

Are We Having Fun Yet?

Here we are in the lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer. As kids this meant a time when we got to roam around the neighborhood doing.... whatever was fun! If we ran out of things to do, we would badger Mom for ideas or ask permission to engage in some adventurous activity... and of course sometimes we forgot to ask. At times we had to work, but usually just for short stints, like mowing the lawn or baby sitting the neighbor's little rug bugs. As long as we didn't have too much work, we were OK with it all.

Parents seem to recognize the need for variety and novelty to keep kids "out of trouble." They know that kids need to have fun. Why don't employers? Yes, yes, I know. People aren't paid to have fun. I agree that work may not be fun, but why not try? Here's a quote from the CEO of a financial services company, Henry Donaghy:

Fun forges cooperation quicker than any other human dynamic other than catastrophe.

Fun at work does not have to mean silly activities or literal games, like tossing things around the office. It should mean things like involvement, innovation, and positive relationships. In the real world work is often not fun, but why don't we at least recognize that boredom is a natural occurrence from a lack of change or challenge, and that sustained boredom can feel like torture? As a management consultant, I continue to be amazed, and saddened really, at how little we *apply* in our workplaces what we really do know about human nature.

Dead Head Jobs

"Are we having fun yet?" is a strategic question, and so is "Are we having fun still?" If you give a human being work that is essentially robot work, or any work really that becomes mind numbingly repetitive, then why expect the worker to smile about it? Of course, work sometimes just is boring, but we could admit it and address it. Variety is the spice of life... and work. I am convinced that many of the dysfunctional, "acting out" games people play at work stem from a lack of stimulation. Yes, many workers need to "grow up" and act more mature, but many employers need to quit blaming their workers when they have paid absolutely no attention to the fundamental motivational aspects of the work and the workplace itself.

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Pay For Performance?

There are decades of research on what motivates us at work, but we generally ignore it. Money, for example, isn't actually much of a work motivator unless the dollars are really big, and who can afford that? (Hint; football teams, pharmaceutical firms...) Year after year in surveys, when supervisors are asked what motivates their workers, the majority invariably say money is the number one motivator. When you ask employees the same question, they almost always list money as number four or five. So what do workers say is the number one motivator? Usually something akin to "interesting work." Of course, when the dollars are ridiculously low, like minimum wage, these results are indeed a little different.

Anyone teaching about work performance, including me, will talk about insights from motivation studies. One well-known researcher that we all cite is Frederick Herzberg. Here's a wonderful quote in its original politically incorrect format from our guy Fred:

The proper attitude for a man with a Mickey Mouse job is a Mickey Mouse attitude.

I love to use this quote for its shock value. Hey, aren't we all supposed to have a positive attitude at work? Well, yes, but give me something to have a positive attitude about. Connect me with my customer. Show me how my work is important. Introduce me to the rest of the organization so that I can network and find answers to my questions. Let me do things my way as long as the outcomes fit your criteria. Give me reasons, recognition, and tell me the big picture. And don't ask me to do the same work, year after year, without change or any acknowledgment that it's no longer interesting. Let me grow at work, otherwise I might find a game to play called worker vs. management. It's just human nature.

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