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Joy in Job Performance

Natural Laws of Management

“Fools’ paradise has burned down” was a recent headline on the cover page of a German news magazine. Things may not be quite that bad. We are still living in abundance. We still have relatively short working hours, long vacation periods, high salaries and wages, comfortable early retirement, secure pensions, and social security. We have more than enough to eat. We can travel far and wide as never before. We have cars and material comfort; we live in the lap of luxury.

However — it is beginning to show signs of eroding: high unemployment, mountains of debt, deficits in the billions. Europe’s future as an economic power is in jeopardy. All of a sudden, politicians are saying: “We have to cut spending,” or “we’ll have to work more,” or “we’ll have to work longer,” etcetera, etcetera. These demands seem to be logical. Nevertheless, both extremes are in fact wrong: Both the fools’ paradise and the curse.

Behavioral biology clearly shows that man is not programmed for a fools’ paradise, but for enterprise and effort. Otherwise, why are there so much illness and disease, violence, drug abuse, and apathy toward work just in the face of wealth and abundance. No, a fools’ paradise would lead to a catastrophe.

So, do we have to make an even greater effort? Yes, but work should not become drudgery, or a curse, or even a “must.” Effort without joy can also make people sick, aggressive, or addicted to drugs. No, the right solution is neither joy without effort nor effort without joy. It is once and for all: Joy in the effort itself. In other words — performance with joy.

That performance with joy possible has been proven in a number of examples: mountain climbers, physicians, managers, artists, craftsmen, etc. But how does it work? Under what conditions

can performance with joy be experienced?

To find out which activities are “fun” and which are not, we have to explore the depths of human evolution, discover the motives behind man’s behavior, and naturally the mistakes, as well, that man has made in dealing with his drives.

Mistake Number 1: Joy without Effort

Man has been programmed for effort and enterprise, for running and fighting, for danger and adventure, by his tribal history and by his past that has extended over millions of years. Man has adapted to his primal environment, to a harsh and difficult life as a hunter and gatherer. Primitive man had to travel 20–30 kilometers (12–18 miles) on foot every day in order to provide food to live on; he often had to fight with his prey — and his fellow creatures.

Some people would now say: It may be so that primitive man had to make an effort to satisfy his drives; but fortunately, we no longer have to do that today. That is the reason that we have created civilization — and our culture, as well. However, this objection overlooks two decisive facts.

The first fact is that our drives and instincts have evolved over millions and millions of years and that such an evolutionary program cannot be made to disappear by a few years or even generations of civilization. Even though we may indeed be able to control our drives somewhat with our cerebrum so that we can restrain ourselves or — conversely — we can escalate our instinctive behavior with all of the cunning and craftiness at our disposal, but we can not educate our drives away. We just have to live with them. But that’s all right in its way; the question is, though: Where do we get our joy in life — from ever-recurring, zestfully experienced satisfaction of our drives or from our “sober” intellect?

The second fact that has been overlooked by theoreticians and ideologists opposed to drives is that the drives and instincts are spontaneous, that is to say, that hunger, sexuality, aggression, inquisitiveness all grow even without external stimuli. That makes evolutionary sense: Living beings endowed with drives will not accept a situation that means scarcity or insufficiency but will look for more favorable conditions. If food cannot be found, it will be actively sought. If a sexual partner is not available, one will be actively sought. The drive is literally so strong that nearly every effort will be made, and nearly every risk will be accepted.

In our affluent society, we violate the laws of evolution. We utilize the potential for taking action to satisfy our drive either too little or not at all. Who would travel 20 kilometers on foot today? Who exchanges blows with rivals? Who exerts himself or herself to satisfy drives when this can be accomplished without exertion? Indeed, man has always striven to achieve joy without exertion, to achieve a fool's paradise. However, now that we have largely realized the dream of a fool's paradise, we have clearly seen that we are have not been programmed to do nothing, but for exertion, struggle, danger, and for utilizing our potential. Wealth and abundance are not good for us; they lead to a deficiency of movement, boredom, passivity, and indolence, which in turn make us aggressive, dissatisfied, and ill. Not for nothing is aggression highest on Sunday evenings; not for nothing do those people take to the bottle who do not do interesting work or who are literally "dying" of boredom at work, at home, or even on vacation.

