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Bringing Joy Back Into the Business

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"I want to burn my business down." Those were the first words my client said when we got on our coaching call. The statement caught me off guard. She had an impressive list of customers, an established team and solid revenue. By many measures, everything was going well.

As we talked more, however, the issues became clear: She hadn't taken a real vacation in years. She didn't trust key employees. She felt isolated, exhausted and trapped by the very business she'd once been excited to build.

Quite simply, work wasn't fun anymore.

So we made a plan—not to overhaul her business, but to strengthen six key components of a joyful workplace: meaning, growth, recognition, connection, earned autonomy and psychological safety.

The changes she made not only transformed her own experience of work, but also strengthened her team, improved the culture of her company and positioned the business for continued growth.

Let's look at the six components that helped bring the joy back to her business.

Meaning

Meaning is abundant in the green industry. Our work creates beauty, improves communities and helps people connect with the outdoors. Yet even meaningful work can lose its sense of purpose when we get buried in to-dos.

To reconnect to her "why" for doing business, my client revisited her company's mission statement and collected new customer testimonials that she shared during all-hands meetings. This reminded her whole team about the impact of their work.

She also took a half-day retreat to revisit her five-year plan and establish inspiring goals for the year. The exercise helped her reconnect with the future she wanted to build and identify important growth areas for her and her team.

Growth

Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the changes ahead, my client felt energized. The opportunity to improve gave her renewed enthusiasm—and that's no surprise.

Humans have a fundamental psychological need to grow. A 2025 study published in the Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology found that employees who feel capable and able to develop mastery report higher job satisfaction. In addition, LinkedIn's 2025 Workplace Learning Report found that 84% of employees believe learning adds purpose to their work.

Together, my client and I created a plan to build the leadership skills she needed—including delegation and boundary -setting—and a training program to help her team.

As employees implemented new ideas and techniques, they became better equipped to support one another and take ownership of their work. This freed up hours of my client's time, allowing her to focus on the strategic responsibilities only she could handle. She finished work earlier, could unplug at the end of the day and began considering taking a real vacation.

Recognition

People don't just want to grow; they want to know their efforts are noticed, appreciated and making a difference. To strengthen this element of joy, I worked with my client and her team to create intentional recognition rituals. They launched a Slack channel dedicated to sharing wins and opened meetings by celebrating employee accomplishments, acts of teamwork and examples of company values in action.

Research supports the key role of recognition in a satisfying workplace. Gallup and Workhuman found that employees who receive meaningful acknowledgment are 45% less likely to leave their organization over a two-year period. They also found that employees who feel meaningfully recognized are 3.7 times more likely to be engaged at work and half as likely to experience frequent burnout.

Connection

Harvard Business Review has highlighted a surprising predictor of workplace satisfaction and performance: friendship. Employees who have meaningful relationships at work are more engaged, more resilient and more likely to enjoy their jobs.

Yet meaningful connection doesn't always happen by default. Like many aspects of culture, it must be intentionally cultivated.

To do so, my client created opportunities for team members to get to know one another beyond their day-to-day responsibilities. One of their favorite activities became Zoom show-and-tell. Employees shared something meaningful from their lives, such as a family photo or a souvenir from a recent vacation. These conversations helped colleagues discover common interests and better understand one another's values, motivations and experiences.

Other organizations I work with foster connection through retreats, volunteer projects or team traditions. One company even created a "Vibe Squad"—a small group responsible for organizing weekly social activities. These gatherings strengthened relationships across departments and built a stronger sense of community.

Earned Autonomy

One of my client's biggest frustrations was her inability to truly step away from the business. Nearly every important decision flowed through her and therefore the business required her constant attention.

To regain autonomy in her own life, she had to give more autonomy to others.

Together, we identified responsibilities she'd been reluctant to delegate and created a plan to transfer ownership as team members demonstrated the skills and judgment to take them on. In particular, she worked closely with a senior leader to ensure this person could confidently manage the team and handle important decisions in her absence.

As trust grew, so did autonomy. Employees gained greater ownership of their work, while my client gained something she hadn't experienced in years: the ability to step away without worrying that everything would fall apart.

Autonomy without accountability isn't freedom; it's chaos. But when people demonstrate competence, reliability and good judgment, increased autonomy benefits everyone. Employees become more engaged and invested in their work, while leaders gain the freedom to focus on high-value priorities or simply enjoy well-earned time off.

Psychological Safety

The final key to bringing joy back to the workplace was increasing psychological safety—the belief that it's safe to speak up, ask questions, admit mistakes and raise concerns.

The value of psychological safety is well established. Google's well-known Project Aristotle study identified it as the single strongest predictor of team effectiveness, as teams with psychological safety are more likely to ask for help and work through challenges together.

A clear sign that psychological safety was lacking in my client's company was the absence of productive conflict. Everyone was so "nice" that difficult conversations were often avoided. My client couldn't trust that issues between team members—or even with clients—would be addressed unless she stepped in herself. Over time, this made her the default problem-solver for the entire organization.

To change this, the team invested in communication skills and created clear expectations around feedback, accountability and conflict resolution. Team members were encouraged to address issues early, ask for support when needed and have the conversations they'd been avoiding.

Creating psychological safety also required difficult leadership decisions. Two employees consistently received negative client feedback and contributed to unhealthy team dynamics. After receiving extensive coaching, support and opportunities to improve, the issues persisted. My client ultimately made the difficult decision to coach them out of the organization so she could create the culture and level of trust the team needed to succeed.

My client's efforts across these six areas paid off. A year after our first conversation, she no longer wanted to burn her business down. She was preparing for her first meaningful vacation in years and felt confident her team could handle challenges in her absence. She felt closer to her team, trusted them more deeply and was proud of the culture they'd built together.

Many leaders assume they must choose between building a successful company and cultivating a joyful workplace. In my experience, the opposite is true. If you give people what they need for joy—meaning, growth, recognition, connection, earned autonomy and psychological safety—you create the conditions that allow individuals and

organizations to thrive. **GP**

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