DIRECTED PLAY

How to Have Fun at Work.

by

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THE SEARCH

Once upon a time there was a bright young man who was looking for fun in his work. He calculated that he spent one third of his day working. For him, his job was just that, a job. Work reminded him of toil and that was something he no longer looked forward to doing.

He remembered his childhood and longed for the freedom of play that it offered. He knew that he could not return to the period of endless play that he had as a youth. He knew that there were people like him who sought to have fun at work. He knew, because every once and a while a whisper filtered through to him from far away, stories of people who had fun at work.

His elders told him to put away such childish thoughts now that he was an adult. The scientists told him his search was futile because their magic machines told them conclusively that people hated their jobs. He didn't want to be one of the statistics who hated work. He was bored with work and the place where he spent a third of his day was no longer any fun. He wanted to find the person who could end his search.

He talked with his friends about his search and whenever he met some one new, he asked them if they knew the person for whom he searched. No stone was left unturned by this young man in his search for the manager who knew how to have fun at work.

One day his search for a manager who knew how to play at work brought the young man to a manager named Huizinga (Hue-zing-a).

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The young man looked at Huizinga. A mild mannered man, Huizinga had a contagious smile that made him look youthful. Yet the depth of the gaze from his eyes conveyed a wisdom and maturity beyond his years.

Huizinga smiled. “Most people call me Hugh. Also, it is the phonetic pronunciation of the first syllabus of my name, Huizinga (Hue-zing-a).”

Hugh leaned forward in his chair and gazed directly into the young man's eyes. "Let me put it to you this way. You spend approximately one third of your day at work, don't you?"

"True," replied the young man. He thought to himself that Hugh seemed to understand the problem.

"Then, the question is simple," asked Hugh. "Would you rather have fun at work or not?"

"Fun," exclaimed the young man! "Of course I want to enjoy what I do! But then that isn't much of a choice is it?"

"It shouldn't be much of a choice either," laughed Hugh. "And it is normally through play that we have fun."

"Through play," exclaimed the young man.

"Let me phrase the choice another way," continued Hugh. "Have you ever had a riddle or question for which you have spent years searching for the answer? I am sure that you have spent considerable time attending workshops and reading books in your attempt to answer this question. Such was the case for me and after arriving at the conclusion, I created a riddle which helps explain the solution to the question which you have raised."

"What is the riddle," asked the young man.

Hugh took the young man's notebook and on its first page he neatly printed the following question. "**Why are volunteers often more productive than employees?**" He handed it back to the young man.

The young man looked at the question and read it out loud. Thinking back, the
young man responded, "You have an interesting question? I was involved with a first aid program offered by a national organization several years ago. You make a good point. I knew volunteers who couldn't wait to leave work to become involved in teaching their courses. They spent hours developing materials for their courses. It was simply unbelievable how much time and energy they put into their volunteering. In defense of the paid professionals, I should note that they were productive too. However, comparatively, they were often less productive than the volunteers."

"They couldn't wait to leave their jobs and go work as volunteers. In a sense, they used their jobs as a pension to support their play," chuckled Hugh out loud. "Unfortunately, this is not uncommon. Many people use their job merely as a way to finance their play. The question we face in the workplace is how to structure the work environment so that we can harness all the energy, productivity and dedication of the player toward management objectives. In other words, how can we structure the workplace so that the employee can play at work?"

"And while the employee is being productive, he is also having fun. The employee
is like the volunteer except that he is getting paid," added the young man. "So tell me how you create play in the workplace?"

"There are six core components to play. Some people add more, some less. We will examine play within the context of these six components. I am going to have you visit several experts whose expertise corresponds to each of these components and who will help you to examine play in the context of each component,” continued Hugh.

Hugh paused for a moment and then continued. "**First, play is motivated from within.** Volunteers volunteer because they want to, not because they have to. We call this intrinsic motivation. In your example, no one forced the first aid instructors to teach the courses. They did so because they wanted to teach the courses. You will explore intrinsic motivation on your visit with McGregor. He is your first stop on your tour of several experts which we have arrange for you. McGregor is noted for his contribution to employee motivation where employees seek satisfaction through their work, find fulfillment in what they do, and actually enjoy their work. He has developed an interesting motivation model which is built upon a response to two simple questions."

“Two simple questions. That sounds easy enough,” asked the young man rhetorically? “And what is the second component?”

"Actually, the next two components complement each other in that they define where and when play occurs. **The second component is that play occurs on a playground.** By defining where play occurs, you can easily define the play which occurs on the playground. Equally important is that by identifying the playground you also define the area outside of the playground where play does not occur.” Hugh paused a moment and then continued. **"The third component of play is that play has a time component; it has a beginning and it has an end.**

“I see,” stated the young man. “The playground is a special place defined by time and space and which is different from the world outside of it.”

“Correct,” complemented Hugh. “And in the case of the volunteer, it helps him to focus and become more productive. Also, it gives the volunteer peace of mind since he can step on and off the playground at any time. This is part of designing playgrounds. In your example, the volunteer may not realize that this is what he is really doing, but never-the-less, this is what he is doing," replied Hugh.

