



HOW LEADERS CAN GET THEIR FUN BACK

BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

Merriment makes teams stronger





As leaders in our businesses, IRWA, other organizations and our communities, many of us have become seriously somber. We are consumed with project deadlines, adequate staffing, company expenses and profits, responding to RFQs, RFIs and RFPs (and in the legal world, RFPs can be either requests for proposals or requests for production of documents), continuing education programming, organizational membership numbers and swag bag contents for upcoming fundraisers. Oftentimes, we are suffocated by the minutia that seems so critical at the time. Who hasn't felt trapped at an organization meeting where a discussion about a minor point prolongs into a loquacious debate, and you wonder whether the dialogue is really even significant?

Between our jobs and other professional, philanthropic and familial commitments, our calendars are congested with multiple meetings and other events. We are double-booked, triple-booked and just flatly overbooked. We leave a Zoom work department conference early to arrive at a nonprofit organization meeting late. It seems as if we are working all the time, and the fun has completely evaporated from all that we do. One day morphs into another day; one month lapses into another month; and another year passes by. Life seems mechanical and dull, even dreary.



How did Leaders Become so Seriously Somber?

How did somberness overcome our lives? Clearly, as we mature chronologically, we get more serious. We have more responsibilities. Others rely upon us. We have far less freedom and far more to lose by abandoning solemnity and engaging in frivolity, or so we think. The carefree college days where we engaged in spontaneity and play are a distant memory, and we delude ourselves into believing that this path of seriousness is the one meant to be traveled.

It is not uncommon for leaders in all industries to tie their feelings about their self-worth and identities to their careers and base their success on professional achievements and accomplishments, thereby attaching vital importance to their jobs and other related affiliations. In a 2019 Medium article, “Don’t Take Your Work Too Seriously,” author Mark Tanner notes, “In my experience, we often unnecessarily make our jobs more stressful in an effort to make them feel more important.” Leaders take their career responsibilities seriously, and if they do not, they worry about what their colleagues, team members and clients will think of them.

The right of way industry is now inundated with new projects but fewer professionals to do the work. This situation is exacerbated by our employees being poached by competing firms. Volunteers in all types of organizations have dwindled. All around, we are doing more with less and feeling overwhelmed. Unfortunately, these circumstances are fallout from the COVID-19 crisis, along with other effects, like feeling a lack of uncertainty about the future in both our professional and personal lives.

Yet, leadership has not always been so dull. I recall a pair of hostesses for our neighborhood women’s monthly bunco get-together who started the event with a rousing series of musical chairs and awarded exciting prizes to the winners. In IRWA, at a Chapter 10 Christmas party several years ago, a Region officer appeared in Indianapolis Colts apparel from head to toe, adorned with coordinating blinking lights. The bright side is that if we, as leaders, once promoted fun, we can do so again.

What is Fun and Why is it Important in Leadership?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “fun” as “enjoyment, amusement, or lighthearted pleasure.” Although the definition of fun may be universal, what is fun to each person is indeed distinct. Although fun is different to everyone, a Forbes 2017 article suggests that to leaders “[i]t’s about opening our minds to the ideas and opportunities that help us be more productive, effective and successful at work and life.” Fun is often overlooked by leaders because “[m]any people think ‘fun’ is something that belongs only in recess, vacations, weekends, and childhood,” writes Ashley Bell in a SnackNation blog post. But fun is crucial to leadership, particularly in a post-pandemic world when anxiety about the future pervades.

The benefits of creating a fun environment for our team members include “motivation, creativity and team building. It can and should be a part of every workday,” says Bell. “[I]t also reduces absenteeism,” claims Forbes. Having fun not only contributes to the welfare and success of an organization but provides a competitive edge in the recruitment and retention of team members. The article “Why Work Should Be Fun” on ascend.com found that, according to statistics compiled by “Great Places to Work,” “Eighty-one percent of the companies ranked as ‘great’ described their office environments as fun.”

Taking Workplaces from Dull to Delightful

In the celluloid world, when a group is in a rut, a leader will call out for fun, usually through some type of outrageous celebration. Think of John Belushi’s exuberant bellow for “toga, toga, toga” which his fraternity brothers then chanted in unison in “Animal House,” or Rob Lowe’s character, Billy Hicks, in “St. Elmo’s Fire,” proclaiming that, “It ain’t a party till something gets broken.” In “Sisters,” Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, portraying the Ellis sisters, host a raucous party in their childhood home immediately before their parents are to close on its sale. However, in no way is the suggestion to promote the consumption of excess quantities of adult beverages or engage in a spree of damage to personal property in the pursuit of fun, but there are important lessons about having fun that we can extract from these movies.

One lesson is to not take ourselves and what we do so seriously. It’s not that work and our other career quests are not important, but, as a 2014 blog on Psychology Today concludes, “It is possible to take something seriously and still inject some fun and humor in it.” A second lesson is not to worry about what others may think about you. In the same blog, the writer adds, if others “are judging you for being silly, then they’re people you don’t need to know anyway.” The third lesson is to break away from convention and be innovative and unpredictable in creating fun environments for our teams.

Team-building events, such as lunch or a get-together during or after work hours, at atypical places can be planned to encourage jolliment among group members. While having lunch at the restaurant down the street or catching a drink at the usual tavern promotes camaraderie and enthusiasm, these locations are ho-hum. Conversely, there’s nothing like an exhilarating few hours of axe throwing or ice skating at the local skating rink with team members.

Leaders can also make in-person and virtual conferences fun. An amusing background can be used for virtual meetings. Yet, a word of caution is that the



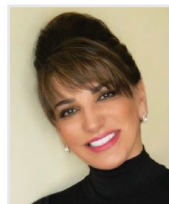
background should be professionally appropriate for the circumstances. No one wants to be caught in the position of the attorney who had a cat face filter on his screen when he appeared virtually at a court hearing. Also, leaders can initiate meetings or presentations by telling a joke or funny story. Humorous cartoons and other slides containing levity can be incorporated into PowerPoint presentations.

The celebration of team members' birthdays and other milestones is another way to integrate fun into work and organizations. The celebration of such milestones was the topic of another Leadership column published in the Right of Way Magazine a couple of editions ago and contains details about their significance to our team members.

Smaller ways to integrate fun are also meaningful. Break lounges and snack bars where team members can retreat and interact, even for short times, are impactful, particularly if they are stocked with favorite beverages and nibbles.

Finally, of course, you can always plan a party with an entertaining theme to have fun. Last year, I hosted a "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" party and invited women whom I know from our involvement in various professional and charitable organizations. The party theme was inspired by Cindy Lauper's 1980s hit song and upbeat music video.

Certainly, these suggestions made for leaders to include fun are not exhaustive. There are endless ways for leaders to incorporate fun into our companies and associations. The only limitation is your imagination and confidence. As the Psychology Today article recommended, "Have fun now: There's no time like the present." 🌟



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