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Fear or Fun at Work

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Management's dilemma

by Praveen Gupta



I talk to a lot of people and most of them are stressed at work and carrying it over to their homes. The question then becomes, "What drives performance—fear or fun?"

If someone asks employees what it's like to work at Google, the most likely answer is that it's exciting to work in a fun, nontraditional business culture. Conversely, if one asks the same question at a struggling company—where leadership is trying to improve profitability by cutting cost and rightsizing is the mantra—the likely answers would be "I'm just doing my job," "there's too many things to do," "the culture is adversarial," "there's internal strife and lack of motivation," or "I'm tired of working hard and being stressed." If a company is growing profitably, employees are happy and doing well irrespective of workload. In a struggling company, with stagnant or declining sales, management cuts cost to sustain profitability. Cutting costs sometimes includes reducing investments in development or training. While a company tries to stay profitable, sales continue to suffer without investments in new products or services, instilling fear in the leadership, which results in scared, stressed employees. This is common at many companies.

Fun and fear relate to business performance. Profitable growth brings fun and excitement to everyone in the company, along with more innovative work and higher productivity; while losses and stagnation bring fear, stress, depression and lower of productivity.

How can leadership sustain profitable growth?

There must be leading indicators, industry watch dogs and opportunities for growth. Be it with existing or new products and services, growth is mainly—not always—driven by innovation, while profitability is driven by execution.

I have worked with many leaders who adopt "Making money and having fun" as an initiative at their companies. Until recently, I admit, I could understand how to measure making money, but measuring fun wasn't so apparent to me. If we don't know how to measure fun, we're probably not having fun, and we certainly aren't growing profitably. The adage, 'If you ain't havin' fun, you ain't doin it right,' makes more sense to me than ever before.

While recently developing a process to institutionalize innovation, I learned that innovation and business growth begin with an idea. This implies that if we aren't growing, we must not be generating new ideas. I found that when we get together in a room to brainstorm for good ideas, most of them turn out to be old and boring, and require no thinking. We spit out those "good" ideas almost like the things we want to throw away. Further experimentation on making people think, led me to establish a four-stage idea development process: Good ideas, Crazy ideas, Stupid ideas and Funny ideas. While conducting an exercise in my classes to generate ideas, I observed that as more time was spent on generating ideas, the ideas moved from good to funny, which directly relates to the extent of innovation and thus the opportunity for growth.

I had the "Aha!" moment when I figured out that having fun at work means being able to present funny ideas without fear. How does having funny ideas help a company, even if executives are afraid of hearing some things? Well, smart executives want to hear everything on the employees' minds. Executives want employees to be smart, but they don't give them time to think, they discourage their speaking up and they don't have a process to which all employees can contribute intellectually. They don't even believe that every employee can think, or that everyone could be innovative. I'm not being antimanagement, because I'm always trying to figure out how to help management, but do managers have all the answers? Do only managers have the right to think?

While problem-solving with clients, I get more ideas from the employees than from managers. Someone working eight hours a day on a process is more likely to know the causes of a problem with that process than someone who merely oversees its performance. However, employees are often afraid or unwilling to give their ideas because they fear rejection or scolding for wasting time in thinking. In one company, in a team training session, participants told me they had always involved management in the team, although management only showed up in the final meeting to reverse the team's decisions.

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Therefore, one of the critical aspects of sustainable growth is creating an environment for employees to have fun at work, where they can freely think and contribute to the growth and profitability of the company. Training for active listening and empathy may have to be reintroduced in the corporate training curriculum. This would make the leadership's job easier, be more rewarding for all employees and help generate profitable ideas. I tell leaders, "Listen to the employees. Let them have fun, work hard and enjoy the profitable growth."

About the author

Praveen Gupta, president of [Accelper Consulting](#), helps clients in the areas of Six Sigma, lean, business scorecard and innovation. He has authored several books including [Six Sigma Business Scorecard](#) (McGraw-Hill Co., 2003) and [Six Sigma Performance Handbook](#) (McGraw-Hill Co., 2004). Praveen writes monthly for Quality Digest's Inside Six Sigma newsletter.

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