SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

Health Watch

September 2010 – Issue 64

An Interview
with Matt Weinstein

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Matt Weinstein is the founding president of Playfair, Inc., an international consulting company that presents innovative team-building programs for more than 400 clients each year. He has appeared nationally on PBS, and is the author of many books and articles on the nature of work. As a keynote at the SOA '10 Health Meeting, Matt gave an engaging and powerful presentation on the power and importance of using humor in the workplace. We sat down with Matt to ask him some questions and allow him to share more of his thoughts with the *Health Watch* readers.

Matt Weinstein

What would you say are the most common misconceptions or myths that people have about being serious or having fun?

The classic [misconception] is that people who are having fun are goofing off, and they're not taking their work seriously, and they can't possibly be productive if they're having a good time. The evidence is so overwhelmingly the opposite—that the "command and control" kind of management style burns people out, and after a while you don't have any creative thoughts, if you're just doing the same thing over and over again. You know, the classic nose to the grindstone. Sometimes taking a break, even though in the moment it may not be productive, people come back so re-energized and so full of new creative possibilities that you just leap ahead from there. I know it really is something a lot of people still believe, but only because they've not educated to the present realities.

We've been doing this work for 35 years now, and the old attitude used to be that work isn't supposed to be fun. That's why it's called work! But that has horrible consequences. You really have to think of what are you going to give people besides money to retain them and get corporate loyalty and get them to give you even more. It doesn't cost a lot of money to bring a sense of community, a sense of reward, of recognition or appreciation to the people there to let them know you care about them.

How would one go about changing the culture of their workplace?

I've written a number of books on this, and the basic one is called Managing to Have Fun. The idea of that book is that you try to do one fun thing a week. It's divided into 52 chapters and each one has one idea. You don't try to change it overnight. You take a whole year and you take 15 minutes a week and, boy, it looks so different! Who wouldn't want to be a part of that? Well, there are people who won't, but mostly you get them about the 30th, 40th week, people are excited about knowing what's happening!

What about techniques or ideas for reducing job stress?

The thing to remember is that everyone has a different idea of what's fun. So what's fun for one person is not necessarily what is fun for someone else. You can't just get a bag of tricks and dump them indiscriminately on people. You have to pay attention to your employees, and you have to say "OK, what are the kind of things that are fun to them?" Then you can do something that's specific to them that they can really appreciate, because they can see the thought behind it. The other thing about this, especially for people in management, is "YOU WILL HAVE FUN FROM NOW ON!" You have to model it. If you're not having fun, it doesn't seem safe for anyone else to have fun. People always look to their managers to set the tone. So this is something you have to lead by example.

Do you have tips for introverts about how to get out of your shell?

I was once on a cruise with all the Price-Waterhouse-Coopers partners from Canada. A three-day cruise. My friend said to me, "This is going to be horrible! Trapped on a boat with all those introverted accountants!" When the community, when the holding environment, feels safe, then of course people [will still be] introverts, but people are much more free to express themselves.

The classic work environment is unsafe for people. It's not about changing yourself. Who you are is fine! It's about changing your environment and what's acceptable and what's not. The end result of having fun at work is people feeling connected to each other, feeling a part of a community, feeling appreciated, and you don't need to be an extrovert to do that. In fact, many times extroverts take too much focus on themselves and it's much more difficult. A group of introverts hanging together can have fantastic results as long as they look out for each other and make it safe. This is not about performance; doing something where people look at you. This is more about paying attention to other people and making their life at work more appreciated. If everyone takes that as their mission, just the feeling inside an organization transforms. I won't say instantly, because it doesn't happen overnight. Change is not like an on/off switch, it's more like a dimmer switch. Tiny little increments, and then everyone starts getting the idea, and everyone does it. Then, a year later, "WOW! Is this the same company!?"

What about those old-school people that just don't want to have fun?

