

Invest in Jest

Retailers spend countless hours and enormous resources in developing successful strategies and tactics that will position their businesses for continued growth. However, only the truly innovative companies have embraced the “fun-day-mental” attitude that humor in the workplace is a powerful tool for both recruitment and retention. Countless books and studies support the notion that fun and humor are an important part of the most productive workplaces. The immeasurable costs associated with stress and burn-out in today’s workforce has been countered by companies who commit to the premise that humor can minimize work-related stress and set the stage for more creative thinking. Humor acts as a powerful antidote that can re-ignite the team spirit and create strong commitment bridges at all levels of the organization.

For thousands of years we’ve heard that “laughter is the best medicine”. Experts say that the most productive workplaces have ten minutes of laughter every hour. An extremely key ingredient to keeping a high morale environment in the workplace is to have a company where employees feel good about coming to work. Ann McGee Cooper in her article “Fun at Work” in the AT WORK Magazine, says “Intense pressure brings a shift in the body’s neuropeptides, which can lead to feelings of exhaustion, depression, and just plain dullness. A deep belly laugh stimulates the brain to produce endorphins. Endorphins renew you physically, mentally, and emotionally; they contribute to feelings of relaxation and refreshment, as well as a positive outlook.”

I suggest that clients use humor as a powerful way to open doors, open minds, and open hearts. The use of humor can be very inspiring to the staff. Webster tells us that the root word of *inspire* is “inspirare” – literally meaning “to breathe into.” Use humor as a way to inspire the passion, the energy, and the courage that will give your staff that “fire in the belly” mentality.

If your company’s workplace has been negligent about a commitment to use this powerful motivator, I urge you to reconsider. As I have worked with organizations both large and small, I have implemented many tactics that drive home the point that high morale, spirited workplaces are laced with a sprinkling of fun endeavors all year long.

So, where do you start to inject this type of adrenaline in your business? Use this outline as a guide for your “fun-cilitator:”

- ◆ **Start talking about fun – why it’s important, what it can do, ways that we might incorporate it, etc. Make it okay to have fun.**
- ◆ **Host a fun innovation focus group.**

- ◆ **Appoint a “vice president of fun.”**
- ◆ **Conduct a humor audit of recent ways and specific events that the company has done to spike morale.**
- ◆ **Jazz up your staff meetings by using a variety of ways to inject humor.**
- ◆ **Set up a “fun budget.” Designate a specific budget for each month (it does not need to be big bucks -- most important is the commitment and execution).**
- ◆ **Discuss reward and recognition strategies and tactics specifically as they relate to what the associate values. Rewards help keep the momentum.**
- ◆ **Too often we think that the most coveted reward is money – not true. In addition to the ones your staff comes up with, consider these ideas:**
 - **Donation to employee’s favorite charity.**
 - **Set up a mini scholarship for a specific course of study (not necessarily work related).**
 - **Offer a self or family portrait.**
 - **Give a certificate for a two-hour massage.**
 - **Send flowers to the associate’s home for one month to a year.**
 - **Take a subscription to a magazine or newspaper of interest.**
 - **Personalized note cards or stationary.**
 - **Gift certificate to a greenhouse.**
 - **Negotiate a specific arrangement for vendor discounts as part of a reward package.**
 - **Buy a phone card.**
 - **Get creative and give them rewards that they value.**

Let your imagination go wild with the possibilities. Consider these:

- ◆ **Year-at-a-glance fun calendar – 52 reasons why we love to come to work.**
- ◆ **Run off “you made my day” cards and give each associate three per week to express their appreciation and pass it on to an associate.**
- ◆ **Start a “cartoon, poem, story” file and keep it in the employee lounge area.**
- ◆ **Start a quarterly staff newsletter that is about lifting team spirit, fostering a sense of a caring organization and recounting fun ideas.**
- ◆ **“Log in for fun” – create a large poster or writing space using this title. Post it in an area that the staff frequently visits. Urge them to write a quick note about something they have done to add excitement to their life (does not have to be work related).**
- ◆ **Fun meters. These colorful buttons have meter bars that can be moved as the fun progresses. They are a great conversation piece. Customers love them! Order your own customized fun meter buttons for a nominal cost from Meter Buttons, Box 484, Osseo, MN 55369, 1-800-847-0426.**
- ◆ **Rent a popcorn machine or a cotton candy machine to have on hand for both the customers and associates.**
- ◆ **Set aside one day a month as “sneaker day” -- they will love this opportunity to wear their best sneaker.**

- ◆ Have teams write a song, create a poem, or create a skit that is work related.
- ◆ As the manager, designate a specific number of “joy breaks” that you authorize each week. Just give them \$5.00 and 20 minutes – Wow!
- ◆ At a sales meeting, give each associate a piece of white construction paper and have it titled “My Worst Customer Nightmare.” Have crayons or colored pencils available. Have each person draw his interpretation of this nightmare. Have everyone show their drawing and select three or four to tell why they drew this. Have the associates sign them and post all of them in the employee lounge.
- ◆ At the end of a long sale day or with paychecks at the end of a very tough period, send off each associate with a “Coke and a smile” as a way of showing your appreciation for their dedication. Ice down your favorite sodas in a big tub.
- ◆ Use a 15-minute segment of a meeting to write a mission statement for the company that incorporates how you use humor in your business.
- ◆ Invest in a recliner (better yet, a massaging recliner) and create a special space for “time-outs.” Employees can use the recliner on breaks or the manager may designate a special 15-minute break for a rejuvenating time-out.
- ◆ Start a scrapbook named “(Your store name) – A Fun Place to Work” that keeps dates, photos, memories, etc. Encourage everyone to contribute to creating this scrapbook.
- ◆ Conduct a “talent analysis.” See who among you has special talents, i.e., singing, dancing, ventriloquist, sign language, great chef, crafts, etc. Think of ways to leverage this talent in your activities.
- ◆ Create a “whine cellar” – that special spot where an associate can go when they need to get off the floor. Stock the area with a few stuffed animals, Lego’s, stress toys, etc. Put up a colorful sign denoting the “Whine Cellar.”
- ◆ Go to the candy counter and select candy to use as instant rewards, i.e., Lifesavers (“You were a lifesaver to us”), Crunch bar (“Wow, without you, we would not have made it through that crunch”), \$100,000 Grand (“Let this be a small token of our gratitude”). Get creative as you stand and gaze at the possibilities.
- ◆ Have a team develop a “Trivial Pursuit” type of game about the company. Use it at staff meetings – give small prizes.
- ◆ Sponsor a recipe contest. Make up teams of 2-3 associates and have them write a “recipe for success” at your business. Use the format of a traditional recipe. “Cook up” original ideas and “blend” them in the recipe. Reward all who participate. Post, publish, share with staff and customers -- makes a great addition to the newsletter or part of an ad.

As owners and managers, your role continues to evolve more to that of coach and cheerleader. Your actions directly affect the daily *esprit de corp* with your staff. Your ability to “spread the sparkle” in your business will definitely have a bottom-line effect and will infuse your organization with determination and hope. This myriad of thoughts on the premise of “investing in jest” needs to be approached with “everything in moderation” mentality. Certainly we must remember the old

adage “all work and no play makes Johnny a dull boy” but “all play and no work makes Johnny unemployed.”

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