

Finding Joy as a Manager — Even on Bad Days

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Illustration by Benedetta Viali

Summary. When work and life are overwhelming, it can be difficult to reclaim a sense of joy at work. Research has shown the benefits of incorporating joy, hope, and optimism into the workplace to combat burnout and improve well-being. The author recommends four... [more](#)

Several months into the pandemic, I found myself feeling persistently down as the new leader of a global team. Each day, I faced a wave of challenges for colleagues I'd never met and planned strategies for offices I had never seen. The rising tide of

crushing workloads and interpersonal tensions threatened to pull us under. At the same time, the lack of face-to-face interactions left me yearning for the teamwork that could sustain us through difficult times. With uncertainty and fear everywhere, finding inspiration felt nearly impossible.

Then, one afternoon, things changed during a presentation of new marketing projects. Watching teams from around the world, I was inspired by their vibrancy, creativity, and talent. This wasn't just another virtual meeting with creative concepts and catchy taglines. I witnessed the joy and pride on my colleagues' faces and felt their spirits lift with each recognition. In that moment, my focus shifted from the gloom of endless tasks to the joy of shared experiences, creativity, and resilience.

It became clear that the widespread exhaustion and lack of connection were hurting our work and straining our relationships. These stressors were also stealing our joy and wonder. It was a ticking time bomb for burnout.

Research from the Association for Psychological Science indicates that chronic workplace stress not only impacts emotional well-being but also leads to significant physical health issues and cognitive impairments. However, incorporating strategies that foster joy, hope, and optimism can mitigate these effects. According to the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, focusing on increasing joy at work, rather than just reducing burnout, has been shown to improve employee satisfaction, reduce stress, and enhance overall well-being, leading to lower burnout rates and higher engagement levels.

By proactively tackling what gets in the way of satisfaction, connection, and purpose, we can transform our workplaces into spaces brimming with joy and optimism. When you improve how

you show up for yourself, you improve your capacity to be more effective and present for others. Here are four strategies leaders can use to summon joy, hope, and optimism in their workday.

1. Find your why.

Connecting with yourself first requires you to embrace the driving force behind all you do — your why.

Ikigai is a Japanese concept roughly translated as “a reason for being,” or your life’s true purpose, satisfaction, and fulfillment. This concept suggests you can unearth meaning and contentment by aligning your passions, talents, and values as well as addressing the world’s needs. In an episode of the podcast *In the Arena*, author of *How to Ikigai* Tim Tamashiro describes it as “the inherent gifts you possess, which you can naturally share with others, thus illuminating and enriching their lives.”

Try finding your Ikigai by reflecting on these questions from *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* by Héctor García and Francesc Miralles:

- **What activities and pursuits bring you joy and enthusiasm?** This information can help you determine what you love (your passion).
- **What skills and talents do you possess for the greater good?** This helps you determine what you are good at (your calling).
- **How can you be acknowledged and rewarded for your contributions to the world?** This helps you determine what you can be rewarded for (your profession).
- **How can you make a positive impact on others and the world at large?** This helps you determine what the world

needs (your mission).

What brings you joy, what you are uniquely good at, and what the world needs from you are the fuel that keeps you going. Aligning your work with these elements can renew your passion and purpose in your role. For example, if mentoring others lights you up, grab a coffee and have a chat with a junior team member. It's rewarding for you, helpful for them, and boosts morale. Plus, it makes your job more fun. Or, if you enjoy organizing social events, start a Friday playlist where everyone shares their favorite song. It's a simple way to build connections, spread joy, and make the workweek a little more enjoyable.

2. Embrace a beginner's mindset.

The daily grind can sometimes close our eyes to new possibilities.

Do you remember the rush of excitement when you landed your first job or were last promoted? Those initial days brimmed with potential, and everything seemed achievable. The thrill of new relationships, projects, and opportunities had you walking on air.

