

Discover the Fun of Work

Work has gotten a bad rap. It shouldn't be the 8 (or 10 or 12 or 14) hours you spend when you're not enjoying yourself or sleeping. If working at your organization isn't fun, it's time to ask yourself why and to find out what you can do about.

By Bernie DeKoven

Sometimes, money just isn't enough. Even with a pension plan, medical coverage, and sizeable bonuses, it's just not enough to keep people working at their best.

Work must be fun, too.

I don't mean the kind of fun that you get from arranging pizza parties or giving people Nerf guns or by having dress-up and dress-down days - though these all have proven to have a positive effect on the overall sense of fun in the workplace. I mean the fun of the work itself, the actual joy of working.

Let's call this kind of fun "Working Fun." Working Fun comes from two sources: from the workplace community, and from the work itself.

When the task is interesting, engaging, and involving, when it is the kind of job that you can get utterly absorbed by, then the work is fun.

Likewise, when you work with people you like and who like you, when they recognize each other's competence, and when there is a sense of genuine caring for each person as a whole person (not just as someone at work), then work is really fun.

Setting the Bar for Success

When a task is engaging, it challenges you to perform. When people have fun, there is always some kind of challenge that engages their abilities. Whether they are rock climbers or rock dancers, surgeons or assembly line workers, when things are really fun, people are really involved. In any occupation, when it's really fun, it's really occupying.

What most often makes work seem more like work than fun is the nature of the challenge itself. If the challenge is beneath people, if it doesn't engage enough of their skills, if it doesn't interest them enough, work gets just plain boring. Similarly, if the challenge is more than they can handle, if it's something they just don't think they're good enough to do, they get anxious. In either event, boredom or anxiety, it's not fun.

When setting the bar for success, for an individual or an enterprise, we all too often find ourselves taking the fun out of work. Regardless of how realistic we try to be, for some people the bar is too high, for others, too low.

To recover the fun of work, we need a different kind of high bar - one that creates challenges that are individually and collectively negotiable. The key is to frame the challenge in a way that invites individuals or organizations to challenge themselves according to their constantly changing perception of their abilities. Making a fundraising goal of \$10 million can frustrate even the most skilled of fundraisers. Asking people to make a gentlemen's bet about how much funds they will raise that day, and then seeing how accurate they were at the end of the day, can turn fundraising into "fun"-raising.

Slanting the high bar, we create the opportunity for success, for growth, and for fun.

Coliberation Means Mutual Empowerment

Frequently, the fun of work has less to do with the work itself and more with the workplace community. Often, a light-hearted staff member can have more impact on the fun of the workplace than an arcade full of executive toys.

Celebrating anything - births, birthdays, even the purchase of a new copy machine or car - has a positive effect on the fun of work. But when workplace community is most fun, the individual's sense of his or her own abilities changes. There is an experience of team, of collective competency, of an increased capacity to meet even greater challenges. There is greater personal involvement and an increase in commitment and personal investment.

People go beyond cooperation and collaboration to what I call "coliberation" - a relationship of mutual empowerment in which each person somehow manages to increase the abilities of the collective, and the collective somehow manages to increase the abilities of the individual.

This most often happens in the meeting room, especially in creative meetings such as brainstorming sessions. It happens when people discover that someone is actually listening to them without judging them. When their contributions, but not their persons, are being evaluated.

There is often a lot of laughter. Things tend to get noisy, sometimes silly, maybe even outrageous. As the collection of ideas grows, the sense of accomplishment increases. By the end of the meeting, the walls are literally covered with possibilities and opportunities.

Meetings don't need to be creative in order to be coliberating, however. Even a weekly status report meeting can be fun: if people believe that others are listening, not judging.

Even meetings without a declared product or goal can become remarkably coliberating. I once attended a meeting that ostensibly was convened to discuss a research report and its relevance to our current work. Instead of a free-for-all discussion, the convener introduced a new ritual that she called a "questioning." We were sitting in a circle. She began with a summary of the research report, from her perspective, and ended her turn with a question. The next person responded to the question, and then ended his turn with a question for the next person.

At first, it was very strange, this questioning game. Instead of us all focusing on responding to one question, new questions were continually emerging. Frequently, the questions were more interesting than the answers. But, as the questioning game continued, we seemed to be drawing from a collective wisdom, raising and exploring issues that were far more profound and relevant than anything covered by the research report.

In the Beginning it was Fun

Most organizations are built on a sense of fun. In the early stages, when a few entrepreneuring souls are framing the vision and nature of the organization, there is often an excitement, an anticipation, a sense of enjoyment that is both inordinately challenging and deeply fun. The founders of a new initiative give everything to the effort, frequently beyond the point of exhaustion. Even though the money has not yet come in, even though they may be just a wink away from desperation, there is an unmistakable joy underlying every moment of their struggle.

Oddly enough, as the effort begins to succeed and more people are brought in, the fun of it all becomes less and less apparent. It could have something to do with money.

In order to recognize, affirm, support, and otherwise encourage people to work hard, organizations institute incentives. And, since we are all in it, to some degree or another, for the money, what better incentive could there be than a raise or bonus? According to Alfie Kohn, and echoed by many other insightful organizational pundits, money can actually become a disincentive to fun. In his New York Times article "For

Best Results, Forget the Bonus," Kohn writes, "While rewards are effective at producing temporary compliance, they are strikingly ineffective at producing lasting changes in attitudes or behavior. The news gets worse. About two dozen studies from the field of social psychology conclusively show that people who expect to receive a reward do not perform as well as those who expect nothing."

Though there are many brave and impressively successful efforts to bring more fun to the workplace, those that are most successful somehow manage to recover the fun that is endemic to the organization itself - the fun that led to the creation of the organization, the fun of the camaraderie of visionaries who believed, not only in the vision, but even more importantly, in each other's abilities to realize that vision.

Next Steps: A Fun-Raising Meeting

Somewhere at the core of almost every organization lies a belief that it is possible to maintain a working environment that is both fun and profitable - otherwise the organization would not have been created.

The purpose of a "Fun Raising" meeting is to return to that core belief. It's an event devoted not so much to making work more fun, but to bringing the fun that people find in their work out into the open. A Fun Raising has the following elements: food, toys, and talk. Because of certain personal predilections, I usually put food first.

I like healthy finger foods - bowls of nuts and raisins, little carrots and dips, popcorn, and, of course, little cheesecakes. OK, so the health-content of cheesecakes is debatable. On the other hand, delicious is as delicious does!

Toy-wise, my very favorite is Silly Putty. My next favorite, Koosh Balls. (For more on the merits of these particular toys, see <http://www.deepfun.com/koosh.html>) . Why toys? Because they embody the message that this meeting is about fun.

For the talk, start with a brainstorm. Make an exhaustive list of every task or event that occurs during the workday. Be as inclusive as possible. Nothing is too slight to be beneath notice: making coffee, organizing your desk, doodling during a phone call, writing a report, updating a calendar, answering e-mail, revising a budget, or developing a presentation.

After the list is impressively long, ask the group to pick an item and talk for a few minutes about what it's like when it's fun. Some of the items may be a little too dark or mundane to elicit an immediate response. These usually prove the most fun to explore.

As soon as the conversation lags, pick another item. Given 20 minutes of this, people will begin to realize how much fun is available to them in the normal course of work, and they'll perhaps begin to realize that fun is not a mandate, but a choice - available to anyone, doing almost anything, if he or she so chooses.