He paused for a moment and then continued. “You will visit Ellis, a mental health specialist, who creates what we call ‘designer playgrounds.’ He will teach you how to
design playgrounds in your life. The ability to design these playgrounds in your life and in those whom you manage will enable you to better cope with the world around you....”

“....And it will help you to be more productive also,” added the young man picking up on Hugh’s previous comments. They both laughed at the young man’s perceptive comment.

“The fourth component of play is that each playground creates its own reality or in terms of traditional play, it has a pretend quality,” noted Hugh. “Once the playground is created in terms of time and space, a separate world with its own reality is created. For the child who is playing, and to an adult looking in from outside of this play world, it seems to have a pretend quality. However, it is pretend to only the people outside of the playground, not to those engaged in the play. To the players, their play is very real. It is pretend to the onlookers because they have a different perspective. Since the creation of the internal reality is closely linked to the creation of the playground in terms of time and space, Ellis will cover this component of play when you visit him about creating designer playgrounds.”

“I see,” said the young man. “We design a playground which creates its own world.” He paused, then continued. “What is the fifth component of play.”

Hugh continued with the fifth component. “Each playground has its own structure and order. It can be as simple as understanding the rules of the football or a game of checkers. In a sense, it is the creation of a perfect order, the fourth component of play. For the first aid instructor, the teaching of the course is governed by the rules and regulations of the parent organization. In your example of the first aid instructor, this includes the course materials covered, admission policies, grading rules, and certification procedures. These create an order and structure to the first aid course that are understandable to all of the players, both student and instructors alike. We will use the structure of a game which is a more formal form of play to illustrate this point. We call it the ‘workgame.’ You will visit with Taylor who will instruct you on how to create this perfect order with the ‘workgame.’ Taylor is noted for the application scientific principles to the workplace and for developing incentives in an effort to increase productivity.”

"And the last component," asked the young man.

"The last component of play is that it creates social groups," added Hugh. "People are social by nature and those with whom we play become part of our social group. It is really that simple. The first aid instructor forms a bond with his students. The students form a bond with the instructor and the other students as well. Randy is the last
stop. You will enjoy your visit with him. He will provide you with a new look at groups
when he takes you on the challenge course. We use a challenge course to facilitate group
dynamics and group development."

“A challenge course,” asked the young man?

“Sometimes they are called a ropes course,” replied Hugh. Then realizing that the
young man might not understand what a challenge course was, he continued. “One of the
things which we do on a challenge course is ‘group initiatives’ where we do a series of
activities which are designed to facilitate group development. You will enjoy your visit
with Randy when he takes you outside on the challenge course and demonstrates how
play fosters group development.”

"Interesting," noted the young man as he returned to his original question. "So, you
maintain that play in the workplace can result in increased productivity?"

"Absolutely," replied Hugh. Turning in his chair, Hugh pointed to a plaque on the
wall. "Directed play facilitates increased productivity, That's the bottom line."

"Hard to get away from it, isn't it," added the young man. He had missed the
plaque before. Now he saw it clearly.

"Now, let me flip the riddle around and solve it from a different perspective. We
know that the volunteer is often more productive than paid employees, but the flip side of
the question is why are paid employees less productive than the volunteer?"

"Now that you mention it I hadn't thought of it from that perspective," asked the
young man. "Your riddle is quite complex."

Hugh smiled. "Unfortunately, paid employees are often less productive than
volunteers because employers often find it easier to motivate their employees using
carrots and sticks. Representing rewards, carrots usually include things such as increased
wages or bonuses. The stick represents the fear of punishment or of being fired."

Seeing a puzzled look upon the young man's face, Hugh knew that he could tell the
young man one of his favorite stories. "Management learned about motivation from the
donkey cart drivers. The driver had a problem motivating the donkey to pull the cart. So,
the driver dangled a carrot on a stick in front of the donkey. The donkey wanted the
carrot and took a step forward to eat it. The cart moved forward. Unfortunately for the
donkey, so did the carrot."
"Did the donkey ever get smart to the scheme?"

"Of course it did. After a while the donkey realized that he was never going to get the carrot and stopped dead in his tracks."

"Sounds like where I am in my life," interjected the young man.

"Well, the driver did everything he could with the carrot to motivate the donkey. He moved it closer to the donkey so that it actually bumped against the donkey's nose. The donkey sniffed the carrot, thought for a moment, remembered and didn't budge. Finally, the driver took out his whip and gave the donkey a good snap across his rear end. The donkey lurched forward. Again the whip cracked. Again the donkey lurched forward.

After about a dozen times the donkey became stubborn and stopped dead in his tracks again. Again and again the driver beat the donkey with the whip. The donkey felt no pain. The whip no longer had its desired effect. It simply did not work any more."

"Sounds like the driver had a real problem. What did he do?"

"Not much he could do," continued Hugh. "This is the problem management eventually faces when using carrots and sticks. They reward you with more money and if that doesn't work they use the stick to threaten you with being fired. It works for a while, but like the donkey, the employee learns the game and this approach inevitably fails."

