

## We All Need Friends at Work

By: Christine M. Riordan; July 3, 2013

Survey after survey shows that employee engagement at work is at an all-time low. One way to help improve engagement at work is to foster friendships. We all know them: the good old fashioned friendships created when we chit-chat, hang-out, joke, and have fun with co-workers.

Tony Hsieh, the CEO of Zappos, the online shoe retailer with over \$1 billion in sales, fosters fun and friendships as part of corporate culture. The core values of Zappos help create a positive environment for employees and cost very little to implement. These values include embracing and driving change, creating fun and a little weirdness, pursuing growth and learning, and building a positive team and family spirit.

Research shows that workers are happier in their jobs when they have friendships with co-workers. Employees report that when they have friends at work, their job is more fun, enjoyable, worthwhile, and satisfying. Gallup found that close work friendships boost employee satisfaction by 50% and people with a best friend at work are seven times more likely to engage fully in their work.

Camaraderie is more than just having fun. It is about creating a common sense of purpose. Studies have shown soldiers form strong bonds during missions because they believe in the purpose, rely on each other, and share the good and the bad as a team. Camaraderie promotes a group loyalty that results in shared commitment. Camaraderie at work can create “esprit de corps” – mutual respect, sense of identity, and admiration for hard work and outcomes. Many companies are engaging in corporate challenges, such as bike to work day, wellness competitions, and community service events to help build a sense of teamwork and togetherness. Best practice companies communicate corporate goals and priorities to unify everyone.

Friends at work form a strong social support network for each other, personally and professionally. Whether rooting for each other on promotions, consoling each other about mistakes, giving advice, or providing support for personal situations, comradeship at work can boost an employee’s spirit. A recent story in the Fairfield County Gazette in Ohio highlighted the power of workplace friendship for brain cancer patient Tracy Lee. Three nights a week, Tracy’s co-workers from the Fairfield County Board of Developmental Disabilities stop by with dinner for the family. Notes containing messages such as ‘miss your smiley face’ cover her office door. This type of support also creates a strong sense of community.

Some companies — among them Google, DaVita, Dropbox, and Southwest — have built reputations for fostering comradeship at work. Creating comradeship at work hinges on the leaders of organizations. That is, companies can and should create and value camaraderie as a competitive advantage for recruiting top employees, retaining employees, and improving engagement, creativity, and productivity.

I spoke with Gary Kelly, CEO of Southwest, who outlined some key points on how a leader can help foster a culture of camaraderie. First, he notes that it is important for the leaders of the organization to have a vision for culture. His advice is to “be clear in your mind on what you want the culture to be within your organization.” At Southwest, they want a culture where employees feel they are part of a family.

Kelly suggests leaders must “model the culture: spending time with employees, treating people with respect, having fun, being there for them personally and professionally, and putting people first — with empathy, kindness and compassion.” Finally, Kelly notes it is very important for organizations to have products and services around which employees can feel proud and that organizations need to leverage the talents of the employees by letting ideas come forward.

People need to work together. So, managers and employees need to foster collaboration, trust, personal relationships, fun, and support. In an increasingly global and virtual environment, challenges for employees and managers will be to cultivate these personal relationships. Fostering friendships takes proactive effort.

Are there downsides? Sure: professional jealousy, groupthink, cliques, split loyalties, time socializing, and broken friendships. These are manageable and the benefits far outweigh any negative outcomes.

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