

FUN at Work is Not an Oxymoron

Glance around at your employees. Do they look relaxed and happy or stressed, bored and disgruntled? Are they smiling or grimacing? Is your company culture burning them out or firing them up?

If you want higher morale and lower staff turnover, it's time for you to put FUN to work on the job! Smart companies know that a little playfulness at work can provide a spirited environment that is conducive to productivity, creativity, and ultimately, profitability.

“Wait just a minute,” you might be saying. “Work is not supposed to be fun - that's why it's called work! If we spend too much time having fun we won't get any work done.”

True, you are there to achieve the company objectives and work is serious business.

However, it doesn't mean you have to take yourself seriously. In fact, a little sense of humor goes a long way towards building productive teams in the workplace.

A Gallup poll of millions of US workers has shown that job satisfaction increases by almost 50 percent when an employee has developed close friendships at work. In fact, most of the workers surveyed rated close friendships at work higher than a 10% pay increase in terms of job satisfaction.

Promoting laughter in the workplace is one way to help employees develop those close friendships. As musical comedian Victor Borge once said, “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”

However, HR Professionals and managers often wonder how they can promote a fun workplace environment without losing focus of the company mission. Fun at work is neither an oxymoron nor a free-for-all. When creating an environment where playful productivity is paramount, keep the following in mind:

1. You must make your expectations very clear. Employees want to know what is expected of them, how they will be trained and coached to meet those expectations, how they will be held accountable, and what will happen if they don't follow through. When the mission is made very clear, and accountabilities are put into place, then you can relax and have a little fun while still seeing that the job gets done.
2. You must set clear boundaries regarding fun at work. Lightening up with laughter does mean enjoying the company of your co-workers, finding humor in common situations, and celebrating your accomplishments. It does NOT mean laughing AT your co-workers or customers, playing cruel jokes, indulging in sexual, racist or intolerant humor, or making fun of the company.
3. As HR Professionals and managers, you can feel free to set the tone for a jovial workplace culture. However, let your employees generate their own fun! Forced fun is NOT fun and usually does not have the desired effect.

How do you have fun at work? Create the kind of atmosphere that gives people permission to play, and they will usually come up with their own fun! Or try some of the following ideas that have worked for others.

- Rotate the responsibility for planning fun, morale-building events from department to department. One month, the human resources department plans and sponsors the fun, the next month it's the accounting department, and so on.
- Invite staff and their families back one evening. Put up a big screen and show a family-friendly movie. Remember the popcorn, candy, and soda. This could be even more fun with pillows and comfy chairs! It could even be done outside. Remember drive-ins?
- Draw names for "secret pals." Surprise your secret pal with simple acts of kindness for a month. At the end of the month, have a party and reveal the identities of the secret pals.
- Brainstorm ways that you can have fun with your customers! Take a tip from Southwest Airlines whose flight attendants tell jokes over the intercom, or Pike Place Fish Market where fishmongers invite customers to catch their fish! Rather than plan fun events, brainstorm ways you can make your daily customer interactions more fun. Another example? When you walk into "Moe's Tex Mex Grill" you are greeted by shouts of "Welcome to Moe's" by the entire staff! How can you make YOUR workday more fun for you and your customers?

- Bring toys to the next Staff meeting. Give people something to play with and see what creativity emerges.
- On Fridays, lock the doors at the end of the day, blast the music and dance for a full five minutes!
- Host an after hours scavenger hunt. About two weeks before the big date, divide into teams and give everyone their lists. Each item should have a point value. Everyone gathers at the appointed date in front of the "judges" with their items. Include fun things like "The Best Song and Dance Number." The team with the most points - Wins!
- Give everyone squirt toys and watch the fun ensue.
- As the boss, spend a day washing your employees' cars. At one company an employee was so excited about this event she actually borrowed a car so she could watch her boss wash it.
- Some companies allow their employees to bring their well-behaved pets to work. People in those workplaces swear it keeps everyone relaxed, happy and more productive.
- Write a funny (clean and kind humor) play about your workplace, and invite your co-workers (and customers??) to star in it!!
- Food is ALWAYS fun! The Google Offices have a rule that there must be food within 100 feet of every employee. Bring on the pizza party.
- However, healthy employees are happy employees. Bring healthy snacks to work and promote wellness programs. Start a lunchtime walking club.

- Rather than work on a project by yourself, invite the entire team to be in on the planning! Give them something challenging to do, and they'll have FUN, they'll buy in, and who knows what you'll accomplish?

These ideas have worked for others, but surely you and your team members will have ideas of your own. Start a “joy committee” and generate a list of ways you can have fun in your workplace. Whatever it is, jump in, celebrate and reap the rewards of joy on the job. FUN at work is NOT an Oxymoron.

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