Seven Ideas to Create Fun at Work
By Joel Zeff

The crowd of 400 waited patiently for the ballroom doors to open. The trumpets of the William Tell Overture signaled the start to find the perfect seat. As trumpets blared, 400 smiling employees of a large insurance company stampeded to their chairs. In less than 2 minutes, they were seated and ready for hotel chicken, steak or stuffed red pepper.

The room buzzed. Employees and executives mingled, smiled and enjoyed each other’s company. They had no idea what would come next would be awesome.

One of their leaders, a vice president and actuary, walked on stage wearing a very tight pseudo Lone Ranger outfit. He called it “robin’s eggshell blue”. He had a mask. He had lots of fringe. The crowd ate it up. As he gave out awards and recognized various individuals, he punctuated everything by drawing his toy gun. He had perfect timing and the crowd loved it.

For a little more than 2 hours and the price of a hotel chicken lunch, employees celebrated, received applause and recognition for a great year, relaxed and had fun. And when lunch finished, the employees returned to work, most with a bounce in their step.

It is a simple formula. Break from work + free lunch + actuary dressed as the Lone Ranger + recognition = fun. Why can’t more companies figure this out?

Fun wins again. Fun should always win. Now, more than ever, we need to instigate, encourage and demand fun. Sometimes, we even have to fight for it. We are all working harder and longer. Take your pick of recent frustrations: the
economy, a recent merger or layoff, global events, reduced benefits, or any daily corporate change.

Fun is our secret weapon. Fun will always win against the stress, frustration and impatience of change and uncertainty. Fun will increase passion, productivity and loyalty. Fun energizes our passion for the day to day work. It is our fuel and for many companies it is in short supply.

Fun is also simple. It really doesn’t take much time, budget or energy. It just takes willingness. Here are seven ideas for managers to promote, encourage and instigate fun:

1. **Surprise and silliness.** The Lone Ranger Vice President is the perfect example. I have seen executives dress up as a Roman emperor, cowboy, Greek Olympian, super hero, and everything else. It always works.

   Work is serious. Business is serious. It is okay to lighten up a little with a touch of silliness. Here is another example: One of my best friends works at a telecommunications company. They had a large chess piece (about four feet high) in their office. It would appear in someone’s office one day and reappear the next day somewhere else. Sometimes they would take the chess piece to meetings with them. It was silly. Sometimes it was given as an award. If you were having a rough day, it was guaranteed the chess piece would show up in your office. The recipient would always smile.

   My friend, who is in the Army, was called up and sent to Kuwait in support of the war effort. One day, his colleagues mailed him the chess piece. My friend carried around this four foot chess piece around the base and took pictures: in the mess hall, on a tank, in the latrine. Everyone on base laughed at my friend’s chess piece during the impromptu photo session. They offered photo ideas.

   He sent the photos back to his friends. His friends at work loved the photos.
One 4-foot chess piece created fun on two continents, one war zone and one large corporation.

What is your 4-foot chess piece? Fun sometimes comes from unlikely places. The common ingredient is always a little silliness, mixed with a little surprise and some imagination.

2. Recognition and celebration. A little positive support and recognition is a huge ingredient to fun. Be creative and different. Telling someone “thank you” or “I appreciate you” is the greatest gift you can ever give. And it doesn’t take any money, planning, budget or a PowerPoint presentation with an upside down triangle.

• Create a “thank you” bulletin board in the break room.
• Give out a funny trophy each week.
• Take someone out to lunch.
• When I host award programs, I always suggest the client create a slide show to play during dinner with photos and work/personal achievements of everyone in the room. Ask employees and managers to submit their achievements. You might only be giving out 12 awards, but you just recognized everyone in the room with the slide show.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of ways to celebrate and recognize employees for their work, dedication and excellence. And every way you find will foster, encourage and create fun.

3. Energize Meetings

Skit night is a big deal. What is skit night? “You can’t miss skit night,” I was told repeatedly. “What time are you coming to skit night?” I was asked. Believe me, I am not missing skit night.
Skit night is the highlight of the annual leadership meeting for one of my large apartment management clients. On the opening night, the CEO and COO give a presentation. And then skit night happens. Several of the regions are tasked with performing a skit that can and does include everything from acting, video, music, lip synching, and “dancing”. Each region performs every other year, to increase the anticipation.

Each skit was about their culture, current trends, executives, state of the business or and just about everything else. Between the videos and the stage performance, dozens of people were involved in each performance.

When I saw skit night, I was amazed, delighted, and entertained. I spoke to the CEO after the meeting. He couldn’t have been happier. You see, skit night has nothing to do with the performance. Sure, it adds some fun, energy and laughter to the annual meeting. Skit night is about the time spent back at the office planning, writing, producing and rehearsing skit night. Managers and employees from each department spend time together creating their skit. Everyone in the region is involved at some point.

Skit night is a release. Everyone working on the common objective of skit night is an equal. Different departments working together on skit night builds camaraderie, respect, loyalty, passion and friendship. Those are the same skills that will be needed during a crisis.

Skit night is fun. And just one more reason why the company is consistently named one of the “Best Places to Work.”

