Play is not just an activity; it’s a state of mind that brings new energy and sparks creativity.

Remember this old warning? “Boys and girls, playtime is over, get back to work.” Most of us learned early in life that work and play are separate, and that if you are playing you could not possibly working. But to have a livable work environment, one in which human beings thrive, a certain amount of playfulness or lightheartedness is required. We have found no exception to this rule. The alternative is what Ken Blanchard refers to as an “epidemic of tight underwear.” Not a pleasant image.

An innovative environment demands even more play. Habitually following the direct “all business” line from Point A to Point B may seem more efficient, but it constricts one’s capacity to generate new solutions when needed. The freedom to be playful – to take a winding, curious line – expands creative opportunities (as well as the minds and spirits of the humans involved). The spirit that allows people to wear a goofy tie or to laugh out loud without fearing what others think is the same spirit that encourages them to consider new ideas which expand the boundaries or what they used to think was possible. Creativity becomes an adult game of make-believe (“Hey, what if…?”) we can all play.

The fishmongers know that play can stimulate creativity. When a customer placed an order, they used to walk from behind the counter to pick up the fish, then had to hike all the way back around to wrap the fish and ring up the purchase. But one day they did something different. One of the fish guys threw a salmon over the counter to another. Eureka! Not only did they create a new kind of performance art, but they became more productive by eliminating a lot of walking back and forth.

Despite the benefits of a lighthearted workplace, it’s amazing how much fear the thought of play strikes into the heart of management. When an executive for a large fast-food chain said, “You want us to tell 300,000 teenagers they can play?” he probably imagined the world’s largest food fight.

One reason for the fear may be that we aren’t sure what play is. The same people who are drawn to the playfulness of Pike Place Fish often can’t imagine how they could ever replicate such an atmosphere in their own workplace. “What can we throw at work?” they ask.

The fishmongers have the answer. “There are a million different ways of playing,” they say. “It doesn’t have to be throwing a fish!”

Actuaries, teachers, or engineers will find different ways to be playful than the fish guys. That is the point. Play is not restricted to a toy or a game. It is the lighthearted feeling you release inside people when they are enthused, committed, and free of fear. A successful budget meeting in which serious work is being done can stimulate the same feeling as a picnic.

Exerts from FISH! TALES – Stephen C. Lundin, Ph.D., John Christensen and Harry Paul
PLAY

Some people think play is the opposite of work. You’re either playing or working. Playing at work is usually done on the sly. It’s considered unproductive, unhelpful, and unprofitable.

Every day the Pike Place Fish Guys prove that wrong. Their play works for them. It makes their jobs more enjoyable than they would be otherwise, it draws in business and it actually helps them accomplish some of their tasks better than if they just slogged through the day.

- Play makes your job fun.
- Play energizes the creativity and problem-solving abilities within you.
- Play pleases customers, and team members.
- Play makes boring tasks easier to do.
- Play makes time pass more quickly.

“YOU HAVE TO REGENERATE YOUR FUN EVERY DAY!”

What can you do to regenerate fun every day at your workplace?

If you’re out of the habit, playing might require some serious practice. Well, not all that serious. Here are some ideas to spark playfulness within you. (Be sure to add you own ideas.)

I usually sigh and roll my eyes when…..

Next time I want to roll my eyes, I plan to

The most unpleasant part of my job would become my favorite part if only I got to…

LIGHT UP SOME SMILES

Sure, “play” sounds great. But what if your workplace is a heavy manufacturing plant where safety is critical? First, any activity that puts someone at risk is not play. It’s recklessness. But there are ways to lighten spirits even in the most demanding environments. During December at a tool manufacturing plant, the maintenance workers hung icicle lights on the chain link fence surrounding the site. The machine operators asked if they could decorate too if they kept it safe. Garlands and twinkle lights began to appear wrapped around workbenches and conduit - anything that didn’t move.