Let's keep the following in mind: By nature, man is active. He has been programmed to make use of his potential for drives and action. Only in this way can he reap the benefits naturally: Namely, to satisfy his drives with intense and varied joy. With his cerebrum, man has been able to intervene in this "joyful/joyless economy" (Lorenz): He wants joy without exertion or effort; he wants to be pampered. However, pampering in fact leads to the usual "diseases of civilization," to greater aggressiveness, to dissatisfaction, and even to drug abuse.

Mistake Number 2: Work is a Curse – Leisure as Joy

Seen in an evolutionary context, exertion and joy form a unity: Man and animals have been immediately rewarded for exertions directed toward satisfying drives: traveling on foot or hunting led to obtaining food, exploring led to securing and expanding territory, fighting led to victories over rivals, to status and recognition. This shows clearly the evolutionary unity of exertion and joy:

Recognition as high status in a society can only be achieved through exertion. An expensive automobile can be bought by winning at gambling or by inheriting enough money. Recognition cannot be bought, not even in an affluent society.

The unity of exertion and satisfying drives has endured longest in agrarian and craftsman-like ways of life. Otherwise, man began early on to separate exertion as work from joy and to view work as a necessary evil. Work was looked upon as drudgery, as punishment. People were saddled with it, who could not defend against it.

Certainly, work became easier with the advances of technical civilization, especially in a physical sense. However, separation of joy from work has persisted until today. Even light work that is purely mechanical and is thus only routine has been robbed of its joy, is boring, is an evil.

Consequently, it is no wonder that work is perceived as something negative, as something to be avoided, as something evil, unworthy, and inhuman. Only in this way can "labor disputes" be understood, how the lines are drawn between industrialist and worker, between employer and employee. If work is indeed an evil, then it should be sold for as much as possible and otherwise be avoided as much as possible.

Leisure is pursued to the same extent that work is avoided. From leisure, people expect the desired joy, which of course should then be made available without exertion. In fact, it is not so easy to find enough impulses for our curiosity in our leisure time, even though the leisure industry and performers offer diverse programs. As a consequence, boredom then begins to gain the upper hand as boredom is nothing more than the absence of impulses for curiosity and thus the absence of exploratory satisfaction of drives. It is even more difficult to obtain recognition during leisure hours. For this, it would be necessary to resort to extreme types of sports or to join an organization such as a club. However, there is great danger that the joy without exertion sought in leisure would remain superficial and empty. Hence, it is possible to satisfy the desire for curiosity more or less by watching television or by identifying with a central character and in this way, to experience the victory. However, in both cases, the joy involved is a vicarious gift; it has not been "earned" by the person himself or herself. It is not the result of tension that has been truly experienced by the viewer.

No, it is wrong and even tragic to separate exertion and joy from one another as work and leisure. It would mean that work would become an ordeal while leisure would become a shallow substitute for satisfaction. This fact would be confirmed by the

few who were fortunate enough to have interesting work, work that is, in which they can make use of their creative and cooperative potential, work, for which they would receive not only material but also social recognition: such as politicians, managers, physicians, scientists, craftsmen, people with responsibility and enough latitude for taking effective action. They often work 60 hours a week and more — and with a high degree of job satisfaction.

Solution: Job Performance with Joy

But how can we reunite exertion and joy in today's affluent society, in today's high-tech civilization?

First, let's be clear on one thing: It is absolutely possible to experience exertion with joy. Just consider mountain climbers. They even experience climbing itself as zestful and not just reaching the peak. "One of the greatest experiences in mountain-climbing," Csikszentmihalyi quoted (1987) one enthusiast, "consists in finding out the best possibility for each individual position. Each one presents an infinite number of equilibrium variations, and figuring out the best one from all of these possibilities — both with regard to the current position and the next one — that's really fascinating." Other mountain climbers interviewed by Csikszentmihalyi responded similarly — and not only mountain climbers. Surgeons, chess players, rock dancers, basketball players, artists, all experience their strenuous activities with intense zest. Csikszentmihalyi characterizes this "special dynamic condition," this "holistic feeling of totaling losing ourselves in an activity," especially in a strenuous activity, as "flow."

Csikszentmihalyi describes the flow experience in detail, but he cannot provide an explanation for it. However, this is possible with the aid of behavioral biology: The flow experience is nothing more than the joy in our curiosity drive.

