

Creating a fun culture at work

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Abstract

It is crucial to create a unique corporate culture where people enjoy one another's company and where there is a healthy mix of productivity, professionalism, and fun in the office. In order to offer an enjoyable workplace to a happy workforce, it is suggested to lighten up the work environment. Because the employees love to work hard when they also get to play hard. It is the quickest, easiest and the most effective way to improve the office life.

This paper combines theory and practice, through a literature review and a qualitative study. First, corporate culture is defined and how to become a corporate culture of creating fun and enjoyment is outlined. Then it is discussed whether it is the management or the employees who have the responsibility for creating a fun work environment. The paper also includes a two-step qualitative study conducted among Turkish private bank employees. In the first step of the study, it is investigated whether the private bank employees believe that it is the management's or the employees' responsibility to create a fun work environment. In the second step, it is investigated which workplace fun practices are used most often in their organizations and which of them are believed to be the most effective ones. Hereby, it is aimed to shed light to the organizations which aim to create a fun environment when they are building their workplace fun policies and also name the practices which characterize workplace fun and which are believed to be the most effective ones in the Turkish context.

Keywords: organizational culture, corporate culture, fun culture, workplace fun, fun at work

1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional view that work means work and fun gets in the way, has long been ingrained in management philosophy (Jaffe, 1990, p. 59). Today more companies are attempting to integrate fun into the workplace and this is a sign that this trend is changing (Society for Human Resource Management, 2002, p. iv). Because as Yerkes (2007, p. 4) states, the sustainability of the success of an organization goes through having a culture of engagement that makes work fun. However, a corporate culture that supports laughter, play and celebration doesn't arise spontaneously in most workplaces. Creating fun at work often involves concentrated effort and most of the time there has to be put in a lot of work behind the scenes to create a fun-filled atmosphere on the job (Allen & Thatcher, 1995, p. 20; Gore, 2014; Hemsath & Yerkes, 1997, pp. 216-229; Weinstein & Barber, 1999, p. 10).

The aim of this paper is to discover the workplace fun as it is practiced and to discover through the eyes of the employees who work for the headquarters of the private banks that are operating in Turkish Banking Industry and listed in the "Member Banks" list of The Banks Association of Turkey (Türkiye Bankalar Birliği, 2016) whether it is the management's or the employees' responsibility to create a fun work environment and to discover the frequency of the workplace fun activities in the organizations of these employees and the perceptions of the employees and finally the perceptions of the employees about the effectiveness of these activities. The study is oriented to address these three questions in order to shed light to the organizations which aim to create a fun work environment in the Turkish context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Culture and Corporate Culture

Culture is defined as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 9) or as "a pattern of basic assumptions, invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore is to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 1990, p. 111). Bolman and Deal (2008, p. 269) state that culture is both a product and a process and add that as a product, it embodies wisdom accumulated from experience, where as a process, it is renewed and recreated as newcomers learn the old ways and eventually become teachers themselves.

Corporate culture, which symbolizes the signature of the organization (Adams, 2015, p. 108) refers to the values, beliefs and attitudes that permeate a business and defines what the company considers important and unimportant (Case, 1996, p. 44) and so it can have a significant impact on employee behavior (Ford, McLaughlin & Newstrom, 2005, p. 14).

Gostick and Elton (2007, p. 97) define culture as "If your firm were a computer, your corporate culture would be akin to the operating system, guiding how members think, feel and act on the job. If your organization were a living, breathing person, your

culture would be your personality and very soul. It runs that deep. In fact, culture colors everything we do.” and emphasize their definition with the words “Culture is how you do things: the rules, spoken or unspoken, that you play by. Culture is the foundation of everything you embrace, and the reason for everything you do.”

2.2. Shaping the Corporate Culture

Shaping the culture of any group is the unique role of the leader. The example of the behavior of the leaders are seen and followed by others (Parker, 2008, pp. 231-232). Llopis (2013) claim that people desire a “leadership refresh” in their organizations and the employees want leaders who they like, who understands their needs, who can authentically motivate people and who know how to energize a workplace culture to generate the best results for the organization.

