

Stop Confusing Serious Work With Joyless Work.

Rigour and joy are not competing ideas. Good leadership knows how to hold them together.

What would serious work look like here if it did not have to look joyless?

Use this conversation to examine the emotional conditions surrounding demanding work - and what leaders may be unintentionally rewarding.

1 WHERE HAS SERIOUSNESS BECOME HEAVINESS?

Where have pressure, restraint, urgency, or exhaustion become signals that people are committed and professional?

2 WHERE DOES JOY EMERGE NATURALLY?

When do people become curious, energized, playful, connected, proud, or deeply absorbed in difficult work? What conditions make that possible?

3 WHERE IS THE REAL RIGOUR?

Which parts of our work genuinely require challenge, precision, persistence, feedback, and high standards - and which parts are merely unnecessarily hard?

4 HOW IS GRATITUDE EXPERIENCED?

Is appreciation specific, relational, and genuine - or mostly ceremonial, generalized, or used to smooth over legitimate concerns?

5 CAN PEOPLE TELL THE TRUTH?

Can someone name frustration, grief, fatigue, disagreement, or a problem without being labelled negative or uncommitted?

6 IS PLAY INVITED OR MANAGED?

Where do humour, imagination, experimentation, and serious play have permission to emerge? Where have we turned fun into another requirement?

BEFORE YOU LEAVE

One condition for joy and rigour we want to protect

One practice that may be making work unnecessarily heavy

One thing we will do to make appreciation more genuine

Serious work can include serious fun.

Audit the Emotional Architecture of the Work.

A 20-minute practice for examining whether demanding work remains deeply human.

Do not ask whether the workplace is “fun.” Ask what the work makes possible.

1 CHALLENGE

Are people being asked to think, stretch, solve, question, and improve - or simply absorb more pressure?

2 CURIOSITY

Is there room to wonder, explore, experiment, ask “what if?”, or be surprised by what emerges?

3 HUMANITY

Can people laugh, connect, tell stories, admit uncertainty, and remain fully human while doing serious work?

4 GRATITUDE

Do people know when their effort, care, judgement, and contribution have mattered? Is appreciation specific?

5 TRUTH

Can someone say “This is not working” without being treated as negative? Can difficult emotion coexist with hope?

6 CHOICE

Is playfulness invited and voluntary - or has “fun” become another performance requirement?

NOW LOOK FOR THE PATTERN

1 Where is challenge productive - and where is it simply pressure?

2 Where is joy authentic - and where is positivity being performed?

3 What is one small change that would make demanding work more human without lowering the standard?

High standards. High humanity.

FROM THE BLOG

RIGOUR $\neq$ GRIMNESS

RIGOUR



Challenge



Precision



Feedback



Persistence

WHERE THEY MEET



Deep learning



Creativity



Engagement



Adaptation



Curiosity



Connection



Play



Gratitude

Serious work can include serious fun.



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AUTHENTIC JOY

Conditions where people thrive and do their best.



Voluntary play

Play is invited, not required.



Meaningful challenge

Stretching goals with purpose.



Gratitude

Genuine thanks that builds connection.



Truth

Space for honest conversations, even when it's hard.

VS.

PERFORMED POSITIVITY

Conditions that may look positive but create harm.



Mandatory fun

Fun is scheduled, expected, or imposed.



Constant competition

Winning is everything; recovery is forgotten.



Forced gratitude

Gratitude is performative or used to silence legitimate concerns.



Silence

Pressure to stay positive and avoid difficult truths.

Leaders need to know the difference.



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Innovative Ideas for an Inspired Future

Creating workplaces where people can learn, contribute, and thrive—together.

What Does the Research Say About Joy at Work?

Five findings on positive emotion, playfulness, gratitude, engagement, and the leadership conditions around serious work

Current research does not support a simple claim that happier workplaces automatically perform better. The more useful finding is that emotion, playfulness, challenge, gratitude, leadership, and context interact in ways that can either support or constrain learning, engagement, creativity, and wellbeing.

1 Positive emotion is part of learning - not outside it.

A 2025 meta-analysis of 120 studies found positive academic emotions associated with stronger performance and, especially, motivation. Joy does not remove challenge; it can help people remain engaged with it.

Source: Xie et al. (2025)

2 Playful work design can strengthen engagement.

Daily and multilevel studies of playful work design link intentionally adding fun and challenge to feelings of competence, engagement, flourishing, and task performance.

Source: Pap et al. (2026); Bakker et al. (2025)

3 Play works differently when it is authentic.

Recent reviews emphasize that workplace play is highly context dependent. Spontaneous, work-embedded, voluntary play differs from overly managed or mandatory fun, which can undermine its value.

Source: Firoz et al. (2026); Jarkko (2026)

4 Challenge and fun are not interchangeable.

Recent evidence suggests both fun and competition can support engagement, but competition-heavy playful work may also increase workaholism. Fun can be protective when challenge becomes excessive.

Source: Costantini et al. (2026)

5 Gratitude matters when it is genuine.

Recent workplace studies connect specific, high-quality gratitude and gratitude dialogue with feeling valued, attachment, engagement, wellbeing, and job satisfaction.

Source: Cardon & Wong (2024); Harty et al. (2024/2025)

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

- Rigour and positive emotion can coexist.
- Playfulness is not the same as mandatory fun.
- Leaders shape whether employees feel permission to design work playfully.
- Gratitude works best when specific and genuine.
- Joyful cultures still need truth, boundaries, standards, and room for difficulty.

The goal is not less rigour. It is more sustainable rigour.

What Leaders Need to Get Right

Authentic joy is not forced positivity - and serious fun is not the absence of standards.

CREATE CONDITIONS FOR

- Meaningful challenge rather than unnecessary difficulty.
- Voluntary play, humour, curiosity, and experimentation.
- Specific appreciation that recognizes effort and contribution.
- Honest conversations that make room for difficulty and bad news.
- Autonomy and agency so employees can bring more of themselves to the work.

WATCH FOR THE HAZARDS

- Mandatory fun that employees must perform.
- Competition that crowds out recovery, cooperation, or perspective.
- Forced gratitude used to silence legitimate concerns.
- Positivity that makes anger, grief, fatigue, or disagreement unwelcome.
- The belief that exhausted people are necessarily more committed people.

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- 1 Where have we equated seriousness with heaviness?
- 2 What conditions allow people to enjoy doing something difficult well?
- 3 How do people know their contribution is genuinely valued?
- 4 Can truth and joy coexist here?

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