Do you also remember when that spark fizzled out? When situations that were once exciting began to feel stale? It might have started when someone quit, and you had to take on their workload with no change in salary or deadlines, spiraling into exhaustion, loneliness, and frustration. You might have felt like you couldn't do anything right or became disenchanted with your boss, team, or colleagues.

You were burned out.

And it's not just you who feels the impact of going from a bright-eyed beginner to a weary, overburdened drudge. Your colleagues, the people you manage, family, and friends sense it, too.

Shunryu Suzuki, author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, writes, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s mind there are few.” Embracing a beginner’s mind, or *Shoshin* from Zen Buddhism, means approaching the world with the openness and curiosity of a novice. This mindset, free from past knowledge and biases, expands our perspective and potential and can help us break free from feeling stuck or burned out by fostering a sense of wonder, eagerness to learn, and curiosity.

Encouraging your team to approach tasks and challenges with fresh eyes can uncover hidden opportunities and foster openness to new ones. You can model this mindset by actively seeking new perspectives and showing curiosity about different approaches. When a problem arises, instead of defaulting to past solutions, ask yourself and your team, “What can we learn from this? How might we see this differently?” Dive into conversations with a “tell me more” attitude, and watch as you build more profound, meaningful connections. This approach not only sparks creativity and enhances your understanding of yourself and others but also reduces the pressure to have all the answers.

3. Sprinkle gratitude and joy like confetti.

Actively expressing gratitude and recognizing others’ contributions can lift spirits, strengthen relationships, and build a supportive team culture. Research from the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley shows that gratitude in the workplace leads to increased job satisfaction, improved mental health, and stronger team cohesion.

My colleague Maneesh Goyal introduced a “confetti” tradition at board meetings, sharing personal photos and anecdotes of proud moments and snippets of life outside the boardroom to energize the room and strengthen social bonds. Inspired by this, think of someone who’s helped you or done something memorable recently. Say “thank you” with a thoughtful gesture that stands

out. Celebrate your team's wins with notes, shout-outs at the start of meetings, or small tokens of appreciation. These gestures foster a sense of belonging and boost morale.

Encourage your team to do the same. Turn it into a fun ritual to share unexpected or creative recognitions during team meetings or one-on-ones. Celebrating small wins and acts of generosity can remind them of their positive impact, lighten the mood, and reduce ongoing stress. Sprinkle these feel-good moments throughout your onboarding process, highlight them on your career site, and seize every opportunity to transform your workplace into a more connected and joyful environment.

4. Fuel your joy.

Difficult days are inevitable. When work feels overwhelming, maintaining a "Happy Folder" on your desktop filled with positive feedback and memorable moments can lift your spirits and remind you of your value. For example, I treasure a farewell note from a team member expressing appreciation for my support: "I know you advocate for us even though we may not see it, but we sense it." This simple practice helps recenter my focus and boosts my morale during tough times.

And when did you last say, "good job," "you are worthy," or "it's okay" to yourself? Ease up on self-criticism and give yourself the same kindness and recognition you offer others. Research shows that positive self-talk improves mental health by reducing anxiety and depression, building resilience, and boosting confidence. Just like Olympic athletes who meditate and engage in positive reflection to enhance their performance, you, too, can benefit from a positive mindset. By practicing this, you'll recharge your batteries and be better able to support your team with enthusiasm and energy. Joy is contagious — when you model it, others will follow, creating a cycle of positive reinforcement.

When you need a boost, ask yourself: What aspects of my work bring me joy? What would need to be true about my role for me to stay here for five more years? How can I positively influence my team and create a ripple effect? This focus can transform work into a place of lightness and connection, countering the world's harshness and reigniting your collective spark.

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Integrating joy, hope, and optimism within teams is more than a modern version of management self-care; it's a leadership mindset. As you implement these strategies, remember that the aim is not just to survive the toughest days — but rather to make work a place where you and your teams can share joy.

DA

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