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Get serious about having fun

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We were down by 14 points at half time and the team seemed defeated. Our star player was frustrated. Her shots weren't going in and neither were her teammates'.

As a coach I was unfazed. Having been irritated with the refereeing in the first couple games, I had decided that my fuming wasn't going to make the situation any better. I could see that the team was tense and this anxiety was creating a very stressful game for the players. I knew we were playing a good team but we still had a chance if only the girls would loosen up, have fun and start playing as a team.

Basketball teams are not much different than organizations. We get ourselves into a tough spot. Perhaps it's a cash flow issues, people problems, communication or competition challenges, and we seize up. I have been there!

As team leaders we become tense, freak out, jump all over the place and make a lot of noise because we feel we need to wake up our team to the severity of the situation.

What happens next is almost comical. Our staff crawl under their desks with their heads down or head for the door, with colds, sick days or holidays. They get out of our way and hope to come back when the office attitude changes. As leaders we are left thinking we have to do it all ourselves, and so often we do, by putting in the hours trying to figure things out and get through the next few days, weeks or months.

A study of over 700 workers by the University of Warwick in Britain found that happy employees were 12 per cent more productive than others. Sad employees by the way, were 10 per cent less productive. This would go a long way to explain why my basketball team wasn't producing. They weren't happy. In fact, they were angry at themselves, the refs and each other.

Studies have also shown that we need a certain amount of stress to have productive employees. This stress is often suitable when we place an emphasis on achieving realistic results in a timely manner. In cases like this, employees often respond well and not only feel good about their success but tend to produce the required results. When stress levels, either externally or self-imposed are too high, productivity drops significantly.

More often than not, the pressure we put on ourselves to get jobs done, to be successful, make money, or to be perfect, is incredible. We place unrealistic expectations about what we can get done in a given day, week or month. Frequently, we have no concrete plans to achieve our goals and the result is often failure and a significant feeling of disappointment. We start to feel irritated with ourselves and others around us because we aren't producing. We aren't having fun and everyone around us can sense it.

So what difference can fun make in business and life? While fun can be interpreted differently by each of us, when we enjoy something, we generally are having fun. Creating a fun culture with the business environment starts with you as the leader. When our employees are enjoying their work, they will get more of it done in shorter periods of time. This is good for business and will be more satisfying for our staff.

It is true that businesses need to make a profit and need cash to ensure their longevity. However, I know of many companies where the culture of the business is focused solely on profits and making money. These businesses often do not retain their employees for long periods of time because, when money is the only reason for existence, the joy of working quickly disappears. Not only do employees burn out but because the focus is on profits and not the customer, the long-term success of the business is often in question.

As coaches, Wade and I were able to get our team to relax and as they did, the ball started going in the hoop. We chipped away at the score tying the game and eventually winning by three points.

Managing people is as much about managing emotions and team dynamics as it is about focusing on the results. Balanced approaches to leadership that ensure happy employees often result in much happier stakeholders.

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