



Play Improves Morale and Productivity

By Steve Wilson, Cheerman of The Bored

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*“Choose an occupation that you love,
and you will never have to work a day in your life.” --Confucius*

*“Among the chief worries of today’s executives is the large number
of unemployed still on the payrolls.” --Anonymous*

“Work is the crabgrass in the lawn of life.” --Bored Employee

Where, Exactly, Do You Work?

Some years ago I came across this impressive estimate: a fifteen percent increase in morale can account for as much as a forty percent increase in productivity. It doesn't surprise me. This was in reference to the workplace, but it seems quite likely that the same estimate probably holds true for work you do at home, too. After all, not all work takes place in an environment of paid employment. Many people 'work' in their gardens, 'work' on their car, and 'work' at their golf game. And, there is the never-ending 'housework'. Millions of us willingly put in long, difficult and, sometimes, dangerous hours 'working' on our hobbies in spite of the fact that all of these efforts may not yield us a cent of cash earnings.

Paid or not, just when is work *work*? I suppose it has a lot to do with how we look at it, how much pleasure and satisfaction it brings us, how much fun it is for us. I Mark Twain's classic story, Tom Sawyer convinced his pals that white-washing a fence was not work at all, and they ended up doing the job for him. Was it 'work'? Tom said, "Maybe it is and maybe it ain't... all I know is it suits Tom Sawyer." When we make work fun - paid or not - more people will gladly do more of it.

You Can Mix Work And Play

According to management consultant Fred Pryor, "Humor is good for your health and that of your employees. Healthy, happy employees are on the job. Unhappy ones tend to call in "sick" - and they may well be. In many cases they may only be sick of work! Noted author and management expert Tom Peters observes, "In general, a spirited environment is marked by laughter - enthusiasm for being on a team and trying darn near anything to make the service or product better."

Traditionally, work and play are thought of as separate and opposite activities. Fred Pryor points out that many workers feel self-conscious about being playful on the job, "and many supervisors feel obliged to discourage playing at work" in order to be taken seriously. However, British comedian, John Cleese, makes an important distinction between seriousness and solemnity. When a manager or executive appropriately joins in the fun, they neither lose the respect of the workers nor stop being serious. The manager in danger of losing respect of his subordinates is the one who acts like a 'stuffed shirt' and, when something is genuinely funny, abruptly cuts off the laughter and orders everyone: "back to work".

When you join in the humor, you temporarily let go of two things: anger (which probably does you more harm than good, anyway) and solemnity (which has its place at funerals but not at work). You can remain serious about your goals, your responsibilities, your values, and your purposes --and join in a little bit of good fun-- without losing the respect of your teammates. Too many supervisors are afraid that fun is wasteful. Imagine how much more they would accomplish if they realized that there are clearly times when fun and playfulness contribute to workers' efforts by boosting morale and enthusiasm.

John Bowman, Ph.D., is a sociologist whose research calls into question the usual ways we look at work and play. He has collected numerous examples of occasions when “work activities are accomplished quite playfully.” He has gathered evidence that “playful activities either relieve tension, made very boring work more tolerable, or built solidarity among a group of employees.” Dr. Gerald H. Graham, editor of *Applied Management Newsletter* suggests, “If your department has engaged in fewer than 4 fun kinds of activities during the past three months, you might want to consider ways of adding fun to your work environment.”

A Potpourri Of Ideas

Here is a baker’s dozen of proven ideas for creating a positive working environment by having fun at work.

1. Look for the unintended humor of reality and share it with coworkers.

Example: A business used an official application form that included the instruction: “Please write your name as you usually write it”. One applicant, taking things a bit too literally, signed, “Love always, Charlotte.”

2. Make sure there is a place on the company or employee bulletin board for the 'cartoon of the week'. Invite co-workers to submit ideas.

3. Send anonymous notes of appreciation and praise.

4. Keep a cartoon book near the copy machine and pass time pleasantly while waiting for copies.

5. Celebrate at every opportunity: birthdays, completed projects, employment anniversaries, keeping within the budget. Celebrate unusual holidays (in the U.S., January is National Prune Breakfast month, March is National Frozen Food month, April is national Humor month, and October is National Popcorn Popping Month). Find creative ways to involve your teammates in celebrating these special commemorations. Bake a cake or bring in other appropriate refreshments. One company I know of celebrates a special New Year’s Eve each year on the anniversary of the founding of the company. Employees and their spouses and friends are invited to dress up and enjoy good food, drink, and dancing. At midnight, everyone sends up a 'three cheers' for the company.

6. Prepare a 'Humor First-Aid Kit' for your department. Fill it with toys and games and place it where everyone can get to it.
7. Conduct “secret friend” gift exchanges throughout the year.
8. Hold contests for unusual reasons: funniest mistake, worst tie, best imitation of the boss. Give inexpensive prizes.
9. Organize a Humor Committee. Their job is to infuse the place with laughter each week.
10. Periodically have the executives serve coffee or cook breakfast for everybody.
11. Decorate for holidays.
12. Whenever someone solves a tough problem or deals with a difficult customer, give awards for “hazardous duty” or “action above-and-beyond the call of duty”.
13. Start a Laughter Club for you and your co-workers. Then you can start each day with laughter, or take ‘stress breaks’ with laughter.

If you try any of these, or come up with other ideas, please let me know what you did and how it worked for you.

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