"The problem for management is that it inevitably falls into a trap. The use of
carrots and sticks is easy to use and just like the donkey chasing the carrot, initially, the employee is productive. However, eventually, the manager becomes trapped in a course of action which no longer works. Dangle another carrot; crack the whip. Like the donkey, the employee doesn't respond." As Hugh finished, his voice trailed off into the distance and he slowly dropped his head in a gesture of mourning for the poor donkey and employee.

Raising his head, he continued in a low voice. "Management has tried a lot of things. One group tried to increase the morale of employees. Others, found that productivity became defined as a group-determined norm. The problem is that when an employer has the power of the stick, it often becomes an easy tool to use, even though it has limited success."

Hugh paused and then slowly raised his eyes so that they caught the young man's eyes squarely. "On the other hand, since volunteers aren't paid, you can't really motivate them using the carrot and stick approach, can you? Granted, in practice, carrots are often used to motivate volunteers. But how do you doc a volunteer's pay or threaten to fire them? Difficult, isn't it?"

"So, you have an interesting riddle. On the one hand, you suggest that the volunteer is essentially at play, and that the use of carrots and sticks have little applicability in motivating the volunteer to be more productive. Even so, they are more productive than paid employees. On the other hand, usually motivated by the use of carrots and sticks, paid employees are often less productive than the volunteer." The young man paused and scratched his chin, deep in thought. Hugh had made his point. Perhaps play can be used to motivate employees to increase productivity, but he still had two nagging questions.

Lowering his hand from his chin, the young man asked Hugh the first of his two questions. "I still have this nagging notion that play is only for kids?"

Hugh laughed. It seems as if everyone always asked him this question. "Play is only for kids!" His head shook back and forth as he laughed out loud to himself. "Unfortunately, that's what many people believe. In our society we have the three boxes of life. The first box is that of play. It occurs when we are children. While we are in this box, we are trained for the next box, the box of work. In the box of work we are taught to forget how to play. Then we reenter the box of play when we retire. Unfortunately, we are totally unprepared for the world of play again."

"Sounds like we are either ill prepared for the next box, or that we are expected to
forget what we learned from the previous box," concluded the young man.

"True," continued Hugh. "Some people believe that when we become adults we put away childhood things to become dull and uninteresting. We played for a reason when we were children, and there is no reason why we shouldn't continue to benefit from play as adults." Hugh paused, then pointed to a plaque on the wall.

He turned back to the young man and continued. "Play should serve us throughout our lives. Remember, you indicated that you would rather have fun working, didn't you?"

"True," replied the young man.

"Well, fun is the result of play," added Hugh. "So we structure the workplace to facilitate play among the employees. Play becomes the vehicle to our having fun. It also becomes the vehicle to our productivity."

"But isn't play frivolous and without purpose?" the young man thought out loud.

"Play may be frivolous and without purpose to a bystander, to someone off the field of play, but never to a player. Ask any youth engulfed in play whether it is frivolous and his answer will be an emphatic no!" Hugh was impassioned in his response.

"To a group playing Capture the Flag, the purpose of the play is obvious, their task is well defined. It is to capture the other team's flag. Their dedication to the purpose is without question, as is their commitment. Their hearts and souls are in the game. Think
about it! Wouldn't you want people working for you who have the same dedication, commitment and productivity."

"This same sense of purpose can be brought to the workplace." Hugh paused, then chuckled softly to himself as he thought out loud. "Some might say that a lot of work is frivolous and without purpose too. Unfortunately, a manager has a real problem when an employee has this attitude toward work."

"I see your point," confessed the young man. After a thoughtful pause, he offered a conciliatory summation. "So we can concluded that play creates its own relevance, its own purpose."

"I couldn't have said it much better," responded Hugh, complementing the young man. "Play creates its own world, its own order and its own purpose. In addition, it is flexible and ever changing. It is agile and it has a different outcome each time play occurs. Now tell me what is your second concern?"

"How do you incorporate play into the workplace," asked the young man.

"Actually, you are closer to the answer than you may think," responded Hugh. "Remember the volunteer. For whom does the volunteer work?"

"The volunteer works for the organization," responded the young man. As soon as he the words passed from his lips he knew the answer. As he paused to contemplate what
was now obvious, a broad smile beamed across his face. Now he understood. "Now, I see the answer to your riddle! Whether the volunteer perceives what he is doing as play doesn't really matter. Also, the normal carrots and stick motivational tools used by management have little applicability since the volunteer isn't an employee. Yet, the volunteer is productive. The first aid instructors I admired were very productive. And they were working in concert with and working toward management goals."

"You've got it!" added Hugh. "We call this concept directed play." He pointed with pride to another plaque on the wall and continued. *In our workplace, directed play is play that contributes toward the goals of the organization.* In a sense, the highly productive volunteer is an example of directed play. In our organization, the hired help is more productive than the volunteers, but that is only because we structure the work environment to facilitate directed play."

"So, in a sense, your employees are paid volunteers," noted the young man. "And, in directed play the employee has fun while meeting organizational objectives."

"Good points! You seem to be catching on quite well," complemented Hugh. "Tomorrow I would like you to meet with McGregor. His focus is on facilitating intrinsic motivation within the workplace. He has an interesting motivation model which I think you will find useful."