

25 Ideas for Building Fun into Your Work Setting

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"What we are looking for, first and foremost, is a sense of humor . . . We hire attitudes."
Herb Kelleher (CEO, Southwest Airlines)

Signs on Employee Doors/Desks

The buck doesn't even slow down here.

Oh no! Not another learning experience!

Stupidity does not qualify as a handicap. Park elsewhere!

Nothing's impossible for those who don't have to do it.

We do precision guesswork.

[Adapted from P. McGhee, *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*. Call 800-228-0810 to order.]

Once you've become convinced that making work fun makes your work more enjoyable while, boosting your ability to perform at peak levels and provide quality service under increasingly demanding work conditions, how do you go about introducing elements of fun into your work setting?

Each company has its own unique cultural considerations which influence what will and will not work, so it's up to you to make your own best guess about how to go about lightening up your work environment. Whatever approach you adopt, remember to always sustain your usual standards for competence and professionalism, even when you're having fun.

25 Ways of Making Work Fun

1) Hire competent employees who already value fun and have a sense of humor.

If you begin with employees who already have humor and fun as part of their personality and style, they will automatically bring these qualities to their job. They will already have

the skills you want to nurture throughout the organization. A core of people with strong humor skills is one of the most important keys to helping other employees build up these skills.

2) Be sure humor and fun are modeled by top management.

No plan to change the corporate culture can work unless it is supported and modeled by top levels of management. Most employees assume that humor and fun on the job will be viewed negatively; so they need clear evidence that this is not the case. If they fail to see evidence of a lighter attitude in top management, they will be very cautious about using their sense of humor on the job--no matter how many fun activities are set up by the company. They will assume that their chances of getting ahead are better if they're always serious. Sean Greenwood, a full-time humor coordinator for Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream in the mid-1990s, noted that "If your management doesn't support it, it's tough to go out and have fun at work."

A special meeting designed to emphasize this new organizational value generally handles any doubts employees have. This meeting should also offer guidelines for the limits of humor and fun; i.e., when and how much humor or fun is and is not appropriate. It may even be built into your company's philosophy or value statement.

3) Establish a Fun Committee.

Every company has its own unique culture, and fun activities that work in one setting might not work in another. Establishing a fun committee not only helps assure that fun activities and events will actually be created; it assures that they will be appropriate for your company. This committee should rotate to keep ideas fresh and sustain ongoing commitment to fun on the job.

4) Provide challenging work.

Fun on the job does not have to take the form of humor or silliness. Simply having challenging work is an important source of fun for many employees. While people often feel too overwhelmed by their workload to experience this form of fun, the drive for mastery of a challenging task remains a powerful source of fun for managers to tap into.

5) Encourage spontaneity on the job.

Spontaneity is central to play and fun. While a judgment must always be made about when any form of fun or humor is and is not appropriate, don't let this restraint kill your capacity for spontaneity. An employee once told me that he was traveling with his boss by car to another city for a meeting. They stopped mid-morning at a rest stop near a beautiful lake and pine trees and walked about and had a Coke from a machine. As they got back into the car, he noticed a day-planner opened up to that day. At 10 a.m., he saw "Stop and relax for 15 minutes."

Chances are that this man's boss had not internalized the notion of fun and enjoyment of his work. Fun and relaxation are simply one more item on a busy schedule. A similar approach is evident in the director of a large department of a company who actually stated in a meeting, "If you have anything funny to contribute, please save it until the end of the meeting." It wasn't that she thought it was inappropriate or disruptive; she just did everything by the book, and liked to keep to a tight schedule. If you want to improve your sense of humor, and get humor working for you on the job, you can't use a schedule for adopting a playful attitude. You need to be open to the spontaneity of the moment—even though you may not be able to act on your playful mood, because it is inappropriate at the moment.

6) Create a humor bulletin board.

Encourage employees to contribute. Assign someone to monitor it for appropriateness of content. Make it a point to look for cartoons and jokes which poke fun at the circumstances that cause negativity or conflict in the office. Start with a blank board each Monday morning, but keep the old ones. Put them together in a book and give them to the employee who's had to deal with the most difficult customer that month, or was most effective in using humor to deal with a difficult problem on the job.

Another option is to place cartoons next to the serious messages you want people to read. They'll stop for the cartoons, but the other messages will get read, as well. In health care settings, make photocopies of the cartoons and create cartoon booklets for patients.

7) Create a humor break room.

This room should contain cartoon and joke books, fun props, VCRs and audio tape recorders (with several sets of ear phones) so that employees can take brief humor breaks. Put a suggestion box in the room so that the kinds of humor employees like can be made available. As a variation on this idea, have a tape recorder containing 1- to 2-minute samples of standup comedy routines set up in the coffee room (change the tape every day). This will allow employees to have a laugh while getting their coffee—without taking any extra time.

Marguerite Chandler, president of Edmar, Inc., in Bound Brook New Jersey, stocked the employee lounge with comedy tapes, put up a humor bulletin board, and subscribed to a software service that provides a joke a day to employees.¹

8) Create a tension release area.

