

Improve company culture with a little bit of laughter

If Mary Poppins ever tires of childcare, she might make a good company culture advisor. Consider her astute observation, “In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find the fun and—SNAP!—the job’s a game.”

Research increasingly supports the notion that some laughter and playfulness in the office corresponds to a myriad of company culture positives: reduced employee turnover, improved well-being, better communication, higher creativity and greater productivity, to name a few.

Yet while lightheartedness has its pros, managers must be aware of potential cons. Taken too far, tomfoolery can create anything from a distraction to a den of unprofessionalism to a lawsuit. The boss sets the tone, so it pays to take fun seriously.

Inclusion

Workplace fun should promote bonding among team members, not spur tension. So for starters, watch that activities are open to all (even if the invite gets declined). The last thing you need is a female secretary who feels slighted because she wasn’t asked to join the March Madness pool or a seasoned employee who fears his age kept him from being recruited for a Happy Hour trip.

And while humor can lighten situations and contribute to a pleasant atmosphere, it should never make anyone feel uncomfortable. Leaders must step in when jokes become sexist, racist, vulgar, political or religiously intolerant.

Jennifer Folsom, now chief of corporate development at Summit Consulting, shares this story from her first workplace:

My first boss made you feel like a million bucks by giving you a nickname. Our team was really tight, and we had all of these great inside jokes. But when a new person came on board? Awkward. And a young woman of color got a nickname that was well-intentioned but called out something about an individual characteristic that made her feel uncomfortable, but she was afraid to speak up. So while I LOVE a fun office environment, I have taken a few lessons from that early career experience.

Folsom recommends avoiding anything that singles out an individual and instead sticking to group fun.

For instance, one team at her firm has a whiteboard with everyone’s names on it, and each person draws in a little picture of his or her mood for the day. And her consulting project team has a fun way of releasing stress—hitting a big office buzzer after a client asks them to do something out of scope.

Celebrate all birthdays. Volunteer as a group. Create a company playlist of energizing songs. Hold a cubicle decoration contest. Bring in an instructor to teach meditation or run an improv workshop. Agree to a Friday pizza party if production goals get met. Options for fun together are endless.

Giving fun its place

While fun provides a release and keeps people engaged, managers needn't make it their primary goal. Instead, focus on developing the type of company culture in which fun can thrive.

"People do not go to work in search of fun," says Neil Bedwell, founding partner at Local Industries. "It is not the reason they put in extra effort or choose their next move. Most people are looking for something deeper—meaning. To know that what they do matters."

When employees internalize their importance, great things happen.

"Confident people are more inclined to have fun and to create moments, habits and routines around it," Bedwell says. "So as an employer, you don't have to create the fun, just enable it— a little like the role good parents take when their kids play; create the space for them to make up the game."

Finally, don't view "fun" and "free" as synonymous. A loosey-goosey environment is unlikely to produce desirable outcomes.

As Bedwell notes, "The ability to enjoy time at work and bring fun into the workplace is a measure of how much trust employees feel, and how much trust they have in their employer, not how free or relaxed the company is. Find and build trust in your people, and they will build your business in ways you have yet to imagine."