



Turning  
Work into  
Play

"Are you for real?"

I would regularly attend the family court during my custody battle for my daughter who was seven at the time, and then go back to the office where I was M.D of an agency, and walk into a meeting, where the argument was which brand really owned the colour blue? . Good god - you can't make this up. It was all I could do to remain silent and interested to chair an outcome to this purile exercise. The consequences of the agency / client argument were very different to the consequences of the argument that my lawyer and I were making in the Family Court of NSW not hours before. But it's a living.

But ad agencies now have names like breakfast spreads, or funky upper and lower case word plays that no one cares about or understands when the invoices arrive. I doubt whether we will ever see people actually put their name on the door again like Saatchi, Patterson, and Clemenger. Those people stood behind their names. Hats off. There was no room for interpretation whose enterprise it was and the standards therein. So to Charles, Maurice, John, Peter and George I was inspired to work for several of you.

But in a world of institutionalised unaccountability, you can hide the management of an agency beneath layers of poor website design, except when the principals buy a new house, then it's in the tabloids, and the figure paid is known to staff and clients alike. Better still Instagram it.  
Real shrewd.

Offices across many sectors of commerce now suffer from well designed infantilism. Bright colours, play slides, baristas, break out rooms, all in the name of "we are all creative". I've got news for you. Creativity and innovation are two very different things and most innovation in Australia is held back by capital and courage, not ideas. I don't care how many ties you take off, the rigidity of left brain efficiency does not suddenly disappear and transform into open ceiling creativity . The naivety of this approach staggers me. But stay calm and pass the wasabi. If your office looks like a kids playgrounds, don't be surprised if you get seated at the kids table when it counts.

How is this different to making people wear suits and a game face everyday? It is not. We seem determined to do everything not to be ourselves and promote a work culture that enables such a disconnect. It does matter to an extent what you wear, but what is even more important in office culture is can you be yourself?. Many of us in the service businesses have to sell our firm. You might be selling your firm, but are they buying you? Human beings have a well developed sense of bullshit.

So we are attuned to truth because is essential to good decision making and is a survival method. When you veneer yourself so much with language, a costume, a setting, you have actors in a play and playing make believe and is easily spotted by those you are trying to sell to. Do not be surprised if you are not trusted. There are many people I like and don't trust. It becomes easy to work with people you like and not trust, and millions of people in corporate life do just that everyday.

Depression is not a workplace problem.

It is a human problem and can and does occur cross culturally. But the role of the workplace with regard to addressing mental health is that of creating environments where people can be themselves, as masking the condition is one of its key issues.

We mask because we do not trust.

Depression is often described as a battle . In my view if you battle as I did, you will lose. You will be exhausted. I am tremendously frustrated by the condition and I have taken vast steps to mitigate the effect of the condition on myself and others yet still it pervades me. I still have weeks where I am flat and in previous times no one could tell. The only reason people can tell now is because I tell them, not because they have acquired any special new skill to discern that I'm down .

When I wake in a day with the realisation that I'm going to suffer, I am disappointed and in times past would war against myself and become angry. If I was to remain in that state my day would be lost. I have had to find acceptance. Bad days will happen and they will pass, the greatest challenge I have on a bad is to be good to myself. To eat well, and if I don't then I don't beat myself up over it. If I need to sleep I accept I need to sleep as to push on regardless will benefit no one.

To battle is noble and maybe even honourable, but to war with yourself lacks empathy. The protestant work ethic, the stiff upper lip and man up exhortations are suitable for other conflicts but not depression. This condition is not a conflict, and sheer will, is not the answer. To soldier on is for what purpose? The lack of empathy in the work place should not be replicated by a lack of empathy for yourself. Lean in. Move closer to yourself when you suffer. The natural reflex is to recoil from pain. But this is a condition you need to respond to not react.

Mornings are liars. I often have taken from mornings that I will be flat or worse all day. Fortunately it is not that linear. I log all the people, places and things that I can do to modify the trajectory of the day. Sometimes, these alterations are minor, but may serve to give me hope that step by step I can alter what the morning may pose as an inevitable days of the blues.

As feelings of worthlessness can accompany the physical feelings, I have often found that to do one small thing of mastery helps my esteem. It may be out of 50 balls you hit one pure 6 iron, or that you complete a small puzzle, or you go for a very small walk. I then use this to reflect on, and recall the feelings associated with that mastery I use to lift my mood from one level to another. It is both physical movement and emotional distraction.

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