

Work Hard, Play Harder

How and why you should build a corporate culture with play at the core.

BY ELIZABETH CUSHING



Google recently explored its own practices to identify key indicators of employee engagement and effectiveness. Google's Project Aristotle found that successful teams shared two key characteristics. First, they found an equality in dialogue, meaning the distribution of "talk time" happened naturally instead of hierarchically. Second, team members had a higher-than-average ability to read one another's emotions based on facial expressions.

In my experience, the best way to create an organizational culture that supports both of these indicators is to bring play into the workplace. Play permeates our culture at Playworks, which I believe has helped us

to navigate challenges and opportunities over the past 22 years.

It pays to play at work

Organizational culture is the sum of the values and behaviors that contribute to the unique psychological and social environment of an organization. Playworks partners with elementary schools to build healthy school cultures through play. This year we will reach 1.25 million kids at 2,500 schools through our efforts. Researchers have closely evaluated our impact and play's extraordinary ability to bring out the best in kids. Less visible is how play brings out the best in our staff.

The same programming that we bring to kids—the same emphasis on play as a tool for promoting trust and rapport—is an important part of how the Playworks staff interacts in the workplace. For example, we have a foursquare court in our office where staff can play when they need to take a brain break. Getting out from behind our screens to play together helps us practice greater empathy, better understand our peers, and sharpen our social and emotional skills. "It Pays to Play," a report by BrightHR, explores the benefits of corporate play in a three-generation workforce and how having fun trickles down to productivity. The study revealed that playing at work

not only motivates individuals as they feel a greater sense of purpose in their companies but also strengthens skills and teamwork, decreases stress, positively transforms office morale, and creates a baseline of emotional safety.

Corporate social responsibility is shifting

The 21st-century civil rights movement is changing corporate social responsibility. Not only are companies taking a stand on societal issues, such as climate change, sexual harassment, gender pay equality, and gun violence, but they're now refocus-

handle mistakes. Through playing, our leadership is also able to articulate and model our organization's expectations, philosophies, and values.

In addition, we offer a number of opportunities for our corporate partners to engage in socially responsible hands-on projects that benefit their employees and their communities. For example, we host playground beautification days in which companies help to design and build customized neighborhood play areas for kids at local schools. Our Corporate Play Days provide opportunities for individuals and teams to coach recess and play

Icebreakers. Icebreakers, such as the check-in questions mentioned above, are effective and fun ways to quickly build community among co-workers. These games can be used to learn names and personalities at your next onboarding event, discover pleasantly surprising commonalities, or just take a quick break from the daily routine.

Minute moves and energizers.

Minute moves and energizers are short, simple games used to effectively energize the office. Games such as Indoor Marco Polo and Hot Potato boost company morale and increase overall productivity. These games don't require everyone to participate, making them perfect for opening up a meeting or taking a quick stretch during the day.

Cooperative indoor games.

Cooperative indoor games, such as Tic-Tac-Toe Toss and Charades Relay, are focused on providing great opportunities for team building and having fun. These games range in complexity and style, so choose one that best suits your office and occasion. Friendly competition among colleagues makes for a fun time and lasting memories.

Cooperative outdoor games. Get some fresh air and take a break from work with cooperative outdoor games, including Sardines and Relay Lock Race. These games can be played during a longer office break or incorporated into a company-wide game day. No matter the situation, each one is great for rejuvenating the office and strengthening team camaraderie.

The key is to remember that, just as with kids, playing must be safe and engaging for everyone. Modify games so that everyone feels welcome to participate. Leverage competition as a healthy way to reinforce working toward shared goals and encourage others to not give up and do their best, win or lose. Doing so not only enhances your organization but will be a lot of fun in the process. [AQ](#)

Elizabeth Cushing is the president of Playworks, the leading national nonprofit leveraging the power of play to transform children's social and emotional health. For more information, visit www.playworks.org

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ing on the health and well-being of the heart and soul of their brands—their employees.

Studies show that employees who feel valued are more productive and work better together. And companies that authentically support their employees' professional, social, and emotional needs have higher retention rates. According to a recent survey Playworks commissioned on behalf of US Bank with adults not affiliated with either brand, 98% of participants think play is valuable for adults, as play increases physical activity, brings people together, gives individuals a brain break, and fosters creativity. The same survey revealed that nearly two in five Americans say they would ideally like to participate in active play at least once a day, but 38% report financial stress prevents them from engaging in playful activities.

At Playworks, we walk our talk. As the president, I am aware that how I show up to play has an enormous impact on how I am received as a leader. Our staff watches how I pay attention, how I work with our teams, and how I

alongside kids on the playground. Many of our regional offices also host Corporate Kickball Tournaments for companies to compete in teams to help raise awareness and funds to provide kids with opportunities for safe and healthy play while having fun themselves.

Try playing in the office

At Playworks, we start every meeting with a random question. Check-in questions—such as "What was the first concert you attended?" or "What celebrity would you be friends with and why?"—remind us of our shared humanity and the three-dimensional nature of our lives. They also give individuals opportunities to practice sharing and presenting to teams. And, throughout meetings, we facilitate playful improvisation activities to foster collaboration and creativity. Doing so enhances the brainstorming process and ultimately allows us to problem solve, develop, and test ideas in a safe, healthy, and engaging way.

Our Corporate Playbook offers examples of office games to try in these four categories: