

Change Language:

Cultivating a Workplace of Fulfillment

Joe Carroll

Imagine working for an organization that allowed you to develop and achieve your full potential. What kind of impact do you think it would create if all employees were able to perfect their talents and skills on the job? Of course, every company strives to maximize profits through an engaged and passionate workforce. Organizations seek to retain customers, minimize employee turnover, expand business and turn a profit. The challenge, however, is actually achieving these objectives on a consistent and long-term basis.

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Companies are often impacted by the economy. Depending on the product or service that they provide, some actually thrive during a downturn, while others soar only during boom times. Company success can be unpredictable, and can rapidly change. Suppose, however, that there were a way to ensure business growth and prosperity despite a seesaw economy. What specific initiatives could companies adopt to achieve this seemingly daunting task? Walt Disney asserted that “It’s kind of fun to do the impossible.” The key word in that quote is “fun,” and it is one of the secrets to success in the workplace.

According to a Gallup poll, 70 percent of workers are not completely engaged and never reach their full potential on the job. This number is staggering, and demands an explanation. What is preventing employees from connecting with their work? Many attribute this detachment to inflexible bosses, recruiting mishaps or the daily churn, burn and pressures of the job. However, the question is much more complicated, and its answer is rooted in human complexity. Humans are one of the few intelligent species on the planet who can smile on purpose: most zoologists believe that when animals smile, they are simply carrying out conditioned muscle reflexes that create the illusion of a smile. Only people’s outward expressions of emotion, therefore, provide an accurate and reliable indication of how they feel. Unlike animals, people cannot be conditioned and trained to adopt joyful expressions. While humans are endowed with the ability to purposefully smile, they only exercise this ability if they truly feel happy. Workplaces, therefore, must be designed to elicit genuine happiness from employees.

Develop a friendly company culture

Fun and festivity are often believed to indicate a lack of productivity that the C-suite naturally opposes. However, having fun at work likely improves worker efficiency. There have been many instances indicating a direct correlation between happy employees and happy customers. Everybody needs an occasional reprieve from work to enjoy themselves and to recuperate. In many companies, such a break can only be achieved through vacations, holidays or paid time off.

However, the incorporation of fun in the corporate culture can allow employees to feel that they are not working tirelessly all day. To some, this idea may sound radical — employees are expected to put in an honest day’s work in exchange for an honest day’s wage. But, if only 30 percent of the workforce is engaged, are companies really getting a bang for their buck?

To establish a fun culture, companies should set aside time for their employees to enjoy themselves without worrying about work. Occasional parties, for example, allow staff to relax, laugh and celebrate together. While the snacks, games, prizes and lost productivity may cost the company money, everybody will remember the fun that they had. Research suggests that strong emotional events can become permanent fixtures in our memory banks. Therefore, the company costs are small when the long-term benefits are considered: developing and nurturing a fun culture will have a huge impact on productivity and engagement. This accords with the universal truth that “what goes around comes around” — when a company invests in its employees, they are in turn more likely to become earnestly invested in the company.

Great organizations do not focus exclusively on performance reviews, time management, strategic planning and meeting deadlines. Of course, these elements are important in corporate work life. However, the big picture must account for employee needs. On average, people spend 100,000 hours of their lives working. That makes it very personal. Upper management, therefore, must ensure that workers are happy and engaged. Because corporate-wide initiatives require top-management support, the C-suite should encourage employees to “play in their corporate sandboxes” — the more, the better.

Align talent and work

The late Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Inc., once said: “Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do.” Some people find jobs that they consider to be exciting and fulfilling. However, not everybody is so lucky.

The key to cultivating a winning organization is ensuring that employees’ talents, skills, interests and natural gifts are aligned with their jobs and responsibilities. This is a difficult and challenging task for any company to achieve, and requires focus and attention. Too often, organizations rely solely on corporate training programs to solve the problem. While there is a definite need for such programs in every company, it cannot be assumed that training will create fulfilled and satisfied employees. There is rarely post-training follow-up by the facilitator or the manager, and it is usually assumed that workers are excited to practice their newly-minted skills. However, these false assumptions often predict disappointing results. Even if employees are taught how to work and behave, organizations may lack worker commitment due to the misalignment of talents and job requirements. People should not be boxed into jobs that fail to utilize their strengths.

The mismatch between employees and their job titles begins with a company’s recruiting process. With the advent of smart applicant tracking systems, employers tend to be more interested in key word searches, and they often neglect important strengths and talents. Companies rigorously evaluate potential candidates’ personalities, but do not spend enough time assessing their motivation, talents and interests. In fact, job candidates oftentimes do not know themselves what motivates them.

How can companies improve recruiting and training protocol to positively impact their bottom-line results? One solution is to develop a workplace of fulfillment that goes beyond the executive level. This process can begin when employers accept that employees will and should pursue their passions, which may or may not necessitate switching companies. Striking a balance between passion, purpose, talent and work can be achieved with assistance from a recruiter or trainer who has been schooled in the art of coaching. Coaching is very different from training or mentoring. Trainers help with skill development. Mentors may use some coaching techniques, but their main job is to impart information and knowledge to their mentees. Coaches, however, dig much deeper: they refrain from telling employees what to do, and instead find other means to catalyze change. Ultimately, they aim to teach employees to tap into their top talents and skills on the job. Successful coaching results in organizations with exceptional, motivated and happy employees.

Create a flexible work environment

People have worked since the dawn of time, but not always in offices. Over 150,000 years ago, humans spent their days hunting and scavenging. Men navigated the wilderness in search of food. Women prepared plants, meat and other such nourishment in caves and huts. The workplaces of early men and women, therefore, were different from those used today: people worked in primitive dwellings rather than modern high-rises. Instead of sitting at a desk, they actively prepared food and defended themselves from enemies. The Uffizi (Italian for “office”) was the first office building, and was not constructed until 1560 in Florence, Italy. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did people begin to forego farm work, opting instead for office employment. The human species, therefore, is accustomed to living and working outdoors. People have traditionally worked in exciting, challenging, strenuous and dangerous environments, and are thus programmed for agility, quick thinking and adaptability. Today, most people work in office buildings or city skyscrapers. But, given the historical timeline of Homo sapiens, are these really suitable work environments? It is certainly unhealthy to spend hours each day in a cramped car commuting to work. It is also unhealthy to be cooped up in a cubicle or office all day, with only occasional bathroom visits or coffee breaks. Therefore, companies should provide their employees with more elective options in the workplace. These alternative choices could allow workers to take advantage of flextime, additional time off and remotely working from home, their favorite café or a nearby park. While it may seem that such arrangements would preclude truly productive work, it is important to consider that most jobs today require only a computer and cellphone. The advent of teleconferencing, Skype and social media further erode the need to come to the office every day.

Developing a workplace of fulfillment increases the likelihood that employees will use their best talents each day at work. Creating a flexible work environment that leverages employee abilities and passions can have a significant positive impact on a company’s performance. Employees must simply be given better opportunities to succeed. As Johann von Goethe once said, “A really great talent finds its happiness in execution.”

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