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Ain't We Got Fun?

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When was the last time you had a good laugh at work?

- Last year?
- Last month?
- Last week?
- Yesterday?

If your answer was "yesterday", you're probably grinning. If your answer was last month (or last year!) you could stand to increase the fun quotient in your organization.

Why? Because research shows that a fun-filled workplace builds enthusiasm -- and that enthusiasm leads to increased productivity, better customer service, a positive attitude about the company and higher odds that talent will stay.

If we know that fun at work is a good thing -- for human beings and for business -- why are so many workplaces fun-free zones? In part, because times have changed, the result of 9/11, a recession, downsizing and the prevalent "do more with less" mentality. But there's another reason: The notion of fun at work is surrounded by mistaken beliefs -- "fun" myths.

Which of these myths do you believe? Notice how managers debunked every one of these.

Myth #1: Professionalism and fun are incompatible.

Most concern about having fun at work is actually concern about inappropriate humor, loud behavior, or poor timing. If employees' timing is off or their behavior is embarrassing or disruptive, give them that feedback, just as you would about any work behaviors.

Slapstick silliness (pie-in-the-face humor) will not fit well in a business environment. But there are many appropriate ways to get some kicks in even the most buttoned-up workplace. Find ways that fit for you and your team.

"Every month we had client reports due and most of us dreaded the solitary extra-hours work that the task required. So we started planning to stay late one night each month. We went to a deli for snacks and then held a work party. We were all on our own computers in our own offices, but we took regular breaks, helped each other, enjoyed our meal together, and had some laughs in the after-work casual environment. It not only made the monthly task much more enjoyable, but it provided a type of team building."

Myth #2: It takes toys and money to have fun.

This is the sister myth to "It takes toys and money to have fun in life." When we asked dozens of people to reflect on fun times they remembered having at work, here is some of what we heard. Notice how few of these examples cost money or involve toys.

- "No specific time. It was just the day-to-day laughter my colleagues and I shared--mostly about small

things."

- "Spontaneous after-work trips to the local pizza parlor."
- "Verbal sparring with my brainy, funny colleagues."
- "When we had a huge project, a tight deadline, and we had to work all night. I wouldn't want to do that often, but we had a good time, laughs in the middle of the night, and a thrill when we finished the project."
- "We decorated one of my employee's offices for his birthday. We used five bags of confetti from the shredding machine. We laughed a lot and still talk about that day."

Myth #3: Fun means laughter.

Fun often does involve laughter or smiles. Sometimes people just need to take themselves less seriously. But people can have fun at work without laughing or getting silly. An intriguing project and collaboration with wonderful teammates can truly be fun. Work that is meaningful and makes a difference can be fun. Building something new can be fun.

"I managed a team of engineers and some of the most fun I ever had was in the early days of creating a completely new form of airplane. We were building something new that would make a difference. It was difficult and challenging but so much fun."

Myth #4: You have to plan for fun.

Planned fun makes sense sometimes. The employee softball team provides fun and requires planning, as does an occasional employee picnic or the annual holiday party. But a lot of fun in the workplace is spontaneous.

"We had been working so hard and had nailed all of our goals for the quarter. I called my team into my office and presented them with movie tickets--for the two o'clock show, that day! It was great. We took off as a group and felt like kids, playing hooky from school. It was so spontaneous and they loved it."

Unplanned fun can be as simple as showing up at the staff meeting with muffins for everyone, asking a group of employees to join you for lunch at a new restaurant, or taking an unplanned coffee break to just sit and talk about families or hobbies.

Myth #5: Fun time at work will compromise our results.

This is one of managers' largest concerns. Somehow many of them feel that every minute spent chuckling is a minute lost toward bottom-line results.

Research verifies that fun-loving environments are actually more productive than their humorless counterparts. A fun break can reenergize your employees and ready them for the next concentrated effort.

"My employees take breaks whenever they want. Some surf the Web or play games on their computers. They say that these breaks clear their minds so that when they return to the project at hand, they are fresher and sharper."

You might be thinking, "If I allow my employees to surf the Web during work, they will never get their work done." Maybe you believe that only exceptional employees can be trusted to that degree. The secret to allowing fun at work is to be crystal clear with your employees about their performance goals. Co-create measurable and specific goals with them, then evaluate their performance using those goals.

Myth #6: You have to have a good sense of humor (or be funny) to create a fun work environment.

Some of you just aren't funny. In fact, many terrific bosses are not necessarily funny (or even very fun-loving). In many cases, they simply allow others' humor and playfulness to come out. They support rather than create fun at work. Let others initiate the kicks if fun is not your strength.

"I'm pretty task-oriented and serious most of the time. One time I did dress up for Halloween, and my employees were all completely shocked. That was a real stretch for me. Most of the time I just let them have their fun, without judging or squelching it."

Experience in companies of all sizes proves it: fun enhances creativity, and it does not diminish productivity

when work goals are clear. Let fun happen. That fun will keep talented people on your team and keep them energized and motivated.

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[1] <http://www.fastcompany.com/fasttalk/forum.html?f=334>