

# A Personal Message from David Firth

## For the friends of Inspire Financial Management

This message was written for the friends of Inspire Financial Management by one of the UK's leading change experts, David Firth, whose books include "Smart things to know about change" and "How to make work fun".

David has a unique and challenging approach to business. So you may not agree with everything he says. In fact, we don't think he expects you to agree with everything.

But we do think you will find his message refreshing, stimulating and extremely thought-provoking.

And that is exactly why we are so pleased to be able to bring it to you in this way.

*The team at Inspire*

### **Making work fun**

*"A spirit of play, a spirit of rebelliousness, a sense of adventure, an eagerness to challenge and be challenged, these are the things that expose our brains to those experiences that make us grow new neural connections. But when a leader is already running a successful business, it takes a special kind of courage to remain childlike.*

*Rewiring the Corporate Brain, Danah Zohar*

In this message I am going to offer you two deadly serious challenges. Firstly a challenge to You as Manager or Leader....

How can you create an environment in your organisation such that your colleagues *want* to come to work in the morning?

Secondly, there's a challenge to the personal You....

How can you reinvent the disproportionately high percentage of your life which you spend working to create real purpose and meaning and satisfaction, rather than work remaining a bulky and necessary hindrance to 'real life'?

I would guess that we'll only ever be in a position to take on the first challenge when we have faced up to the second.

## Reinventing Work

Over the years, I have seen two common and recurring strategies for making work fun.

The first uses the fun as a sort of bandage, covering the work under layers of humour and entertainment. Pranks are common during working hours, everyone must have a Dilbert cartoon pinned up in their cubicle, and heavy drinking between 6pm and the 8.30pm back to Suburbia-town is almost compulsory.

This strategy essentially sees work as toil, a burden which, though it cannot be shaken off and must be endured, can at least be made tolerable with a joke and a merry song. This is a strategy which the British are well groomed for. It is the war spirit. Chin up. Don't let the bastards grind you down.

The second strategy sees work in a quite different light. It accepts work as a part of life, rather than an interruption to it, and therefore embraces it with all its difficulty, pressure and frustrations.

This second strategy has three guiding principles:

- 1 The purpose of work is to discover and express who we are, both as individuals and as social beings. Work allows us to grow and develop our talents, to learn from how we strive to give birth to our ideas and to combine with others to produce something greater than what alone we could achieve.
- 2 We learn as much from life's (and therefore work's) problems and dark times as ever we do from its flashes of joy and brilliance.
- 3 Expecting work to be fun all the time is a fantasy with no chance of ever becoming reality.

In other words, for the people who follow this second strategy, the fun is *in* the work, not separate from it. Making work fun for them is based on an internal, attitudinal shift as much any change in the external environment.

That's why I encourage anyone who worries that their work is not fun to start with themselves. And I ask you to reflect: what is your attitude to fun at work. Strategy 1? Strategy 2? Or something else?

What is your expectation of fun? What are you prepared to do to experience more fun in the organisation? What can you change about you that would help the organisation lighten up?

## Elements of fun

Listening to people who tell me that their work is fun has taught me other things too.

What do they mean by fun? And how do they find it?

The first thing to note about this fun thing is that it is an entirely subjective phenomenon. What is fun for me is not necessarily fun for you. Stamp collecting is fun for you. Me, I get my kicks from black-run snow boarding. Maybe. That fun is subjective and personal is a truth we should accept as readily as saying that what I find funny you may not, but it has enormous implications for those of you who are trying to create a corporate culture which accepts and encourages work to be fun.

How are you going to find a 'fun' which is acceptable to all? Are you really going to be able to tolerate all the diversity of subjective fun that a team, a department or a whole company might contain?

So that's the first element of fun - its inherent subjectivity. Perhaps this explains why it's always fun to find out what other people find fun. Just ask.

The second thing I learnt about fun at work is that, whatever it is, it usually fits into one of the following four categories:

- 1 **Connection** - whatever it is, it's fun because of the relationships built with other people, or perhaps because of a connection to some cause or purpose..
- 2 **Achievement** - whatever it is, it's fun because something positive is achieved as a result of doing it - eg a creative solution, an experience of personal growth, a success, a result, a win.
- 3 **Joy** - whatever it is, it's fun because it sparks a feeling of energy, 'buzz', well-being or excitement, for example through the use of humour, games playing and entertainment.
- 4 **Freedom** - whatever it is, it's fun because the participants are free of (or break through) either real or imagined personal, social or cultural constraints.

A short answer, then, to the question 'how do we make work fun?' would be to say we should work on maximising experiences which fit in one or more of the four categories above. That's a short and simple answer, but not an easy one. Organisations provide constant opportunities to 'connect', for example, but 'connection' describes the *quality* of people's interactions with others (eg in terms of empathy, honesty, conflict resolution) as much as the *quantity*.

