

Creating the fun element in your workplace.

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It would be easy to get an agreement that having fun in our lives is a good thing. However, the single activity in which we spend most time is often fun-less. Somehow “work” and “fun” are seldom mentioned in the same breath.

But thankfully, there are companies out there that do believe in combining the two. We can take lessons from them and make our workplace an attraction for both current employees and potential ones.

According to author Leslie Yerkes in his book “Funworks”, there are 11 principles to fuse fun and work. In part i, we give you the first five:

Give permission to perform

This is another statement to mean empowerment. While it is an often-banded term in corporate circles, still many companies fail to inculcate a culture of empowerment. Hence, statements such as “No one has told me to do that” and “That’s not my job” or “Do you have permission to do that?” are often heard.

If work is to be fulfilling for employees, they should not have rules, restrictions and limitations to impair them. Instead, they need “permission to perform” requirements for success, parameters of behaviour and operation and permission to fail should be the order of the day. As Yerkes says, “permission to perform reduces the control of negative hierarchical guidelines and increases the opportunity for success”.

Permission to perform also means workers are allowed to bring their whole selves to work everyday and it means that work and fun must be integrated. Elizabeth Jeffries, in her book “The Heart of Leadership”, she talks about the need to give workers permission to release their internal playfulness. Encourage child-like behaviours such as trust, openness and inquisitiveness; discourage childish behaviours like pranks and silliness.

Challenge your bias

Biases are what we develop over the years, from what others perceive and say, from stereotypes, from media. It could come to us so insidiously that you are not even aware you have those biases. Think what your biases are and challenge their truth or untruth. It could be a bias that says “If we have too much fun, then work will not get done” or “If I am fun-loving, it means I am less substantive.”

Yerkes suggests we challenge the bias of “when the work is done, then we’ll have fun” and replace it with incorporating fun while at work. A company that is known for challenge biases and stereotypes is Southwest Airlines. They allowed their employees to work in casual “play clothes” and found that it made their employees more light-hearted, more creative, less stressed and less serious. Their recruitment ad copy says “Work at a place where wearing pants is optional”.

Capitalise on the spontaneous

Fun doesn’t happen according to schedule. It isn’t something you can plan. It is more a culture that needs to be fostered over time. Allow spontaneity and fun will be the result. Fun will replicate itself when and if encourage, says Yerkes. Remember, having fun at work is not a programme, but a philosophy. It’s not what you do, but who you are. Don’t overthink it keep it simple.

Trust the process

Once you have hired the right people and put the work processes in place, you need to trust them. Refrain from micro-managing and looking into the details of everything. Trust that the processes (and the people) will work together to bring about the desired results in the company. That way, you will allow more room (remember, permission to perform) for creativity and spontaneity. No one enjoys working while another is breathing down one’s neck.

Value a diversity of fun styles

While fun, joy and happiness are universal concepts, the ways those come about are not. Not everyone, especially across cultures and genders, will express joy and happiness the same way. Fun, therefore, should not, be one-size-fits-all. The wider the diversity, the more ways in which fun will occur. Diversity is therefore the best way to a healthy, fun, and effective company. Celebrate the differences among you.

In the above part, we looked at the first five principles of creating fun in your workplace. Now, we continue with the six other principles. Have fun!

Expand the boundaries

Introducing fun into the workplace is not about throwing all caution into the wind, and making work second on the priority list. The ideal balance between fun and work can be struck if all employees understand and are clear about the work “playing field”. Create boundaries, not those that will constraint or inhibit, but rather to allow them to have as much autonomy (remember empowerment in the first issue) within the bounds of responsibility.

Managers/leaders must also learn to relinquish some control. As Yerkes cautions, “high control is the dark force when it comes to the fusion of fun and work”. Issues of control can crush or strangle the natural energy that gives life to invention, productivity and prosperity. Learn, instead, to develop clear expectations, craft challenging goals and set boundaries that are expansive.

Be authentic

Fun isn't something you put on, and can easily take off like a coat. It is who we are, and the very core of our being. To be successful, in other words, we need to be authentic. The best test of this is when the company comes under stress and duress that's when the natural self shows up. If the “fun” culture was merely a facade, it will crack under strain. If we are authentic, the fun culture will carry us through the difficult times. Being authentic requires us to trust who we are, and we can therefore trust our responses to whatever the situation may be. We don't smile because we should, but because we can't help ourselves. And when we are authentic, fun naturally integrates itself into our work.

It's your choice

Having fun and true job satisfaction is the result of making good choices. One of the good choices we can make is to choose how we behave the power over ourselves is sometimes the only thing we can change. By choosing means we decide who we will be and how we will act. If you find that your workplace is no longer fun, be proactive create the world in which you choose to live.

Hire good people and get out of their way

If you are confident you have hired the right people, trust them once they are on the job. As simple as it sounds, it is a difficult thing for many managers to do the natural tendency is to micro manage and be suspicious rather than trusting. Some managers may fear that giving permission to their employees to have fun means giving them the opportunity to take advantage of the situation and shift the focus from work to fun.

But Yerkes proposes that this is only a risk if we approach fun as a reward for hard work versus fun being part of the work. When fun is “in” the work, then there is little risk of “when the cat's away the mice will play”. Consider the track record of Southwest Airlines which incorporates fun into the workplace it has the smallest number of employees per aircraft, serves the most customers per employee, and has the most enviable record of profitability in the industry.

Embrace expansive thinking and risk taking

Risk taking doesn't become an option when you challenge biases, norms and stereotypes. When you apply principles such as “expansive thinking”, “thinking beyond the box”, you lose some control, and take some risks. But taking risks is not a bad thing. To embrace risks means trying new things without fear of criticism or failure it's about making mistakes and learning from them. Once we are successful at expansive thinking and risk taking, risk taking in itself becomes fun and addictive. Remember, nothing great in history has happened without risk taking. Create history don't follow it.

Celebrate

One of the surest way to have fun is to celebrate. Everyone loves a good party. Finding reasons to celebrate in the workplace is not difficult. We can choose to celebrate successes big or small. Recognising success is not enough celebrate them. Celebrating also generates additional energy for future endeavours; it increases the likelihood of more successes. Celebrate them during work hours, in the workplace. Don't do it outside of it.

Southwest Airlines swears by celebrations. It uses celebrations to create memories and shared memories are what bond people together, and builds relationships. The airline believes in celebrating the fun and the unusual. “Celebration is what families do. Whether it's an anniversary, a new job, a new baby, a promotion, a birthday, a holiday, or anything in between, families celebrate special events,” says Colleen Barrett, one of the earliest employees at Southwest Airlines.

We all like to create positive and outstanding reputations for the business we work in. Why not create a reputation for being one of the most fun places to work in?

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