As with any other principal attribute of an organization’s culture, the spirit of having fun at work must originate and be wholly supported from the top and then transmitted all the way to the bottom (Gropper & Kleiner, 1992, p. 15). Because of the common vision that fun and corporate culture rarely seem to intersect (Twu, 2006, p. 11), unless an atmosphere for fun is supported in the organization, employees and midlevel managers may not take steps to promote it, fearing resistance (Society for Human Resource Management, 2002, p. 45). More companies are investing a lot of time and effort in creating a fun culture. That often starts at the top, at the company’s CEO and these high energy CEOs embody the social spirit that creates an entertaining culture based on working hard and having fun (Feigon, 2013, p. 106). Losyk (2005, p. 132) suggests that the leader should lead by example so if the leader never has fun or is known to frown upon fun, the employees will be afraid to have fun. If the leader lightens up, the employees will lighten up. Management philosophy and policy can encourage or discourage fun in the workplace (Pierce, 2001, p. 80). CEOs should appreciate the value of fun at work and recognize the importance of a positive work environment which encourages fun (Mackay, 2010, p. 14). Weinstein (1996, p. 26) who claims that the employees or coworkers having fun create an opportunity to encourage an atmosphere of excitement, support and celebration on the job, adds that instead of suppressing fun at work, the managers can begin to nourish and cultivate it, because the expression of fun at work can be extraordinarily beneficial for the morale and productivity of the entire organization.

Just like Motsett (1998, p. 47) states that one of the most difficult aspects of a company culture is trying to change it and it usually can’t be successfully changed via an edict or new policy just because cultures are stronger than any policy; Manley (2008, p. 88) asserts that creating a fun atmosphere at work is tricky; you can not exactly direct people to have fun and give them orders such as “This is going to be a happy place to work, and that’s a directive!” Robertson (2011, p. 4) states that creating a relaxed, fun working environment is much more demanding to manage than simply working to rule.

Kahle (2015, p. 13) claims that it is the business leaders’ job to make work fun, where Gostick and Christopher (2008, p. 173) argue that great managers aren’t always the ones to initiate fun, but they certainly allow fun to happen and adds that if they see fun happening they should encourage it. They also state that the managers know that the fun should start on an employee’s first day so when a new hire joins their team, they

should recognize the stress that person is feeling and lighten their atmosphere to make him/her see that he/she has joined a fun environment.

Above, it is emphasized that the workplace fun is often flows from the top down. However, there are also opposite points of view that argue that fun is not a from top to down given order, instead it is something everyone should create in his/her own atmosphere so it fills in the gaps when people stop taking themselves so seriously. Leeder (2014, p. 627) who states that fun creeps in when managers are willing to laugh at themselves and see humor in the little things that go wrong, even if they think it makes them look bad, adds that for best results, managers should engage in play side-by-side with other staff and leave their supervisory hat outside the door, embracing the equalizing nature of fun.

There are many steps management can take to make the emotional environment of a company lively and welcoming (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004, p. 112-113). Gostick and Christopher (2008, p. 33) state that in the current business climate, where half of all employees report having experienced verbal abuse and yelling and most businesses are spending enormous amounts of time and money searching for a competitive advantage and add that the solution may be as simple as just learning how to lighten up, where Deal and Kennedy (1999, p. 234), who stated that the last couple of decades of work have replaced fun with fear, suggested that putting the fun back into work is one of the key steps managers can take to revitalize a fearbound and overly tense workforce.

On the issue of creating a fun environment, Griffin and Moorhead (2013, p. 96) focus on creating an employee environment that promotes happiness and a sense of fun in order to get the employees to smile, where Boyadjian (1999, pp. 237-238) have given the example of an organization that awarded the leaders who appreciate, motivate and inspire their employees, knows their people by giving creative, timely and appropriate recognition and sets the example by having a high sense of self-esteem, is able to take themselves lightly and thereby manages their stress more effectively, with the title “Manager of the Mirth”.

The laughter and fun embody and enact social transformation (Islam, Zyphur & Boje, 2008, p. 1582). More companies are building fun into their mission and values statements (Poe & Courter, 1999, p. 5) and there are some organizations where people wake up after a weekend, glance at the clock and say “Thank God it’s Monday!” because they are eager to get back to work (Emmerich, 2009, p. 6).

To create success, you need a vision, mission, action plan, product, service, and a strong financial model. But to sustain success, you must have a culture of engagement that makes work fun (Yerkes, 2007, p. 4). But to create this culture can not be possible all the time. Sometimes just the opposite may happen. Fleming (2005b, p. 287) claims that although fun cultures aim to establish a context in which fun experiences are more likely to occur, they are not necessarily fun in and of themselves. Aldag and Sherony (2001) also argue that the organizations do not have to create a fun culture, but to assess to which degree the organizational culture tolerates, facilitates, or even rewards fun may also be helpful.

Urquhart (2014) asserts that there are 3 ways to motivate people to work harder, faster and smarter and these ways are to threaten them, to pay them lots of money and to make their work fun. She adds that in today’s workplace, threatening people has not been effective, paying them lots of money has only shown short-term success but making the workplace enjoyable, has a track record of effecting real change and so it is

time leadership experts and managers learned how to create an atmosphere that is challenging and gives inspiration for creativity - a workplace that is fun for employees as well as for themselves.

