

The Unfear Team: Playfulness at Work

Dear Reader,

We at the Unfear Newsletter took a much-needed, relaxing summer hiatus, and we hope that you enjoyed some sun and fun these last few months! Speaking of fun, during our hiatus, we thought about an important, though often forgotten, aspect of work: playfulness.

Think back to your childhood about the games you used to play. Maybe the floor was lava, and you hopped around on the furniture to avoid getting burnt.

As children, we possess an innate ability not only to see the world as it is but as it might be. But playfulness is not just fun and games: according to the scientists Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin, play is “an evolved biological adaptation that enables the individual to escape from local optima and discover better solutions.” In other words, we innovate through play. For that reason, the best performers and most deeply creative humans never lose that sense of play. They can combine their amassed knowledge with childlike playfulness. They take delight in trying new ideas, whether or not they succeed. They can look at the world they know so well and ask: is everything as it seems? What can this world become?

Cultivate Playfulness: The Power of "Yes, and"

The first rule of improvisational comedy is to never say no. In a scene, “no” kills momentum and negates a scene partner’s ideas. The playful approach is to say “Yes, and.” Doing this ensures that everyone builds on the scene, accepts everyone else’s ideas, and encourages each other to show up at their creative, collaborative best.

We can use “Yes, and” in business as well. Instead of negating a colleague’s idea, we can accept their position, make our needs known, and explore new possibilities. For example, let’s say you’re a manager and a project leader tells you, “We can’t put a timeline on this because we won’t know how much work we need until we dive into the problem.” You’re concerned that the project won’t get done without time pressure. Instead of forcing the leader to commit to a deadline, you can say lightly, “YES, I agree that we can’t make a timeline without understanding the problem, AND I’m afraid that the project might drag on without a deadline. How can we solve for that?”

This is a small example, but it shows how this approach can reveal a more productive path forward and can easily be applied to more significant discussions. When everyone embraces “Yes, and,” ideas collide, merge, and evolve. Together, you can come up with something truly revolutionary.

Why Angels Fly

The legendary British writer G.K. Chesterton said, “Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly.” When we embrace a state of playfulness, we take ourselves lightly. We stop viewing outcomes as a direct representation of ourselves and our worth. When we do this, we allow ourselves to try approaches we would never have thought possible. We ultimately free the angel within ourselves.

Worth thinking about

In the modern age, we have forgotten how to play, not just at work but also at home. We schedule and stress over whatever downtime we don’t give to TV or our phones. We rush to events, obsess about lowering our golf handicaps or improving our tennis serves. We need to rediscover the joy of playing with possibilities. This doesn’t require us to sacrifice seriousness: some of the greatest visionaries, like Steve Jobs, were able to play with possibility while remaining serious and focused. It just means we need to engage with lightness and play with possibilities.

Take it to go

The next time you have a meeting where you expect wildly differing opinions, try to bring a “Yes, and” mindset. When a colleague presents a view you disagree with, try to find a part of their idea that resonates with you. Can you build on that part of the idea? Can you link it to your idea? Can you PLAY with it?

Questions?

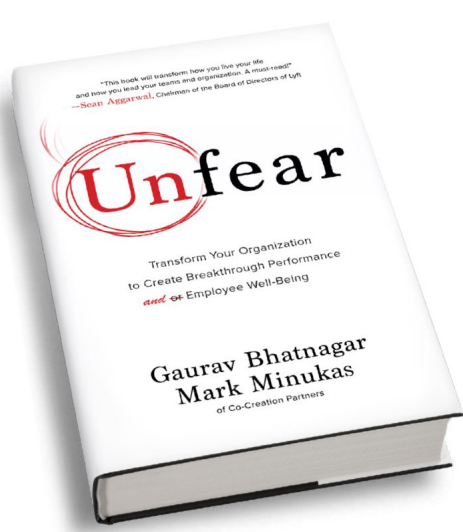
Please contact us and schedule a call if you are interested in applying Unfear to improve your team and organizational culture and effectiveness. We’d love to hear from you.

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