

What Happened to the Fun?

By Nichole Torres

We're no longer allowed to have fun at work. So just shelve those plans you had for your business that included camaraderie and laughter in the office. The Internet bust made one thing clear: Fun belongs at home, and work belongs in the office. Trying to mix the two is what caused the disaster in the first place. So, remember...no fun. Ever.

Or so you've been told. But did the dotcom fallout 5 years ago really put an end to all fun? "I get asked that question all the time," says Leslie Yerkes, founder of Catalyst Consulting Group Inc. and author of *Fun Works: Creating Places Where People Love To Work*. "Ask yourself this question: Did the dotcoms invent fun as a work element? No."

Yerkes cites historical fun/work fusion activities like an old-fashioned barn raising or family quilting to illustrate her point. People found a way to get their work done while having fun, she says. And those are the same principles entrepreneurs can put into effect in their own businesses.

Now that doesn't mean putting a foosball table in the break room and calling it a day--it goes slightly further than that. The classic belief is this: "Work hard, and when you're done and only if you're deserving, stop and have some fun," says Yerkes. "Entrepreneurs will find out quickly that their work is never done." The solution then is not just to do fun things in the office, but also to be a fun workplace.

Confused yet? Yerkes simplifies things: There is a difference between doing something and being something. If you commit to being fun, it will change your approach to work. Example: Challenge the classic ways of getting your work done. Yerkes remembers a situation with a garden supply company that had to put together 20 cast iron birdbaths. The traditional thinking would be to give one person the task of assembling the birdbaths, and then they could do something fun as a reward for their work. "The employee might've grumbled [at the size of the task]," says Yerkes, "or thought 'My boss doesn't like me--she always gives me these chores.'"

The fun/work fusion solution was to gather all eight employees to assemble the birdbaths together and make a competition out of it. How fast could they assemble the birdbaths as four teams, using the one set of tools? The teams then proceeded to laugh and work together and managed to finish the task in 17 minutes. The manager talked with the team afterwards about what they learned and how they developed their system, says Yerkes, and treated them all to donuts and coffee.

Though you may have some employees who resist the work/fun fusion, it is still possible for an entrepreneur to have a fun workplace. "You never force it," says Yerkes. "Everybody does it differently, and the minute you start making rules about it, it's not fun anymore." Just create the atmosphere and underlying philosophy so that combining fun with work is a way of life in your company.

It's a way of life you'll want to commit to. "The Generation X work force says 'I want challenging, meaningful work. I want to have friendship and I want to have fun. It's important to our work/life balance,'" says Yerkes. "Companies that figure out how to do good work and be a fun workplace will be the ones attracting and retaining the talent." So in your start-up phase, when you're outlining profits and losses, expected growth and employee salaries, be sure to create your "work/fun fusion" section. Then dance around and celebrate. Come on. It'll be fun.

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