

Workplace fun can boost bottom line

By Carol Kleiman
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"Fun: amusement, especially lively or playful ... fun and games." Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder
In 2001, Bob Nelson did a dissertation for his doctorate, titled, "Factors that encourage or inhibit the use of non-monetary recognition by U.S. managers."

What Nelson, president of Nelson Motivation Inc., a management-training consulting firm based in San Diego, was talking about in very scholarly terms was simple: fun in the workplace.

That's a subject that Nelson, whose firm specializes in employee recognition and motivation, has been focusing on for 10 years.

"It's an important piece in the spectrum of a motivating work environment, a competitive advantage," said Nelson, co-author with Dean Spitzer, also a consultant, of "1001 Rewards & Recognition Fieldbook" (Workman, \$17.95).

And Nelson, who has a doctorate in management and an MBA in organizational behavior, posits this definition of fun: "It's the ability to play in the workplace it's the opposite of fear."

The executive, a founder of the National Association for Employee Recognition, added: "It's a certain freedom employees know they have that relates back to trust, satisfaction and comfort. People who play don't have a fear of negative repercussions. They know it's OK."

Having relaxing moments at work isn't all fun and games. "It's not about being silly at work, although there is an aspect of silliness," said Nelson. "People who have fun are truly engaged and connected, care about the customer, get the work done and don't leave their jobs."

"Fun has a bottom-line payoff, too: It's important to the employer because it allows a freedom of spirit, and with that goes an attitude of experimentation, of taking risks both of which relieve stress."

And, he adds, "in particular, celebrating success and performance that's fun. But fun shouldn't have an agenda. When it does, it isn't fun anymore."

When Nelson talks about "play," he doesn't mean water fights that might turn out to be harmful or intellectual contests that some might not excel at. Instead, he suggests fun works best when it's based on corporate values and aligned to recognition of the employees' achievements.

"For instance, a large entertainment-park company in Florida gives tokens to supervisors to give to any employees they see doing something in line with the company's goals," said the executive, who has worked with more than 1,000 businesses. "It captures the moment and emphasizes that's what the company is looking for."

"The tokens, which are worth \$10 each, can be turned in to payroll to appear on the next paycheck. But hardly anyone turns them in. The tokens mean a lot to them. They make your day and they're fun."

Another corporation allows employees who play musical instruments to bring them to work to serenade employees of the month. "It's a hoot," said Nelson.

A law firm has a fun committee with five anonymous members. One of the fun things they did was give a party on the roof of the office building in downtown Seattle.

"The best fun usually is free," said Nelson. "Some companies do spend a lot of money on it such as bringing in expensive entertainment and dropping a lot of money but my concern is that the more you spend, the more you have to justify it and the more likely it is to be cut. It's more important to do something unique and fun, even if it only costs \$1."

The executive describes his business as "small, only four employees." But he still manages to provide the kind of fun that means a lot to workers.

"One man on my sales staff was into sports cars, and when he exceeded his sales goals, I rented a sports car for him for one week," Nelson said.

"When I took the staff to Disneyland, I hired a limo driver who was an Elvis impersonator."

And one of his favorites is providing employees with free shoulder and neck massages by professionals.

Now, that's what I call fun!