Managing Office Technology magazine keeps a stuffed (toy) pig called "Babe" (named after the pig in the movie *Babe*) in the common area of the office. When deadlines or other problems get staff members too stressed out, they engage in a silly bout of kicking Babe—in full view of whomever happens to be passing by. It's a great stress-reliever, and creates the lighthearted spirit the company wants in the office.² The central office of

one accounting firm has dart boards, hula hoops, decks of cards, and even a miniature golf course.

9) Have fun dress-up days.

Consider a day in which everyone is encouraged to wear a silly tie, shoes, shirt, etc. Many companies do this on Halloween or April Fools' Day. The chief technology officer of one company dressed up as a leprechaun on St. Patrick's Day, planted himself at the cafeteria cash register, and offered a free lunch to anyone who could stump him with a technical question. Steve Siegel, CEO at Lipschultz, Levin and Gray, an accounting firm, sometimes wears a gorilla mask at his desk. Employees often greet customers in chicken costumes.³

If you organize an ugly tie day, wear the ugliest tie you have, and would love to get rid of. Anyone at work that day can demand your tie in exchange for their own, and you have to then wear that tie the rest of the day until someone else demands a trade. (You can also demand a trade yourself.) Women can do the same thing with shoes or scarves. (They can also seize the opportunity to dispose of ties they've long wanted their husbands to get rid of.)

10) Have cartoon caption contests.

This can be done using the bulletin board approach. Or send copies of a cartoon around before a meeting. Everyone who wants to do so submits a caption in advance. At the meeting, people vote on the funniest caption. Winner gets a fun prize.

Take photos of employees in unusual physical positions while interacting with each other. Put them on a bulletin board and invite funny captions below the photo. Give a prize to the caption judged funniest.

11) Use humor to promote upcoming events.

Barbara Glanz provides a wonderful example in her book *Care Packages for the Workplace* of how a sense of fun and humor was used in one company to promote upcoming events. The manager of staff development "bought a mannequin that she lovingly named 'Sadie.' The first time Sadie appeared on the scene was after some downsizing had occurred in the organization. Dressed as a stressed-out woman, she made her debut in the lobby to advertise a workshop called 'Diminishing Stress Through Laughter.' She was missing a button, her slip was showing, her lunch bag was leaking, her shoes were untied, her nail polish was chipped, and it was definitely a bad hair day! . . . the employees immediately identified with her and began to make even more changes. They unzipped her skirt, turned her belt around, and simply used her as a catharsis for their stress. Sadie became a company legend!"⁴ She was such a hit that she continued to be used as a fun way to advertise subsequent events.

12) Be aware of cultural differences.

With the growing levels of cultural diversity occurring in most work settings, it is essential for managers to raise the issue of cultural differences in fun and humor. What seems appropriate for one group may not be well-received by another.

13) Promise someone an award (if they meet a quota or finish a task) that requires you to dress up in a fun costume.

14) Encourage employees to develop a skit in which they poke fun at themselves and their work.

15) Decorate the Board Room with funny posters.

16) Add pertinent cartoons or funny quotes to memos and meeting agendas.

17) Put a "Food joke of the week" box in the front of the cafeteria. Invite employees to put in their favorite joke that relates to food or eating. Post the winner on a wall each week and offer a prize (free meal for two, antacid tablets, etc.).

18) Have a pizza "complaint party."

Once your office has agreed to reduce complaining and negativity in the office, each person caught being negative or complaining puts a quarter into a pizza pot. At the end of the month the money is used to buy pizza and beer for everyone in the office.

19) Give a free bottle of Champaign to the employee who has the toughest customer of the week.

20) Put up photos of the management team when they were children.

21) Keep a pair of silly nose glasses in the men's and women's rest rooms. People will not be able to resist checking themselves out in the mirror. (Attach it to a string--they'll want to take it with them.)

22) Be on the lookout for a motto to put over your desk that helps keep daily hassles in perspective.

Consider checking out *Dilbert* for ideas. Samples: "I have seen the truth and it makes no sense." "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler." "Just when you manage to make ends meet, they move the ends." You can also be innovative and create a "Dilbert Committee," whose role would be to find aspects of office procedures which could be used in a Dilbert cartoon.

23) Open or close meetings by sharing a funny incident that happened on the job. Jokes have less power and impact in transforming the work environment, but can be used as a substitute if no one has a funny incident to share.

24) Have an "Embarrassing Incident" contest, in which a prize is given to the person suffering the funniest embarrassing incident. (Note: this will often be something which only became funny later, after the embarrassment had eased.)

25) Promise someone an award that requires you to dress up in a silly costume if they win.

It is important to give some thought to your particular work culture and the kinds of fun things which would and would not work. Be sure to organize a "fun committee" which considers sensitivities that would make some of the activities suggested here inappropriate. The committee can brainstorm about fun activities using the lists provided here as a starting point.

While making the effort to bring elements of fun into your work, always remember to continue taking your work seriously while taking yourself lightly. You can remain professional and competent and still bring a sense of humor and fun to your job.

References

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