

LEADERSHIP insights
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PLAY AT WORK



When does work not feel like work? One way is when we are having some fun together. *Leader: you can help with this.*

I will address up front (because some of you don't want to read this article) that asking leaders to allow some playfulness is more than a little uncomfortable for some. Some may even argue that it is not within a leader's scope especially in a healthcare setting. **But playfulness decreases tension and stress, and increases trust and energy.** Productivity *improves* when we have a laugh. Don't be so afraid of losing all control over getting work done because the opposite will actually happen.

Some workplaces can drain all the fun right out of you. When we had 2 dogs, the little dog grew up with no toys because the big dog was a toy destroyer. After she died, we got the little dog a toy, only to find that she was scared of it. It made me think of some workplaces where bit by bit over time you become afraid to even laugh out loud. When offered the opportunity to have some fun, people who have worked in a culture where the expectation is constant seriousness don't just come out of their cubie one day smiling. As a leader, if you want to bring people some lightness, try it in small steps. Like the little dog who did warm up to the toy after about a week (and after we took the scary squeak out of it), there are things you can do as a leader to make it safe for people to lighten up.

Not everyone likes structured fun (games, contests, etc.). It's like the squeak in the dog toy-too much. Start small. The variety box of teas and hot chocolates you bring in is not in itself "fun", but it offers a chance to have a little conversation other than work topics about what people like and don't like and a little pick-me-up. If all are able, ask people to bring walking shoes for the next staff meeting and walk around the block instead of sitting around a table. Do a quick ice breaker at the beginning of a meeting with a go-around to answer a question (e.g. what is one thing you enjoy doing in your free time? If you could go anywhere on a vacation where would you go?)

We don't all find humor in the same things. I have a good friend who I will insist must watch a YouTube video that I think is hilarious, and it lands with a thud for her. Remember to not take this personally if this happens to you. Note it and try something different next time rather than pushing your brand of humor.

After work fun is not for everyone. Another thing to not take personally is if you offer an off-hours event for people to play together and some do not attend. People have a right to hold family and personal time as sacred. That said, if you do want employee attendance, it starts with leaders. And people attend what they help plan. Also, employees are much more likely to come if they work with fun people so…

Hire for a sense of humor. Use some behavior based interview questions, for example:

- Tell me about a time when you had a good laugh at work, even a laugh at yourself moment.
- Tell me about a work environment that you had where humor was a regular part of the workday that people enjoyed. What was that like, and what was your contribution to it?

Ideas others have shared to promote intentional fun while working:

- **Snowball fights** with paper. If you have a group that is stuck, pose a question and have people write down some ideas, then wad up the papers and have a snowball fight for a few minutes. It gets blood flowing, it's a safe way to throw something at your colleagues and the result is laughter and creativity. Collect the papers, start with the ideas there and build on the renewed energy to create more.
- **Food.** Try a chili or soup cook off, most creative salad, weirdest vegetable, your favorite childhood dish, etc.
- **Draw**. Instead of talking through solutions, ask teams to draw a picture of what success will look like for whatever problem you are trying to solve.
- **Scavenger hunt**. If you need information for a project, set it up so that people have to go talk to their colleagues to get that information plus some fun fact about them.

When to pause for your discomfort: If your humor could come at someone else's expense. If in doubt, don't tell the joke or story that could be offensive. Instead of feeling restricted by this, use it as a way to examine your own unconscious biases, which we all have.

When to proceed through discomfort: If you feel a little awkward. Every time my colleague Cella makes me dance to "I like to move it, move it," I groan, but afterwards it just feels good.

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April 22 – Hand in Hand Skills: Project Management & Team Facilitation

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