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Laughter a positive sign

Workplace happiness is the mantra following on the heels of work/life balance, writes Amy Byrne | August 02, 2008

THE chief executive of a large organisation is making his way to his office when his attention turns to a group of employees laughing uproariously, heads thrown back as full-throated guffaws ring through the room. The CEO, suspecting skylarking and time-wasting, turns toward the group with a frown. The laughter stops abruptly as the employees register his reaction and sheepishly turn back to their work stations.



Happiness is . . . a key ingredient to a productive workforce

What's wrong with this picture? According to corporate change consultant Cris Popp, the boss should be happy that his employees are laughing, because it is a healthy sign -- not only for their wellbeing but for his company's bottom line.

"The fact that people are laughing when you walk through the office means they are going to be working better, not worse," Popp says. "It's a sign of an innovative workplace. When you are happy, your cognitive skills are better, you take a broader view of things."

Happiness in the workplace has become the new buzz phrase of corporate culture, the next step along from the pursuit of the fabled work/life balance. Some executives dismiss it as something of a soft topic, but there is a growing body of opinion that says happy workplaces are also more productive workplaces.

Stockland property group chief executive Matthew Quinn is one who takes the concept seriously. He says if he were the boss referred to in the opening paragraphs, he would definitely take his employees' laughter as a positive sign. "I would just see them as having a bit of fun, and I think that's great," he says.

Stockland was a high performer in last year's Best Employers in Australia and New Zealand survey, an annual review by human resources consultancy Hewitt Associates. Quinn's leadership style was cited as being influential in creating a positive work environment.

The company has an impressive list of employee-friendly leadership and development programs, encourages feedback, and measures workers' engagement through annual surveys. But Quinn says fostering a happy workplace is "not rocket science".

"It comes down to good behaviour and good values, treating people fairly and honestly, treating them the way you would want to be treated yourself," he says. He believes workplace happiness is essential to retaining good staff, especially in the current climate of low unemployment and shortages in the professions, and it has a clear impact on productivity.

"I think there is a huge correlation between high engagement and high performance," he says. "It is hard to measure, a lot of it is just intuitive, but I'm a big believer in it."

KEYS TO WELLBEING

How to make a workplace happy:

- Foster good relationships between workers, starting from the top. Make sure everyone's views are sought and respected.
- Positive feedback. In a high-performing workplace, the ratio of positive to negative comments is about 6:1.
- Identify strengths and allow employees to use them every day. If you can't move an employee to a job that suits them better, at least ensure they are doing something they are good at once a day.
- Encourage laughter and humour, but not at anyone's expense.
- Give people a say in what is going on. Give them ownership of a job and real influence in how it is done.
- Know your employees, their names and

Leading human resources surveys have come to the same conclusion. Last year's Hewitt survey noted that average profit growth within the group of companies it nominated as Best Employers outstripped that of the other organisations in the study by 25 per cent to 21 per cent. Also, its Best Employers showed a 17 per cent average growth rate compared to 15 per cent among the rest.

A study of 40 multinationals by global consultancy Towers Perrin similarly found that companies with high employee-engagement scores had better profits and operating margins than those whose staff were deemed to be less engaged.

"The linkage between engagement and business outcomes, that's a given," Hewitt Australia's managing director David Brown says. "What we are interested in finding out is what constitutes engagement."

Brown cautions that happiness and engagement are not necessarily the same thing. "We know that when we were originally doing surveys on employee satisfaction -- asking people 'How do I feel?' -- we actually found no relation to business outcome. If you are simply talking about an emotional state like happiness, our research says there is not a link to outcome.

"It actually needs to translate to what someone does; whether individuals say great things about their organisation, whether they are happy to stay there and whether they strive at work. When you see that sort of behaviour, we say they are engaged."

Bond University management academic Cynthia Fisher is another who believes happiness is only part of the performance picture. She says the belief that satisfaction causes productivity is an "urban myth", saying decades of research reveal only a weak correlation. "You can like a job for a whole lot of reasons that don't necessarily motivate you to do any more work than is needed to keep that job. The hours might be convenient, the company might have childcare, or it might be close to home, but none of those things is necessarily going to make you want to bust your butt.

"To the extent that there is a relationship between overall job satisfaction and long-term performance, it's most likely that performance drives satisfaction through rewards. Employees who perform well are subsequently treated well -- they get promotions and pay rises -- and are then satisfied because of this treatment."

Fisher conducted a study using 121 volunteers who wore alarms that would sound randomly five times a day for two weeks. Each time the alarm sounded, they would record information about what they were doing at the time, how satisfied they were with the task, and whether they were in a positive or negative mood.

She concluded that while there was a connection between momentary satisfaction and momentary performance, there was no evidence that job satisfaction made someone a better worker in the long-term.

But anecdotal evidence tells Cris Popp that happiness is more significant than such studies suggest. He doesn't like the term "engagement" because it makes people sound like "cogs in a wheel", but he is aware that employee happiness is a hard sell in the boardroom and managers are more likely to sign up for a workplace wellbeing seminar if he says he will coach employees in "resilience".

"Nobody really calls me in to talk about having a happy workplace; they want a laughter workshop, they want stress management training, and they want me to talk about resilience. Then, halfway through a session, I say, 'Would you like me to talk about happiness?' and everyone sits up in their chair and goes, 'Yes'.

"It's not acceptable in Australia to pay someone to come in and talk about happiness. But if you ask the employees, what they are most interested in is how to be happier and how to sustain happiness."

what they do. Walk through the office every day and acknowledge them.

Source: Cris Popp, *Workplace Wellbeing*

Top 10 things workers want

- Friendly supportive colleagues
- Enjoyable work
- Good boss or manager
- Good work/life balance
- Varied work
- Doing something worthwhile
- Making a difference
- Part of a successful team
- Achievements recognised
- Competitive salary

Source: *Happiness at Work Index, a 2007 survey by British HR firm Chiumento*