Everything We Know About Great Workplaces is Wrong

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Suppose that later this evening,

after you have stepped away from your keyboard, put on your jacket, and traveled home for supper, your organizations underwent a magical transformation, reshaping itself into the world's best workplace.

How would you know? What would be different the next time you entered the building?

When we think about extraordinary workplaces, we tend to think of the billion dollar companies at the top of *Fortune* magazine's annual list. We picture a sprawling campus, rich with generous amenities; a utopian destination where success is constant, collaborations are seamless, and employee happiness abounds.

But as it turns out, many of the assumptions these images promote mislead us about what it means to create an outstanding workplace.

In recent years, scientists in a variety of fields have begun investigating the conditions that allow people to work more successfully. What they've discovered is that in an astonishing number of cases, not only are the factors that contribute to creating a great workplace not obvious—they are surprisingly counterintuitive.

Here are five great workplace myths we routinely get wrong.

Myth #1: **Everyone Is Incessantly Happy**

Over the past decade, the happiness literature has produced some compelling findings. Research conducted in lab and field experiments indicates that when people are in a good mood, they become more sociable, more altruistic, and even more creative. Studies also show that on average, happy people tend to be more productive and successful than their unhappy peers.

Not surprisingly, many organizations have attempted to capitalize on these outcomes by searching for ways to boost employee happiness. In many ways, it's a welcome trend. Surely, a workplace concerned about the mood of its employees is preferable to the alternative.

That said, making happiness in the workplace an explicit organizational goal is not without its dangers. For one thing, studies show that the more focus we place on trying to be happy, the less likely we are to succeed. In part, it's because the very process of monitoring our happiness prevents us from fully enjoying our experiences.

Happiness also has a surprising dark side. When you're in a good mood, you tend to be less careful about making mistakes, more gullible and accepting of arguments at face value, and more willing to take risks. Feeling happy is useful in many contexts, but that doesn't make it the ideal mindset for every workplace, and certainly not every task.

And finally, while the topic of happiness has been making headlines over the past few years, psychologists have quietly accumulated a trove of evidence that there are also surprising benefits to so-called "negative" emotions, like anger, embarrassment, and shame.

What good could possibly come from feeling bad? As it turns out, negative emotions serve an important function: They motivate us to take action and repair those elements of our lives that cause us to feel badly. Research conducted in real workplace settings confirms that in certain circumstances, experiencing negative emotions at work can actually contribute to *greater* engagement. How? By directing employees' attention to serious issues and prompting them to make corrections that eventually contribute to stronger performance.

Instead of espousing positivity at all costs, leaders are better off recognizing that top performance involves a healthy balance of positive and negative emotions. Pressuring employees to suppress negative emotions is simply not a recipe for sustained engagement.

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Myth #2: **Disagreements Are Rare**

Another assumption we often make about great workplaces is that within these organizations, colleague relationships are characterized by harmony. Workplace disagreements, many of us implicitly believe, are undesirable. They reflect tension in a relationship, distract team members from doing their jobs, and therefore damage productivity.

But this view is incorrect, and the reason it is incorrect is that not all disagreements are identical. Management Professor Karen Jehn has spent decades studying workplace conflict. Her research reveals that most disagreements fall into one of two categories. First, there are *relationship conflicts*, which involve personality clashes or differences in values. These, Jehn has found, truly are damaging to group performance.

But then there's a second type of workplace disagreement—one focused on *task conflicts*. When colleagues are engaged in a task conflict, they are debating ideas and grappling with the best way of achieving their objectives. Not only are these disagreements not necessarily harmful, but in a remarkable number of instances they have been found to yield better decision quality and stronger financial outcomes for the organization.

Why would task conflict—or *any* workplace disagreement, really—improve performance? Because healthy debate encourages group members to think more deeply, scrutinize alternatives, and avoid premature consensus. Studies also demonstrate that while many of us view conflict as unpleasant, the experience of open deliberation actually energizes employees, through providing them with better strategies for doing their job.

The key takeaway? Workplaces that avoid disagreements in an effort to maintain group harmony are doing themselves a disservice. Far better to create an environment in which thoughtful debate is encouraged; a workplace where expressing alternative viewpoints doesn't feel like a risk.

Myth 3: **Mistakes Are Few**

Suppose you've just been hired to oversee two teams. Before your first day on the job, you receive a report summarizing each team's performance during the past year. One statistic immediately jumps out: In the average month, Team A reports 5 errors. Team B reports 10.

Which team is more effective?

On the surface, the answer seems obvious. Of course Team A is better—after all, the data show they commit half the number of mistakes. But are fewer errors really the best metric of a team's success?

