

Making the Workplace More FUNctional

Part I – The Principle

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“Do it Well. Make it Fun.”

This is the first of two articles on making the work environment more enjoyable. In this article, Ron discusses the foundational principle of making work more fun. In the second article, he describes how to make the environment more fun, how to use fun and humor to interact with the people, and how to add fun activities to the environment.

My view of work is that you should either love what you do or do something else. I'm sure I'll get criticism for that statement but the core benefit of Do it Well, Make it Fun is that by combining excellence and fun, you will design your career path by succeeding at each job you pursue. I didn't love every job I was in but when I stopped loving any particular job, I started looking for something else. And each time I got a new job, I loved it for a while and then something better came along - or I created a better opportunity for myself. That being said, no matter what job I was in, I did the best possible job I could and I tried to make the process enjoyable.

In the late 1980's I'd been hired as Counseling Manager for Hospice of Northern Virginia. Coincidentally, I had worked as a social worker for three years in that very department. I was returning after working in another organization for the past year. That meant I'd be supervising people who had previously been my peers. I was nervous about this and wondered if I'd be accepted as a manager since I was relatively young and, oh yeah, I had no previous management experience.

On the first day of my new job, the staff gave me a number of so-called welcome gifts. One was a set of five ties labeled in White Out with a different day of the week on them (while a social worker, I had never worn a tie). Another was a can of gray spray paint to give my hair a more seasoned look. Finally, they gave me a framed collage of pictures showing me as a social worker lest I forget what it was like to work the front line.

These clever and kind gifts meant a lot to me by making me feel more comfortable with this new role I had assumed.

Because of the pain, itch, and swelling of the work environment, you can easily become a too sterile in the way you approach your work. If you're not careful, you'll approach your work too seriously in situations where a lighter touch is needed. One very effective way of “contaminating” this sterility is to add some fun and humor to the atmosphere without compromising the integrity of the work you already do.

Let me give you an analogy. Imagine that you're hiking. If it's too hot, you sweat, tire more easily and become dehydrated. If it's too cold, you need more clothes, your

movement is inhibited, you risk getting frostbite and your muscles tighten up. However, if the temperature is just right, the hiking experience is much more enjoyable.

The work environment is the same way. It surrounds you like the weather and affects the ease with which you do your job. A humorous or fun work environment, just like good weather, makes for a better experience. One of the best examples of a company that functions that way is Southwest Airlines. Here is an example of my visit to their offices.

The name plate on the receptionist's desk said, "Director of First Impressions" (DFI). An airplane oxygen mask hung from the ceiling over the DFI's seat while a bobble head doll of the CEO nodded at me from the counter surrounding her desk. Debbie, the DFI, came from behind the counter, hugged me and said, "You must be Ron, the FUN guy. We've been waiting to meet you. And by the way, this is Southwest Airlines and we don't do handshakes here!"

I was speechless (no easy task). This was not your typical stuffy corporate office. This was the People Department of Southwest Airlines and I was important enough to be greeted by name with a hug. Cool.

Mary McMurtry, the Regional Manager for Field Employment at Southwest's Baltimore office, had graciously agreed to show me around their office and talk to me about the culture of Southwest. For a humor professional, this was like finding the Holy Grail, meeting Bob Hope, or receiving a gold-plated whoopee cushion. Southwest Airlines not only has held a place in the top five best places to work in the U.S., it is one of the most FUN companies in the country.

The airline began service in 1971 and has more than 34,000 employees managing 2,800 flights a day. They carried over 65 million passengers in 2003 through 58 cities in 30 states. One year they received over 200,000 resumes for 908 new employee positions. Southwest was ranked by the Department of Transportation as the airline having the fewest complaints for thirteen consecutive year and was rated the most admired airline for 7+ years in Fortune magazine.

But back my visit. After DFI Debbie informed Mary that I was in a "holding pattern", Mary quickly appeared in the lobby to greet me. Hug number two. Then, she escorted me into her office which was decorated with dozens of Wizard of Oz photos, a framed copy of Southwest's anniversary poster, another bobble head doll of former CEO Herb Kelleher, and a fluffy red boa strung around her desk. At any minute, I expected dancing flight attendants to take my drink order!

Over the course of the next two hours, Mary shared with me the unusual and amazingly relaxed atmosphere of employment at Southwest Airlines. I began to understand that "relaxed" does not refer to an attitude of indifference or apathy but instead refers to a way operating that supports results, customers and staff over restrictive policies and procedures. One of the most important groups responsible for maintaining that attitude

is the Culture Committee, a locally staffed group of employees who are responsible for making sure the culture and the FUN stay intact.

The Culture Committee organizes fundraisers to pay for monthly parties and celebrations throughout the year. For instance, they might sell Mother's Day flowers to their employees for a nominal fee and use the proceeds to pay for a Monday Night Football party or Cinco de Mayo celebration. The biggest fundraiser is a golf tournament which supports Ronald McDonald Charities, Southwest's corporate charity. The airline has contributed more than \$6 million to this charity over an 18 year period.

My favorite experience at Southwest was hearing about the practical jokes that are played on new and seasoned employees. Delta (an interesting name for someone working at Southwest, don't you think?), a new hire, had to complete and return a multiple-page application form to the People Department prior to her start date. When she stopped by one day to drop off the forms, the lobby was full of job candidates waiting for interviews. The minute she came into the lobby, all of the candidates stood up and sang all of the verses to the song "Delta Dawn." The office broke out in hysterics!

Another time, a senior executive spent a day working at the ticket counter and with the ground crew to have a better understanding of their roles. While she was helping direct a plane to the gate using those long orange directional devises, one of the seasoned ground crew members told her to rotate her wrists in a circular manner. When she did this, the plane did a 360 degree turn! She began to scream thinking she had sent a confusing signal to the pilot. In reality, the ground crew had contacted the pilot and told them they had a "greeny" directing the plane and that they wanted to have some fun with her. The pilot enthusiastically agreed to play along. Very cool.

I recall that Herb Kelleher once said, "If work was more fun, it would feel less like work." In a nutshell, that's what it's like to work for Southwest Airlines. It's about working hard and serving others. It's about hugs and humor for the new kid on the block. It's about creating a culture that means something. It's all about focusing on the most important asset they have is people. I guess that's why their company logo says "LUV".

Well done...and fun.

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Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP, CPAE is a speaker, humorist, and author of four books including ***Do it Well. Make it Fun. The Key to Success in Life, Death, and Almost Everything in Between.*** His mission is to change the workplace culture so that organizations are more productive and staff are more content. He shows people how to have more FUN while preserving the integrity of the work they do and the lives they lead. For more information, visit www.RonCulberson.com.