

PARKS & RECREATION

TIPS AND TRAINING FOR MANAGERS

Playbook: *All Work and No Play*

Thomas Jefferson once said, “A mind always employed is always happy.” While it’s a proclamation that’s tough to refute, it certainly shouldn’t be treated as a mandate that the workplace be devoid of fun and frivolity.

That’s the sentiment of Paul Spiegelman, co-founder and CEO of the Beryl Companies, a healthcare call-center business he started in 1985 with his two brothers. Spiegelman, who is responsible for setting the vision of the company and promoting its unique culture, believes that investing first in his employees and earning their loyalty will ultimately result in customer loyalty.

And if that means donning a silly wig and dancing in front of his employees, or buying lunch for the whole company- 320 workers- so be it.

“Investing heavily in our culture was not a decision,” says Spiegelman, “it was just the way we did business.” But it didn’t take long, he says, to understand the direct connection between “our employee-focused efforts and the success of our business.”

Spiegelman shared his thoughts on the benefits of introducing a bit of merriment into the workplace, suggesting that all work and no play really does make for a dull organization.

PARKS & RECREATION:
Why should managers get serious about “lightening up” or introducing fun into the everyday work environment?

PAUL SPIEGELMAN: Managers should introduce fun in the workplace because it is the right thing to do. We spend a majority of our waking hours at work, and many of us work in jobs that are not particularly stimulating or exciting.

Before inserting fun into the workplace, we need to make sure that the basics of good compensation and benefits are in place. If not, it makes efforts at creating fun look disingenuous. By making a workplace fun and by creating a positive work environment, employees feel more connected to the business.

As a result, they become more productive and engaged in its long-term success. Most employees view their managers as very results-focused. If managers can “let their hair down” and make their employees realize that they believe having fun is part of the work experience, they will earn great loyalty and gratitude.

It also creates camaraderie and flattens out the organization, as everyone has fun together.

P&R: *How have you seen fun positively impact bottom-line business matters such as productivity and employee retention?*

SPIEGELMAN: Investing heavily in our culture was not a decision. It was just always the way we did business. It did not take long, however, to realize that there must be some connection between our

Discover how introducing a little fun in the workplace can make for happier employees and healthier organizations.

employee-focused efforts and the success of our business.

While that includes lots of fun, there are many other aspects that contribute to the culture, including leadership style, open-book communication, an attitude of caring, and building a learning organization.

P&R: *Can “planned” fun sometimes backfire on an organization? In other words, how important is spontaneity when it comes to frivolity?*

SPIEGELMAN: In some organizations, most of the fun has to be “planned.” In our business, for example, We realize that we are here to serve our customers but that doesn’t mean we can’t take time to show our fun side.

You can’t guarantee that every activity you plan is going to work. It is quite possible that a great idea turns out to be a disaster when it comes to execution. But like in business, mistakes are acceptable.

It just may mean that we won't do that particular event again. What's more important is to find those types of activities or events that work, and then make them traditions in the organization. Nothing works better than consistently delivering on your promises to your people. If something worked, get it on the calendar again.

P&R: *Give us some examples of successful events that you've seen in the workplace.*

SPIEGELMAN: Having a fun culture can range from the very simple to the very elaborate. We are constantly having dress-up days where people come dressed in themes like "50's Day" or "Crazy Hat Day." Everyone loves food, so we'll frequently buy lunch for the company or suggest various potlucks.

We take groups of employees to sporting events and movie houses where they serve dinner. We have two-on-two basketball tournaments where our COO and I challenge everyone in the company to our version of March Madness. We have a pool table, ping-pong table, Wii game, and a foosball table so people can relax on their breaks. Some of our more elaborate events include Family Day, when we close down our parking lot, create a carnival with rides, and invite all of our coworkers' families (we had 700 people this year).

We have an annual talent show where people show their talents (or lack thereof). We'll have games or races that pit people against each other on cross-functional teams to be the last one standing. And each year, the COO and I do a ten-minute video showing us in some crazy outfit or doing some embarrassing dance routine anything to get a laugh.

P&R: *Any words of advice for organizations that might find themselves a bit "fun-challenged"?*

SPIEGELMAN: First off, it is OK if this does not come naturally. It is hard for managers to show their fun side, or start something that doesn't exist now. As leaders, we all need to get out of our comfort zone.

I am a natural introvert, so dressing in a funny wig or making a fool of myself in front of a group was not the most comfortable thing. But I realized that I could really connect with people if I showed that I was human and vulnerable just like them. And it made us into one big, happy family.

For an organization that is just getting started, I would suggest that they start slowly. This is not something that will change overnight, and it is best to show your employees that this is a change you are committed to over the long run.

Then, rather than come with ideas for how to do it, seek the advice from your own employees. And remember that they don't all like the same things. We have a group that meets regularly as our "culture committee," listening to others in the organization and making recommendations.

Lastly, remember that as leaders, we must set the example. You can't delegate this until you show that you are part of the group and are willing to participate. Once you feel the pride, you'll be hooked.



B E R Y L



While continuing to lead Beryl, Paul has been named CEO of the Small GiantsSM Community, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting companies that choose to be great instead of big. This role is a natural extension of his first book, *Why is Everyone Smiling? The Secret Behind Passion, Productivity and Profit*, which explores how businesses can create the kind of corporate culture that fosters creativity, builds employee and customer loyalty, and benefits the company's bottom line.

Paul practiced law for two years prior to starting Beryl. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in history from the University of California Los Angeles and a law degree from Southwestern University. He mentors MBA students attending Texas Christian University and Southern Methodist University's Edwin L. Cox School of Business as well as nurse executives in the Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellows Program. He also is a member of the American College of Healthcare Executives and on the board of the Entrepreneurs Foundation of North Texas. For more information about The Beryl Companies, please visit www.beryl.net.