



Seeing tomorrow's ideas...Today

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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Are we getting too serious in the workplace? When was the last time you laughed and had fun in your job? Companies that foster a playful atmosphere, where fun is allowed, encouraged, and rewarded, will be successful over time towards creating an environment conducive to creativity and innovation.

Are We Getting Too Serious?

There are lots of reasons why we tend to be more serious these days - increased pressures and demands at work, tighter budgets and fiscal constraints, world events having a negative impact on our lives - you name it, the list seems to be growing for many of us. However, have we become too serious, to the point that it is having a negative effect on not only camaraderie in the workplace, but on employees' creativity and innovation?

Research has shown that the ability to play is a vital ingredient to creativity and innovation. In fact, a playful mindset, common to many great inventors, can help us see patterns and possibilities that others might not notice. We work faster and smarter in a culture that allows for some loosening up. Companies that deliberately strive to make their workplaces and their work fun and add humour intentionally are the ones that are more successful consistently over time in building innovation capacity.

A great example of a company that encourages fun in the workplace is Microsoft. If you were to visit their corporate headquarters you might encounter employees engaged in an exciting game of miniature golf in the hallways. In this case the elevators are used to move the ball from the "tee" (on the first floor) to the "green" (on the second floor). Although you can not directly correlate between Microsoft's enormous success and the apparent fun enjoyed by its employees, it's easy to conclude that innovative ideas and products developed by Microsoft arise from its employees' ability to relax in the midst of difficult work and to be whimsical and playful during the day. Play can ease us into a state of mind that contains many of the elements we need to be creative - curiosity, imagination, experimentation, fantasy, speculation or what if, and wonder.

Some of you may be thinking by now, "How can we share humour in the workplace with so much pressure to be "politically correct" in light of harassment and discrimination laws. Yes, there is humour that is

inappropriate in the workplace, i.e., humour that is hurtful, puts people down, reflects race, gender, ethnic background, etc. However, there is lots of opportunity for good humour - humour that reduces tension by making fun of universal human frustrations or humour that pokes fun at yourself - that can reduce stress and lighten things up in the workplace. Whenever we are joking around or being playful we always need to be mindful of holding the person and the law in high regard.

So if you are noticing that fun and play is lacking in you, your team or organization, here are six ideas to bring more fun in your workplace.

- ***Call a meeting with your team or group to discuss how well you are doing with play.*** Ask are we too serious as a group? Should we lighten up? Can we be better? Develop an action plan to bring more play and fun into your team.
- ***Establish a room where people can unwind.*** Designate one office space as the creativity room, where employees can fool around with musical instruments, electronic keyboards, a drawing board and easel, and all kinds of creative materials. One large telecommunications company had designated rooms with pool tables and foosball tables for employees to let off some steam.
- ***Have a "toy box" in your office or workspace.*** When you get stuck in a project pull out a toy and see what ideas it triggers. Better yet, bring the "toy box" to your next meeting to make it more interesting and fun. Toy box items can include things such as silly putty, finger paints, play doh, balloons; your favourite toys from childhood, legos, etc. Visit your local toy store on a regular basis to replenish your toy box and add interesting new toys.
- ***Allow employees to wear costumers, masks, or other offbeat garb on special occasions.*** Ron Zambonini, the previous CEO of Cognos, was known to launch each year's marketing campaign with silly costumes and themes to energize employees and get them excited about the new year ahead.
- ***Provide managers with a "morale" budget to spend on spontaneous fun in whatever way they see fit.*** For example, if your team has been through a particularly stressful event, take them to an arcade or carnival, hand them a handful of quarters or tokens and tell them to go and "have fun" for a few hours. For more ideas, check out a new Ottawa Company called Great Experiences (www.greatexperiences.ca), a one-stop shopping source, for employee retreats and team-building exercises.
- ***Kick off or close meetings with a fun participatory event.*** Meetings don't need to be run like a funeral; try to open or close the meeting with some kind of humourous content. Consider starting a meeting by having people share a humourous work anecdote or joke or giving people paper and crayons to illustrate the problem you will be discussing in the meeting in a drawing.

What's the Bottom line

Fun and play has its place in the serious workplace. Companies who are serious about building innovation capacity pay attention to encouraging, supporting and rewarding fun and play in the workplace.

Adapted from Jordan Ayan's book, *Aha! 10 ways to free your creative spirit and find your great ideas*, New York: Three River Press, 1997.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.

If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

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