You try not to be bothered by them. If one of them is your immediate supervisor, you have a problem. But, there's a lot of literature right now. You can do an education campaign. When people are exposed to this idea, they think, "Oh yeah, common wisdom was totally wrong about this!" The title [of my new book] is "Work Like your Dog" and that's another common wisdom that's so ridiculous. People say, "I've been working like a dog. My boss is treating me like a dog." Have you ever taken a look at how your dog spends his day? That's a pretty good life, actually! We have a lot of things we say in our head every day that if we took a look at them we'd think, "Wait a minute, that makes no sense! We expect people to be more productive if we give them a hard time and make them miserable? How can that possibly be the truth?"

It seems so intuitive when you explain it in that fashion. I wonder why this has become conventional wisdom. Why do you think that is?

A lot of it is the Puritan heritage of this country. Back in the 1700s, if you acted the way I tell people to act, you'd be burned like a witch or something. Times have evolved a lot of our customs. They move slowly.

What do you think are the best ways for team building in a group? Is there a structured way to do this? Like you said, we can't command a group that, "we're going to have fun now, from 10 to 11."

There's no one right answer. Even groups that get together and have a rotating thing where every once a month we'll do something after work and one person picks what we do, and whatever that person picks we'll do it. Of course, those things can have wonderful effects! It's people, self guided, giving to each other, and experiencing what's fun for each other. In the book Managing to Have Fun, I write about this one company in California that has tasks no one likes to do. Getting rid of the toner. Taking the mail to the post office. Bank deposits. They write out all those tasks and put them in balloons. At the top of the day, everyone gets a knife and pops a balloon and whatever's in there, that's your job for the

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day. It's so random and silly and fun that people say, "OK, I picked it, I got it." Those things have the sense of everybody's participating. It's not like one person handing out the dirty jobs. People are very creative. . .

Is it possible to have too much fun in the office?

The short answer is yes, it's possible. But it's much, much, much more likely to have too little fun in the workplace. I would say the chances of you going overboard are not that great. The tricky thing is, under the guise of fun, a lot of people do some veiled hostility. They make fun of somebody, they say something that's going to be hurtful. "Aww, I was just joking! Can't you take a joke?" That's not fun, that's veiled aggression, veiled hostility. And that's very destructive. To understand what's the intention behind the fun is the important thing for people to see. If the intention was to bring people closer together, sometimes you go too far, but you're forgiven. If the intention was to be divisive, then you can't really call it fun. If someone feels hurt by the end of it, it's important to look at the result of what happens, but it's also important to look at the intent. ■

"Fun At Work Day"

Here are thirteen lucky ways to celebrate the day with your coworkers (graciously provided by Matt):

1. **Give each of your employees a (small) cash bonus** and go to the mall for a company shopping spree.
2. **Bring in a bouquet of flowers** and present it to one of your coworkers.Tell him or her, "I want you to keep this on your desk for the next half-hour. Then pass it on to someone else and tell them to do the same!"
3. **Ask all employees to bring in** baby photos or pet pictures or high school yearbook photos to post on the bulletin board. Then guess who's who.
4. **Hold a lottery** where the winner gets driven to and from work in the company limo. (If you don't have a company limo, rent one for the day!)
5. **Take some "joy breaks"** during the day where you teach all the employees the art of scarf juggling . . . or play marbles together.
6. **Hire an on-site masseuse** for the day to give chair massages on demand.
7. **How about clash dressing day** ... or dress in Polka dots day ... or Hawaiian dress day ... or Suspender Thursday ... or Pajama Day!
8. **Dog Days of Winter:** Let your employees bring their pets to work with them for this fun day celebration!
9. **Hide clown noses around the office** and announce a clown nose hunt.
10. **Bring in some champagne** (or sparkling apple juice) and take time to toast each other, your successes and your fabulous failures of the past few weeks.
11. **Have all employees switch jobs** for an hour. One employee gets this opportunity: "The company president does your job for the day—you train and supervise."
12. **During the lunch hour,** divide into teams of five, give each team a disposable camera, and send them out on a **photo safari.** Each team must bring back photos of themselves in unusual team building situations from the photo safari instruction list, like:waiting tables in a restaurant, sitting on a police car, running around a track, playing catch with a dog ...
13. **Hold an employee pizza party** ... with the name of your company spelled out across the top of the pies in mushrooms! Or have a popcorn pop off and tasting contest.