4. Promote Innovation. I was recently invited to speak at a medical technology company’s Innovation Week. Each day offered a different session that lasted 1-2 hours. The sessions ranged from a panel sharing innovation achievements from the past year to participating in a brainstorming session for new ideas. Different speakers were brought in to discuss and build innovation skills.
All of the sessions occurred on site and were attended on a voluntary basis. Employees and managers were encouraged to attend with door prizes and giveaways.

The sessions were fun and built around an important skill that builds success. Fun can also be about business. Taking a few hours once a year to promote and encourage innovation offers year round dividends.

Most of the sessions were focused on serious topics and creating ideas to help build their business which means saving lives and helping their patients that use their devices.

The Innovation program was about their business, but also a break from their routine. It was special and different. Again, these are the ingredients for fun.

5. Donate your time. Donating time as a team creates a fun, rewarding experience. I have participated in dozens of programs over the years. And I have yet to hear someone complain. There are hundred of possibilities to create fun and give back to the community. Here are three of my favorites:

1. Team shopping excursion. Choose a worthy recipient organization. Split the group into small teams of six or less. Give them a mall gift certificate, a shopping list and a 1 hour timeframe. Stand back and let the shopping begin. My group ran from store to store with our list, looking for the best discounts. We wanted to see how much we could buy on our list. Every group did the same thing, running through the mall with energy and excitement. The best part was when the organization came to the meeting to accept the donation.

2. Creative United Way fundraisers. Many companies run United Way campaigns through paycheck donations. The annual United Way campaign (or any charity) is a perfect opportunity for fun and creativity. One client had a talent show. Another client made a miniature golf course
at the office. Any visitor (vendors, partners, customers, delivery men) would pay a few dollars to play the course. One client had a cubicle decoration contest. Contact your local United Way and they can probably give you 100 great ideas.

3. Spend a day giving back. Many of my clients have given their most precious gift: time. Spending a day (or even a few hours), cleaning, painting, building, reading, or helping brings people together. It isn’t just fun for the employees. It is rewarding.

4. My railroad client sponsors a Technology Awareness Day for area high school juniors and seniors to encourage careers in technology. The program is on a Saturday at their corporate campus and is completely staffed and volunteered by employees. It was obvious the program was as rewarding to the employees as it was to the students.

6. Improve your surroundings. I visited a client in their office a few weeks ago. When I walked in, I noticed a huge painting, separated into small vibrant boxes. I mentioned the painting to my client. Her department created the painting over the course of several days. Each team member chose one of the boxes for their portion of the painting. Four people could work on the painting at one time. Each box within the painting represented the team member’s style, interests, and personality. Their first objective was to enhance their surroundings. The training department moved into a new office with blank, white walls, which they were told not to paint. The second objective was a fun activity that brought the team together. The third objective was to highlight the team’s individuality and personality.

   For the price of some paint and a large canvas, the department created an easy and fun activity. Every day they walk in the office they see the result and are reminded of the teamwork, passion, creativity and inspiration that went into
the painting. When someone new walks into the department, usually their first comment is about the painting. Employees show off “their” square and talk about the art. Like all great art masterpieces hanging in museums, it brings people together. Except this one only cost a few dollars.

7. Compete. Competition is always fun. I always laugh when a corporate scavenger hunt (or similar competitive activity) begins. There is always a group that is “too cool.” They hang back, crack jokes and resist. And then a funny thing happens. They see everyone having fun. Or they can’t resist the urge to help their friends. Or they can’t resist their urge to do something. Whatever it is, a transformation happens. The “too cool for school” kids participate and have fun. Grumpiness erupts into giddiness.

No matter the company. No matter the industry. A scavenger hunt or a silly build-a-rocket-out-of-aluminum-foil-and-toothpicks is always going to be more fun than another day of processing, accounting, selling, distributing or insert-job-activity here.

My favorite competitions are the ones that are about being "best" at their given job. A quick service restaurant client has competitions for the best car hops. The best of the best are invited to the annual meeting to compete. An apartment association client sponsors a skills competition for employees in maintenance. I loved watching each company cheer on their colleagues. I don’t think I have ever been in a louder, more fun environment at a meeting.

Fun is different for everyone. Still, there are some common ingredients that create fun. Fun doesn’t have to cost anything or take a lot of time. And in the
corporate world right now, the fun bar is so low, that it really doesn’t take much to hit a home run.

Find your fun. Encourage it. Fight for it. Find your Lone Ranger or 4-foot chess piece. Give back. What is your skit night? What is your Innovation Week? More importantly, what is your fun?

Joel Zeff ([www.joelzeff.com](http://www.joelzeff.com)) is a national workplace expert, speaker and humorist. He has presented at the 2010 and 2011 IAAM conferences. His spontaneous humor and vital messages have thrilled audiences for years. Corporations and organizations nationwide seek him out to motivate and energize their employees on such topics as work/life balance, passion at work, creativity, communication, teamwork, and leadership. His first book, "Make the Right Choice: Creating a Positive, Innovative and Productive Work Life", published by John Wiley & Sons, is available on Amazon.

Joel Zeff and Joel Zeff Creative retain the ownership and rights to this article. This article cannot be reprinted or published without the written consent of the author.