### Three core beliefs that hinder fun

I have also found that there are certain fundamental assumptions about work and organisations that get in the way of our attempts to make work fun. Here are three:

- 1 **The Organisational Cult of Deferment** - which states that:

'Its fine to have fun, of course it is, its just that we're too busy now. So, if you wouldn't mind, please have your fun after 5.30pm. Or at the weekend. Or on holiday. Or in retirement, just before you drop down dead after slaving your life away here. Thank you for your attention.'

The deferment of pleasure is what recovering addicts are conditioned into when they are trying to break their heroin or crack habit. In their case, it's perhaps an understandable approach to their condition, but it strikes me as psychologically limited in a healthy individual.

But perhaps our organisations haven't always wanted healthy individuals, which brings us to:

- 2 **The Neotonisation of People** - which is a big, fancy word meaning the genetic and developmental retardation of development and is a term from biology. Dogs are neotonised wolves - they are retarded wild animals, stuck and now forcibly bred into a permanent domesticity. Cats, I suppose, are neotonised wildcats - they share primitive

instincts for a more fully developed hunter/forager existence, but in reality all they do is sleep on your lap and lick their backsides...

Generations of hierarchical structure, command and control cultures and the ridiculous solemnisation of business by the few who have the most power has neotonised too many people. Organisations don't have wolves or wildcats (independent, self-reliant, powerful). They have the tamer versions of the same thing (dependent, selfish, weak)...Wolves may be scarier to manage, but they're better equipped to survive & thrive. And wolves wouldn't tolerate Core Belief 1 above.

- 3 The Measurement of Everything** - which maybe is always going to be true in a world where everything is focused on the bottom line (which will be sad), but that doesn't mean to say that we are already in possession of all the measuring tools we'll ever need. A Fun-ometer may be difficult to design, but I'll bet you if Bill Gates turned his mind to it, we'd snap it up no problem.

### **Why bother with fun at work after all?**

Because it may be becoming a competitive necessity in a changing world of work, which has moved from the age of production into the era of innovation and information. Along with that transition has come a shift in emphasis from organisational control to individual potential.

In the old world of production and command, the old certainties were what distinguished a company in the eyes of its prospective employees - salary, promotion, perks, with size the most important factor in all three categories.

Finding and retaining the best people now, however, means that organisations have to become comfortable with the shifting, subjective world of environment, values and personal needs, since these are the things that have increasing meaning for us all. Money will always speak to people, but talented employees are becoming increasingly choosy where they invest their time.

Perhaps we'll need a new definition of 'corporate culture':

from....

'the way we do things around here -

so get used to it, keep your nose clean and all will be well'

to....

'whatever turns you on whilst you're here and

whilst we're trying to get the best out of you.'

It always seems to be like that for the Creative Directors in ad agencies anyway. Maybe their relationship with their employers - where space to innovate, explore and play is expected and granted - provides a glimpse of the 'looser' corporate environment which fun at work demands.

## **Eight things you can do...**

... to bring a looser, more relaxed and fun-friendly environment:

- 1 Poke fun at yourself, yourselves, your company.

“Without consciousness of one's own fleshy absurdity there is no comedy, and without comedy there is no intelligence.

*Howard Jacobson*

Organisations can be stupifyingly dull and stupid places. For a change, don't get angry. Laugh. Satirise. Caricature. Mimic.

- 2 Celebrate often, for the bizarrest of reasons. Celebrate 'as if' you've finished because you know that the Organisational Cult of Deferment will otherwise make you put it off. Celebrate events in people's private lives as well as milestones in the change project.
- 3 Banish dress-down Friday. Have a 'progressively fewer clothes during the week' week. Or at least pretend to.
- 4 Practice random acts of kindness.
- 5 Hold regular brainstorms (which themselves can be fun if you do them right - and if you don't, invest in someone who can teach you how) on different themes: 'how to make meetings more fun'; 'how to reward our staff at a cost of less than £50 per time' etc
- 6 Learn something fun together. Juggling. Skiing. Shiatsu massage.
- 7 As a team, give something to the community. Offer mentorship to a school, training sessions at a job club. Clean a stream.
- 8 Hold competitions which are aimed at providing you with another 8, 18, 81, 888 ways to loosen up. Competition One: the most creative ways to connect with colleagues/our customers/our purpose. Competition Two: the most creative ways to celebrate achievement/achieve on this project. Competition Three: the most creative ways to free people at work. Competition Four: the most creative ways to bring joy into our organisation.

*David Firth*

This message was written for the friends of [insert name of your practice] by one of the UK's leading change experts, David Firth (author of "Smart things to know about change" and "How to make work fun"). To find out more about David's ideas visit [www.foolweb.com](http://www.foolweb.com)

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