Fleming (2005a, p. 31) states that seeking to create a corporate culture that allows laughter and fun is not a frivolous pursuit, it is honorable and necessary, where fun is encouraged with the words of Nelson and Economy (2010, p. 280) "Have fun. Don't allow your office to become a morgue, with everyone walking around like zombies." Whiteley and Hessian (1996, p. 231) also encourage fun with their words "Lightening up is not a management initiative. It is a symptom, a spirit."

Organizational leaders and their employees can help increase the potential for workplace fun by their personal attitudes and actions, by helping eliminate factors that decrease workplace fun, by supporting factors that increase workplace fun, and by understanding that workplace fun can be a result as well as a cause (Pryor, Singleton, Taneja & Humphreys, 2010, p. 300). Corporations hiring Chief Entertainment Officers, Chief Fun Officers and Directors of Fun (Khirallah, 2001, p. 87; Marcelo, 2004, p. 4; Regis, 2008, p. 60; Schumpeter, 2010; Havens, 2014; Nelson, 2015, p. 324; Wooldridge, 2015), Fun Committees (Miller, 1996, p. 38; Morreall, 1997, p. 17; Berry, 1999, p. 141; Cumming, Houck, Moore & Pansczyk, 2004, p. 22; Fry, 2004, p. 32; Alsop, 2008; Levinson, 2013, p. 20; Shriar, 2014) or an Office of Surprise (Alsop, 2008), is named by Redman and Mathews (2002, p. 53) as "the emerging of an organisational architecture of fun".

Abshire (2014) states that from celebrating the big things to enjoying the little things, building a strong company culture that inspires both teamwork and friendly competition isn't very hard to do and doesn't need to deplete revenues and adds that the golden rule of building a happy culture gets through answering the question "If this wasn't your company, would you want to work here?"

Just like in the cultures that Deal and Kennedy (1982, pp. 113-116) call "Work Hard / Play Hard", Housh (2015) also claims that it is possible to run a successful business while still having fun and argues that the secrets of creating a fun culture is to create fun office challenges, to get moving, to celebrate special occasions in unique ways, to make time for fun and to occasionally get out of the office. Demers (2015) also argues that there are several strategies that an organization can use to keep its productivity high while simultaneously injecting an atmosphere of fun into the office environment and these are to organize challenges, to encourage breaks, to socialize offsite, to celebrate achievements and to focus on productivity, not schedules.

Hemsath and Yerkes (1997, pp. 216-229) offer a twelve-step program for fun with the titles "Start with yourself, inspire fun in others, create an environment that encourages fun, celebrate the benefits of fun, eliminate boundaries and obstacles that inhibit fun, look for the humor in your situation, don't postpone your fun, make fun inclusive, smile and laugh a lot, become known as "fun loving" and put fun into action". They also claim that fun is a simple phenomenon that anyone can participate and that it doesn't require special training, it won't necessarily cost you money, its benefits are infinite and it can have a positive impact on the lives of the people you work with every day.

Joyful workplaces are buzzing with people bursting with energy, vitality and enthusiasm. These people love what they do and feel they are important at work (Gore, 2014).

In order to make an organization more fun, changes should be created through the complex system of the organization's culture, through formal and informal training, and through turnover and selection. The organization needs to work on changes continuously (Abramis, 1989, p. 69).

Recently, many practitioners, books, articles, and consultants have suggested many methods and activities to create a fun environment at work. These include many activities such as to share funny letters or e-mails with others, organizing an employee "Pet Show" where employees can get their pets to work, having "welcome to the company" parties for new employees, managers prepare pancake breakfasts or hamburgers after work for all employees on special occasions, holding "ugly tie", "ugly sweater", "ugly hat" or "ugly pants" days, having theme days (or weeks or months), organizing a best cookie contest, painting the common areas such as reception area, break room, conference room etc so that bright colors can liven up the environment and having plants and flowers all around these areas to give a sense of aliveness, holding team sporting events - darts, baseball, bowling, anything that gets everyone involved, designating one section of the office as the "fun corner" and encouraging employees to post cartoons, jokes, fun activities schedule, fun committee member's name or other materials that may please others, to rent a theater and take the whole crew spontaneously to the movies, holding a family open house where family members can tour the office and meet co-workers, holding a lottery where the winner gets driven to and from work in the company by a Limo, organizing a baby picture contest where everyone brings their own baby picture and post them on bulletin board and have contests to see who can identify the most people from the pictures, to start a work choir, orchestra or band, to organize a fun committee, to charter a bus, sponsor a road trip to a popular concert or music festival for your employees, decorating your desk, your work space or your office, flying paper airplanes in the office, having a pool party at the manager's house with a potluck dinner, to take some time for a brainstorming for employees to come up with their ideas of fun, hiring a masseuse for employees to keep the stress level down from working long hours (Boyadjian, 1999; Fry & Fischer, 2003, p. 10; Gostick & Christopher, 2008, p. 158; Kerr, 2001; Nelson, 2003; Podmoroff, 2005, p. 203; Putzier, 2001; Scott, 2008).

