Fun at the office? Not such a bad thing

Keeping things fun helps build morale, loyalty

Blueprints for Management

By Rick Speckmann

What's fun? It is something we first become conditioned to in our early lives. Fun was the end product of playtime. As we grew, we learned that fun is not defined equally by all.

I know that Ronny, an oversized seventh grader, had great fun at my expense bullying me on the playground. My experience in that situation was anything but fun. Hanging out with my friends, taking vacation trips, playing golf, making new friends; that are fun.

Hundreds of clients for whom I have performed searches and consulting assignments for have quickly profiled their company as a fun place to work at. My discoveries captured through employee interviews and satisfaction surveys told me that some companies had "Ronnys" as managers. The employees take on "it's a fun place to work" was not unanimous.

So what is fun is it important and how do you manage it? Fun is any experience that provides amusement and results in joy, laughter and personal satisfaction. The bigger question is, should company environments be fun? One CEO stated "If they want fun, they should go to the circus," and continued, "Here, employees get paid money so they can go buy their fun from companies that manufacture fun things or fun services."

Other companies have committees assigned to come up with fun things for employees to do, and others sponsor fun extracurricular like softball teams, bowling and golf leagues. To "fun" the company or not — what is the answer?

The answer comes in the purpose of "fun" and understanding the ingredients of fun sponsored activities that provide tangible return to the company.

Fun must be managed

We each experience fun in our own way. There are several common threads of fun which will unite most employees. A company outing of skydiving is fun for very few. A "beach" themed lunch party (without alcohol) to off set the frustrations of a long winter that is slow to give way to spring will appeal to just about everyone. The party was a great success with lots of photos and stories. It was successful because it was well-timed, well-communicated and well-executed.

The key is to plan activities that are universally acceptable during which the high spirits of some can really get into it by dressing in shorts, sandals, Hawaiian shirts and hats, and snorkel gear while others might choose only to wear sandals. Fun must be contained with guidelines that define acceptable behaviors.

I worked with a CEO who once stated that he felt it was his responsibility to plan fun events. I broke out laughing and said, "You are the last person I'd place on the fun committee. Your job is to make sure someone else is tending to the fun; you can sign the fun checks."

He was actually relieved when I helped him identify Sue, who was in sales and was natural at planning and having fun. When I was running a company, my partner and I decided that there was enough stress in the company to blow the roof off the building. We called a company meeting a few days later. People showed up looking quite concerned. They expected a lecture on behavior; mistakes had been made, people were grouchy, we were behind on schedule, and there was no end in sight to the workload.

They sure surprised when we announced we were taking them out for a bowling for prizes event. The following three weeks the group rose to the challenges and we caught up. Six months later, employees would occasionally reference the fun outing. Bowling became an annual event. When planning your next fun activity think carefully of the outcome.

Fun builds familiarity, not contempt

A fun event is a gathering of employees during which time employees mingle beyond the walls of their work groups. This familiarity provides many beneficial dimensions including "silo busting" for which employees find out that the other employees in divisions are actually nice people and not opposing forces as previously perceived.

Some fun events such as a softball game should be avoided due to the competitive and aggressive styles that show up on the field. Additionally, company sponsored "happy hour" events are strewn with land mines that create gossip and contention. One of the questions you should ask yourself in the planning stage is, "What is the outcome I want the company and our people to experience, and how will that benefit both groups?"

Fun improves employee retention

I have heard in recruiting calls that

employees do not want to leave their company because it is a fun place to work. I translate this to mean that the employee has a high level of comfort with fellow employees and that there is a culture of enjoyment that results from group activities, employee recognition, harmony and personal fulfillment.

Companies that have a culture of "celebration" create compelling environments that employees find it difficult to leave. If you are a consistently "fun" culture, it will become a magnet to outsiders who would like to work at the company. It can also build a reputation in your market segments that draw clients to work with you.

When I think of fun, I think of energy and passion. There will always be demands in our work environment. Some days those demands come in the form of competition, other days it is the anxiety of a challenging economy or the stress of a significant surge of work that overwhelms the capacity of the company. How we deal as management with these issues will require our ability to engage commitment from our employees.

Hard work can be fun when management decides it should be and takes measures to impregnate a fun dynamic into the workload. In these cases a manager gathers the team and creates a "spirited" atmosphere that is focused on team cooperation and ultimate achievement. When the task is completed loud voices proclaim the team's success.

Hard work certainly has its own rewards and we know that we each have different levels of fulfillment in conducting our work. Fun is a purposeful manner of organizing our employees and providing them with a stimulant that combines a mission with an individuals purpose.

Dedication

I wish to dedicate this article to my longtime friend, former boss and partner: Dennis Anderson, who just passed away. Dennis was a natural at creating a fun culture for which he was as much the participant as he was the planner. Working with Dennis was an exercise in passion at work.

As an owner, Dennis and his employees profited well because he was an especially fun person to work with. He taught you how to joyfully experience life while you worked. I pass that legacy on to each of you.

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