That there is such a drive is beyond doubt — even in higher animals. The triggering impulse is what is new, what is still unknown. Should there not be such an impulse, then we start looking for it. We are "curious" about what is new; we make an effort to find something new. When we have found it, we familiarize ourselves with it — that is, we transform the unknown into the familiar. And as the unknown is linked to insecurity, we thus transform feelings of insecurity into feelings of security. This means that our curiosity drive is in reality a security drive, the flow experience is the joy in the security drive.

This realization is of primary importance as it shows under which circumstances we experience exertion with joy. We experience exertion as joy when we master challenges, resolve problems, overcome risks, transform insecurity into feelings

of security, or in other words: when we satisfy our security drive.

There are still two other drives that provide and reinforce job performance with joy: aggression and bonding. Let's first consider aggression.

Aggression should not only be seen as something negative. Aggression is not only violence; aggression is also the drive for victory, the drive for power, for status, for recognition. Of course, man has found enough methods in the aggressive area to achieve joy in victory without exertion or effort: cheap tricks, threats, false promises, and the means of manipulating in every form. Nevertheless, here the same principle applies: That maximum joy, namely social recognition, can only be achieved through effort, through performance. Yes, recognition for performance is the most civilized form of satisfying the aggression drive.

The principle that maximum joy can only be achieved through maximum effort also applies for bonding. Genuine and deep ties — friendship, love, empathy — can only be sustained on a long-term basis when we care about others, when we not only take but also give, when we do not shy away from effort.

Performance with joy is thus not merely an empty formula for success. Performance with joy occurs whenever flow is experienced, recognition and bonding. It reaches a maximum when all three drives are involved in the process. This results in the natural laws of management.

Natural Laws of Management

First, the working world should be shaped in such a way that employees experience continuous flow. This means that they have to be able to "expand their scope" on the basis of security and expertise. They have to have new tasks to perform — whether difficult or of a completely different nature. Or they have to be given the opportunity of finding new problems and then of dealing with them by themselves. They need room for taking responsibility and for creativity. For this purpose, management has a number of conditions to fulfill: Does the work contain flow? Do the challenges correspond to the qualifications of the respective employees? Are the challenges commensurate with the individual structures of employees?

The **second** natural law of management is recognition for performance. Certainly, the fact that employees expect and need recognition for their performance is widely known. Consequently, there are also numerous possibilities for granting recognition: promotions to higher positions, privileges, bonuses, personal praise, etc. However,

another fact is less well known: That this recognition is a form of satisfying the aggression drive — and a particularly human form. However, this means that recognition not only leads to joy; recognition prevents negative forms of aggression, such as violence, mobbing, or refusal. Here, management has unending responsibilities: Which forms of recognition are commensurate? Do they make sense for employees and society for the future? Is the recognition just? Etc.

The **third** natural law of management consists in establishing bonding. Joint action in smaller groups is vital for achieving this bonding. Joint action reinforces bonding. Bonding improves joint action. Moreover, bonding mitigates inner-societal aggression. However, how large should a group be? How can “group flow” be generated? How does recognition function within a group?

Bonding also includes identification with larger societies, with companies, parties, nations, etc. However, how is identification generated? For this question, behavioral biology has a straight answer: Employees will identify with a society when they can participate in the upper status of such a society, when they can be proud of their belonging, or in other words: When they themselves gain in importance.

The **fourth** natural law concerns leadership in the overall society and optimizing joint action. For this purpose, three measures are necessary: First, “inclusive fitness” must be maximized, that is, employees should be assigned according to their

individual capabilities. The better the job performance of individual employees, the better will be their overall fitness. Second, the “societal virtues” have to be fulfilled: justice, reliability, and truthfulness. Here, it is purely and simply a matter of the conditions for survival in societies. Third, action then must ultimately be taken. Leadership not only means administering; leadership means setting objectives, taking advantage of opportunities, taking risks, venturing to do something. Naturally, crimes can also be committed with societies.

The **fifth** natural law concerns taking responsible action. Not for nothing have we begun increasingly to speak of leadership cultures and management ethics. This ranges from the social responsibility for employees over prevention of environmental pollution to global dealings with other people and societies. Certainly, taking responsible action transcends natural laws; responsibility is typical of thoughtful people.

Lorenz aptly characterized man’s evolutionary situation: “Natural selection lifted man up, put him on his feet, and then took the helping hand away. Now it was a matter of standing or falling — however it was possible.” However, people succeed in not falling only when they can better understand the laws of nature, and especially of their own nature.

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