

Executive Briefings

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Marshmallow Dodge Ball and Making Work Fun

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What do morning singalongs, impromptu air hockey matches and marshmallow dodge ball have to do with business? In the case of Umpqua Bank, quite a lot.

Employees — from executives to manager and tellers — of the Portland, Ore.-based bank get together each morning, whether it's in the head office or in the smallest of the 176 branch locations, for what Umpqua CEO Ray Davis calls “motivational moments” — fun, short exercises to energize workers. It's a core part of the bank's strategy and one that's delivering solid growth.

Since taking over the helm in 1994, Davis has grown Umpqua from a local bank with six locations to a regional powerhouse with branches throughout Northern California, Oregon and Washington. Creating a sense of play among employees was one way the bank grew from \$140 million in assets to more than \$6 billion, moving from third to first in the market in the process and winning a ranking as one of *Fortune's* 100 Best Companies to Work For in 2008.

Pamela Meyer, founder of Meyer Creativity Associates and an instructor at DePaul University in Chicago, asked an Umpqua HR leader to describe the impact motivational moments had on employees.

“[She said] the best I can describe it is that people just feel lighter,” Meyer said. “They're more likely to connect with each other and share resources.”

Meyer said work has come to be associated with too many negative things — structure, routine, stress and boredom, among others. Her book *From Workplace to Playspace*, published in April, documented the way companies like Umpqua, Google and Chicago-based T-shirt maker Threadless have used a sense of play to change perceptions and drive business results.

“When I was conducting my research, both with individuals that were thriving and with organizations that were thriving, they don't make distinctions between work and play but in fact create spaces where people are working at the top of their talent,” she said.

Play has gotten a bad rap in business circles, often perceived as something that happens after real work is done. But incorporating play into work is a key dynamic of business success. Successful companies define play broadly to mean the play of new ideas, possibilities and perspectives and look at it as a way to foster learning and create more flexibility and responsiveness.

“You see that they're creating really high-engagement experiences and not necessarily using play in terms of funny hats and games, but this more expanded version as this space for new possibility to emerge,” Meyer said.

Companies that create play space in this sense consistently engage and provoke people to try new things. They make time and room for relationships to develop, and they intervene and coach managers who have a toxic influence on the culture. But it goes beyond just the managers.

“They ask everybody to take responsibility for the quality of their work experience and the space they create, whether it’s in the midst of a collaboration or part of a broader project, so it can translate into coaching, being willing to speak up and challenge assumptions and also being responsible for being a positive influence on the collaboration,” Meyer said.

Leadership sets the tone and “gives permission” for people throughout the organization to take risks by modeling innovative thinking and a spirit of play.

“When people feel this experience of safety and an experience that everybody is taking shared responsibility, their self-consciousness starts to slip away and they become more committed to the shared success of the group effort,” Meyer said.

It’s not just a nice, fun thing to do. Organizations can see real business results from fostering a play space. The recent recession caused obvious stress and lowered morale as overstretched workers were called on to do more work with fewer resources. High engagement can help organizations overcome those challenges, improve learning, open up new possibilities and boost productivity.

“If they’re just completing the task, their openness to learning, especially self-directed learning, tends to go down ... but when people are truly engaged, then they’re more curious, they’re more willing to do outside learning and reading, and they’re more engaged in informal learning. They’re also more willing to persevere past the obstacles,” Meyer said.

While Meyer said the business case for more play is clear and can lead to measurable results, including higher earnings per share, reduced turnover and higher job satisfaction, she cautions against taking the business case too seriously.

“As important as the business case is, if people’s only orientation to this is the business case, it will ring false and it won’t feel really fun,” she said.

It may require a leap of faith from no-nonsense, numbers-oriented executives, but the payoff can come quickly.

“The immediate return you can feel in the middle of a conversation when someone starts building on an idea rather than shooting it down, when someone starts acknowledging that you’re a whole person, [and] you create some relational context and social capital that means you’ll go the extra mile,” Meyer said.



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