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Fun at work: Lessons from the fish market

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Abstract

Should work be fun? Many business leaders today think so. Fishmongers at Seattle's Pike Place Market work hard at a dirty, smelly job and have a good time doing it. Throwing fish, yelling jibes at each other and kidding with the customers are all part of their everyday routine. Obviously, they enjoy their work. Incidentally, they also sell tons of fish. Based on the kickback culture of the fish market, ChartHouse International Learning Corp. and other firms specializing in organizational training are spreading the "philosophy of fish" to leading companies and corporations across the country. If these principles can work on the fishing docks, there is a good chance they will work in factories, shops and offices as well.

Full Text

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Should work be fun? Many business leaders today think so. According to a growing number of business writers and consultants, fun on the job is a trend again. These experts argue work just goes smoother when there's an element of fun involved.

This doesn't mean work is silly or should be all play. And it's definitely not just a game. But it can be fun. And when that happens, things seem to go a lot better for employers, employees, customers and the bottom line.

We've all known a CEO, supervisor or manager who retired early simply because "it's not fun anymore." Likewise, it's common for teachers to say kids do better when "learning is fun." There seems to be something about having fun that makes work more than just a job.

Fun is an energizer and a motivator. When people like their job and have fun doing it every day, they produce more, work longer and harder, are more creative, get along together better and are more loyal to the organization.

Best of all, fun is contagious. It even rubs off on customers. When workers are having fun doing their job, it shows. Patrons like to do business where they observe a sense of joy in the workplace. A case in point is the highly publicized practice of putting fun to work on the job in Seattle's fishing industry.

The Philosophy Of Fish Fishmongers at Seattle's Pike Place Market work hard at a dirty, smelly job and have a good time doing it. Their antics and good humor are legendary. Throwing fish, yelling jibes at each other and kidding with the customers are all part of their-everyday work routine. Obviously, they enjoy their work. Incidentally, they also sell tons of fish.

Based on the kickback culture of the fish market, ChartHouse International Learning Corp. in Burnsville, Minnesota, and other firms specializing in organizational training are spreading the "philosophy of fish" to leading companies and corporations across the country. Nationallyrecognized employers such as Target Corp. and Barnes and Noble, Inc. have invited ChartHouse to conduct "fish camps" for their employees to help them promote more fun in the workplace.

As taught by ChartHouse, the lessons of the fish market are short and simple:

1. Play. Allow yourself to relax and have fun achieving serious goals.

2. Be there. Stay engaged, pay attention and notice what's happening with customers.

3. Choose your attitude. Commit to an unrelenting positive view of work.

4. Make their day. Surprise clients or customers by doing the unexpected to provide them with extraordinary service.

If these principles can work on the fishing docks, there's a good chance they will work in your factory, shop or office as well. It starts by understanding the fundamentals of fun in the workplace.

What.Makes Work Fun

Many businesses take themselves entirely too seriously-and allow themselves to become self-absorbed, pretentious and dull. What's the fun in that? Work is serious business. Too serious to be grim and humorless all the time. The message from the fish market is "lighten up!"

Leaders, interested in loosening up their work environment, are often surprised to find out exactly what it is that makes work fun for most employees. Contrary to conventional wisdom, easy tasks, little pressure and plenty of time to goof off don't make work fun - only boring. In fact, just the opposite is true.

What most workers, in all fields, admit what really turns them on and gives them joy on the job are: 1) doing something important; 2) doing it well; 3) being involved in the end product; and 4) being rightfully recognized for their contributions. Other elements which contribute to a sense of fun at work include:

\* meaningful challenges

\* opportunities for growth and career advancement

\* a culture of caring (mutual respect and support)

a variety of responsibilities

\* recognition and rewards based on merit

\* two-way trust and fair treatment free-wheeling, open and honest communication

\* frequent laughter in the workplace

freedom to risk and fail without censure

a common history (shared. stories, heroes, successes and failures) permission to laugh at the organization

\* a spirit of playfulness and respectful teasing

a mixture of diverse talents and views (if everyone looks and thinks alike, some are useless and all are bored)

\* freedom to disagree

\* permission to have a separate personal life (respect for family time)

\* and acceptance of the belief that people work to live, not live to work

There is nothing on this list which suggests irresponsible, gross or stupid behavior. Fun on the job is about humanity and good humor, not senseless hilarity. It is no surprise, then, all of the conditions conducive to fun on the job are created, influenced or allowed by supervisors.

The Role Of The Supervisor

The single most important determiner of whether or not work is fun is the supervisor in charge. The supervisor or manager sets the feeling tone for the workplace.

Supervisors don't have to be stand-up comedians, practical jokers or entertainment directors for their department, staff or crew; but they do need to possess a sense of humor, encourage goodnatured fun on the.job and allow employees to .enjoy themselves while doing their best work.

Having fun is a matter of attitude. That attitude originates with the supervisor. This usually means providing support, deregulating the workplace as much as possible and removing obstacles.

If the supervisor or manager enjoys going to work every day, workers will too. If the supervisor is tentative, defensive, overcautious and full of his/her own importance, work isn't going to be much fun for anybody.

The bottom line is the role of the supervisor is to model a spirit of good humor and to give workers permission to work hard, take pride in their accomplishments and have fun on the job at the same time.

Ten Ways To Foster Fun In The Workplace

In most situations, it's up to management to create the conditions which make work fun. Measures, such as those below, have helped many supervisors boost the fun-factor in the workplace and can work for you as well:

1. Hold victory celebrations - even for small successes.

2. Give workers a surprise treat for no reason occasionally - even if it's only a root beer float

3. Include and involve family members in company social events.

4. Notice, recognize and reward effort, not just success. It makes trying a lot more fun.

5. Let employees choose their own rewards. For some, a V.LP. parking space may be more fun than the customary gift or trophy.

6. Promote a "club" feeling among workers. The most successful staffs and crews believe only the best are invited to join their elite membership.

7. Perform community service together as a group. Nothing bonds co-workers more or is more fun than helping others.

8. Promote from within. It fosters good will and loyalty. That's fun!

9. Make rallying around a sick or troubled co-worker the norm in your workforce.

10. Be willing to be the butt of jokes when you deserve it.

It's true work is no laughing matter; but it's the leaders who allow a mix of play and hard work who are most often laughing all the way to the bank. pt

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Word count: 1245

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