

All work and lots of play: why managers should encourage playfulness

Taking a playful attitude in the workplace sparks creativity, boosts health and well-being — and is good for business, too.



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By [Mireia Las Heras](#)

Children are experts at play. Whether it's with siblings, friends, toys or even imaginary friends, children spend a majority of their waking hours engaging with life as if it were a game. But as we grow up, play takes up less and less space in our day-to-day lives — until eventually, as adults, we're almost completely devoid of it.

Playfulness is generally designated as a child's activity, when in reality it's a fundamental aspect of human nature, regardless of age. Research shows that, even in adulthood, playfulness can be very beneficial: It can [relieve stress, fuel problem-solving skills and foster general well-being](#). It leaves us energized and can even help bring meaning to our lives.

In a study [published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*](#), my coauthors Siqi Wang, Yasin Rofcanin, Zeynep Y. Yalabik and I looked at the importance of playfulness at work and its connection to playfulness in one's leisure time.

Incentivizing play in the workplace refers to introducing a playful attitude — not just gamifying one's tasks, but using a lighthearted and playful approach, whether it's through healthy competition, humor or setting personal goals.

We found this had a positive effect not only on employees' health and relationships, but on business as well. That's because it creates a virtuous circle: A playful attitude at work can

“spill over” into people’s personal lives, helping them take better care of themselves and then showing up at the office with renewed energy.

A playful workday sparks a healthier life

The study, which followed 65 dual-earner couples in the U.S. over a 15-day period, centers on two key concepts:

- **playful work design**, which refers to employees proactively making their work more enjoyable; and
- **playful leisure design**, a new idea introduced by our team, which refers to people intentionally bringing playfulness into their leisure time.

Together, these two forms of play bridge the gap between professional and personal well-being.

A **playful work design**, which is gaining traction among managers, doesn’t necessarily mean turning the office into a playground or forcing “fun Fridays” on employees who just want to finish their workload before logging off for the weekend. Rather, it’s about employees *reframing* their tasks to make them more engaging — think of Mary Poppins when she sings about getting things done “with a spoonful of sugar.” In the same way that sugar can “help the medicine go down,” adding an element of challenge, humor or creativity to an otherwise routine task can make the workload more interesting.

Playful work design is about attitude and how people choose to approach their job. It’s a proactive behavior, injecting both fun *and* playful competition into one’s daily work. This helps replenish personal resources like energy and resilience, thereby enhancing performance. And that, according to our study, can translate into employees’ personal lives as well.

Respondents who engaged in **playful work design** not only performed better and felt more motivated in the workplace — they also carried that playful mindset into their leisure time. They were likely to view leisure less as mere downtime, and more as a crucial moment for personal growth and restoration.

We call this proactive response **playful leisure design**. Instead of coming home to crash on the couch and scroll through social media, these employees were more likely to turn their free time into something active and energizing — for example, experimenting with new

recipes, seeking meaningful hobbies or finding new ways to enjoy exercise.

As a result, individuals transformed the traditionally passive role of downtime into an active form of resource generation, converting work-derived energy and motivation into wellness benefits such as healthy eating and self-care behaviors. This sheds light on the unique role of leisure in shaping employees' general well-being.

Playfulness as a shared resource in couples

Two major psychological frameworks at play in our study — the work-home resources model and the spillover perspective — suggest that the energy and emotional resources people build in one domain, such as at work or in school, can transfer into another domain, such as home or with friends. That's because individuals do not manage work and leisure in isolation. This means that the creativity and sense of accomplishment an employee cultivates at work doesn't stay in the office — it seeps into nearly every other aspect of that person's life: how they interact with others, what food they eat and how they spend their downtime.

For dual-earner couples, this effect can be amplified. Research shows that partners' work and nonwork experiences are linked through both direct and indirect processes, influencing each other's health and emotional well-being.

For our study, we used a diary method to track daily fluctuations in mood, playfulness and health behaviors, resulting in a total of 910 survey responses. What we found was that when one partner was playful at work, the benefits often extended to the other partner as well.

However, this "contagion" primarily took place from male to female partners, and not vice versa. Although the reason for this asymmetry is still unclear, it suggests that crossover processes may be influenced by gender norms, socialization patterns or certain power dynamics within heterosexual couples — in other words, societal learnings that can determine whose behaviors and experiences are more likely to influence others.

The deeper value of play

There's a long-standing idea in the corporate world that work needs to be serious, and that play is the opposite of work. This has often resulted in inflexible managers, strict office rules and unmotivated employees. Our study shows that play can indeed be the fuel that keeps work meaningful, relationships strong and bodies healthy.

When employees are encouraged to bring playfulness into their professional lives — and their personal lives as well — they become not just more productive but more vibrant. They are the kind of people who bring lightness into meetings, creativity into problem-solving and joy into teams. By cultivating a play-oriented culture, companies can improve employee creativity, collaboration and well-being while fostering a climate of inclusivity and engagement.

Here are some tactics managers can incorporate into their leadership:

1. **Encourage playful work design.** Give employees autonomy to make work more enjoyable. Provide training or workshops that help them redesign their daily routines — this could mean gamifying team goals, creating friendly competitions or applauding creative approaches to problem-solving. The key is to let employees *choose* how they inject fun and challenge into their roles.
2. **Develop work-life friendly policies.** Too often, company wellness programs focus on work performance or mental health workshops, but our study is a reminder that the way people spend their downtime is just as important. Encourage value in rest and leisure through policies like flexible schedules, “play breaks” during work hours or stipends that employees can use for hobbies and exercise.
3. **Model playfulness from the top.** Managers who approach challenges with curiosity, humor and flexibility signal to employees that it’s okay to do the same. A playful leader doesn’t trivialize work — rather, they make the whole experience more human.
4. **Align play with purpose.** The most successful playfulness interventions connect to personal values like health, the arts or family. Companies could provide tools for employees to reflect on how playful approaches at work — and in leisure — align with their broader goals. Initiatives such as team-based well-being challenges or social health pledges can help promote sustained engagement.

Our study shows that play is not a luxury but a strategic resource. Companies that ignore this will remain trapped in rigid cultures, while those that integrate it intelligently as part of their way of working will have employees who are more creative, healthier and more willing to commit. Perhaps the time has come to stop making “be serious” the default, and make room for something as basic as it is human: the playful life.

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