Deal and Key (1998, p. 122) state that leaders, as instigators of fun, are risk takers, willing to become vulnerable, to go out on a limb and to create a culture of playfulness and add that there is much work ahead to infuse today's workforce with frolic and fun. The official designation of April 1 as "International Fun at Work Day" may be accepted as an entirely serious attempt to foster the notion that work should be fun (Wilson, 2004, p. 4; Weinstein & Barber, 2006, p. 88).

In a high-pressure work environment, there is simply not enough time to do everything you need and want to do. So generating a sense of fun and play falls to the bottom of the to-do list unless you consciously choose to make it a priority. Making having fun at work a priority doesn't only lead to reaching out to your coworkers in a playful, upbeat way, but also to treating fun as an essential component of your basic job description and evaluating yourself on how well you are contributing to the creation of a positive corporate culture around you, in addition to the usual stuff, like sales and productivity (Weinstein, 1996, p. 51). It is suggested to start with yourself and not to wait for someone else to start the fun, to inspire fun in others and encourage others to

engage in fun-loving activities and to create an environment that encourages fun (Hemsath, 1997, p. 52).

Ford, McLaughlin and Newstrom (2003) made a survey among the human resource managers to address whose responsibility it is to create a fun workplace environment. One-fourth of the respondents indicated that it was based on a corporate culture, another fourth indicated that it was top management who has primarily responsible for creating a fun work environment and that it must start at the top.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research comprises the private banks that are operating in Turkish Banking Industry and listed in the “Member Banks” list of The Banks Association of Turkey (Türkiye Bankalar Birliği, 2016). In this context, the opinions and perceptions of the employees who work for the headquarters of these banks are taken as base. In this research, 388 employees who work for the headquarters of these banks are reached via questionnaires. The first part of the survey investigated whether it is the management’s or the employees’ responsibility to create a fun work environment, namely whether the workplace fun flows from top down or viceversa, whilst the second part identified which workplace fun practices are used most often and which of them are believed to be the most effective ones.

The majority of the employees who participated in this study (72 %) believed that it is the management’s responsibility to create a fun work environment, whilst 28 % believed that it is the employees who help the potential for workplace fun increase in the organization.

The second part of the questionnaire contained 10 general categories of workplace fun activities which are developed by Ford et al. (2003). The respondents made a ranking among a group of activities that collectively make work fun and rated the frequency of each activity group their organizations used. Next they made a ranking among the same group of activities according to their perceptions of the effectiveness of these activities.

The findings of the second part of the study reveal that the workplace fun practices used most often are 1) recognition of personal milestones (e.g., celebrating individual birthdays or anniversaries of employment or appreciation of personal success of the employees etc.), 2) opportunities to engage in community volunteerism (e.g., donation campaigns, charity bazaars, donations for education, blood donation campaigns, tree planting campaigns, marathons etc.), 3) entertainment (e.g., bands, skits, choirs etc.) and 4) games. The findings also showed that the fun practices that are believed to be the most effective are 1) stress release activities (e.g., massage, exercise facilities, casual dress days, colorful office decorations etc.), 2) recognition of personal milestones (e.g., celebrating individual birthdays or anniversaries of employment or appreciation of personal success of the employees etc.), 3) fun social events (e.g., company picnics, evening meals during Ramadan, new year and welcome summer parties, weekend trips, boat trips, outdoor activities, happy hour, etc.) and 4) opportunities to engage in community volunteerism (e.g., donation campaigns, charity bazaars, donations for education, blood donation campaigns, tree planting campaigns, marathons etc.)

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Although the literature review on creating a fun organizational culture demonstrate that it is both the management and the employees who create a fun work environment, on the basis of what the respondents of the present study reported, the findings of the first part of the present study reveal that the private bank employees believe that it is the top management who is responsible for creating a fun work environment. In other words, fun at work must move from top to bottom. These findings are consistent with the arguments of Feigon (2013), Gropper and Kleiner (1992), Kahle (2015), Losyk (2005), Parker (2008), Pierce (2001) and Society for Human Resource Management (2002).

As a conclusion, the researchers suggest that it is the managers who should create and nurture a fun work environment. In that way, they may set the example in the organization to show the employees that there is nothing wrong with having fun at work. Otherwise the employees may hesitate that the management will think that they are goofing off. And while developing these fun work environments, the ideal scenario would be to incorporate these activities that the employees believe to be the most effective ones.

But as Pryor et al. (2010, p. 300) states that the concept of workplace fun is a real phenomenon which can be influenced by both management and non-management employees and adds that it is everyone's job to create a fun work environment and keep it alive, the researchers also suggest that it is also important to keep in mind that neither the management, nor the employees alone may create and nurture workplace fun.

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