In the mid-1990s, Harvard researcher Amy Edmondson conducted a study looking the performance of nursing units at a university hospital. What she expected to find was a simple correlation; one showing that units with the best managers and coworker relationships recorded the fewest drug treatment errors. Instead, she found the opposite.

Much to Edmondson's surprise, nursing units with close relationships reported significantly more drug treatment errors, but not, as Edmondson later determined, because they were objectively worse at doing their job. They were simply more comfortable admitting mistakes when they happened.

Edmondson's research underscores an important point. To achieve top performance, we must first recognize and learn from our mistakes. And for that to happen within a workplace context, for employees to willingly acknowledge errors, they need an environment in which it feels safe to have honest dialogue.

Paradoxically, fostering top workplace performance requires a new way of looking at failure. Instead of treating mistakes as a negative consequence to be avoided at all costs (thereby making employees reluctant to acknowledge them), organizations are better off making *improvement* rather than *perfection* a primary objective.

Myth 4: **They Hire for Cultural Fit**

The last few years have witnessed an intriguing new trend in the world of hiring: the idea that organizations should stop selecting job candidates solely on the basis of their skills or experience. Rather, they should hire those whose personality and values are consistent with their company culture.

Among the more vocal proponents of this approach is Zappos, the online shoe distributor. On its website, Zappos explains its rationale as follows: "Hiring for culture fit helps maintain the integrity of [our] unique company culture and core values. This ensures the perfect fit on both a professional and personal level!"

The idea of hiring for cultural fit holds intuitive appeal. When employees share similar norms and attitudes, they're more likely to get along. And the better they get along, the more likely they are to produce. Right? As it turns out, the equation is not always so simple.

While similarity among coworkers can foster smoother interactions and better working relationships, there's a point at which too much similarity can actually stifle certain elements of performance.

The reasons are many. For one, similarity fosters complacency. When we're surrounded by others who share our viewpoint, there's little reason for us to do additional thinking. We get stuck doing things the way we've always done them because no one is challenging us to think differently.

Similarity also breeds overconfidence. When everyone around us sees the world exactly as we do, we overestimate the accuracy of our opinions. That unfounded self-assurance leads us to invest less effort in our decisions, making errors more common.

And finally, the more we have in common with our colleagues, the less likely we are to encounter a fresh perspective. This can be especially problematic when the work we do requires innovative thinking.

A fascinating 2009 study looked at the way too much similarity can derail a team's decision making. Within the study, teams of three were asked to solve a problem with the help of a new team member who was either similar or dissimilar to the existing group. The results were clear: While homogenous teams felt more confident in their decisions, it was the diverse teams that performed best.

How exactly did the mismatched newcomers elevate their team's performance? Not in the way we might suspect. It wasn't, for example, by introducing new ways of seeing old problems. Rather it was by motivating veteran team members to reexamine their assumptions and process

data more carefully. Which is the very thing they neglected to do when everyone in their group was similar.

The mere presence of an outsider led insiders to think harder.

So what's the right degree of cultural fit for a job candidate? The answer can be complex.

When the work itself is simple and creative thinking is rarely required, establishing a homogenous workforce has its advantages. But the same can't be said for organizations looking to be on the forefront of innovation. Here, exposing people to different viewpoints can generate more value than ensuring that they gel.

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Myth #5: **They Have a Ping-Pong Table, Swimming Pool, or Volleyball Court**

Every winter, *Fortune* magazine releases its annual list of great workplaces. Among companies near the top the list, lavish amenities are common. Twitter, for example, has a rock climbing wall. Zynga lines its hallway with classic arcade games. Google provides a bowling alley, roller-hockey rink, and volleyball courts, complete with actual sand.

Given the frequency with which resort-like workplaces are recognized, it's become easy to assume that this is what employees want—diversions; that to build a great workplace, you need to pour millions of dollars renovating your office into an amusement park.

It's not true.

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To thrive at work, employees don't require luxuries. What they need are experiences that fulfill their basic, human psychological needs. As decades of academic research have demonstrated, we perform at our best when we feel competent, autonomous, and connected to others.

What differentiates great workplaces from average ones is not the number of extravagant perks they make available. It's the extent to which they satisfy their employees' psychological needs and develop working conditions that empower team members to produce their best work.

How do you build an extraordinary workplace? The answer is no longer a mystery. For the first time in history, we have thousands of scientific studies providing direction, telling us exactly what works, and exposing what doesn't.

For too long, we've relied on assumptions when it comes to improving our workplaces. Isn't it time we looked at the data? ⬚

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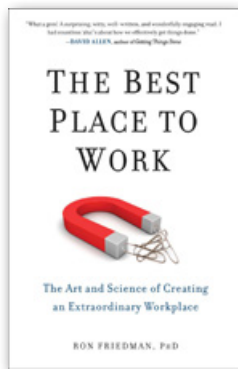
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