

When engagement isn't enough

Navigating 2019 with Serious Play



“This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.”

As we edge ever closer to 2019, it can be concerning to wonder what the future brings. With horror stories about what could come from our departure from the EU, and uncertainty and chaos from our most senior leaders, it's easy for us to feel disoriented and adrift.

How then do we maintain motivation and morale – in a real way, not just with another team drink or “having fun because the boss told us to”?

We've spoken before on the Learning & Development blog about Serious Play – play that is not idle, frivolous, or childish, but involves engagement, meaning and therefore is also pleasurable.

Psychology has something to say about this. Dr Martin Seligman, former President of the American Psychological Association, described and measured life satisfaction and the causation of happiness in 2011 while working at the University of Pennsylvania. How do extremely happy people differ from the rest of us? They're not more religious, or in better shape. They don't have more money, and they're not better looking.

He identified three of the most satisfying kinds of lives:

- **The pleasant life** is about having as many of the pleasures of life as you can, written large. The image of someone going from party to party, and sailing around the Caribbean. The issue with this life is you need an ever increasing hit. The first six months would be fun, but it would begin to pall. Results show that pleasure doesn't contribute to lasting sustainable life satisfaction.
- **The life of engagement** rates higher on the life satisfaction metric. It is distinct from the pleasant life in the element of feeling: when engaged you don't notice so much what you feel because you are concentrated and absorbed in what you are doing. If you imagine someone playing chess and losing themselves in the game – when they look up at the end of the game, two hours are gone. They are completely absorbed.
- **The meaningful life** rates highest on the life satisfaction scale. This is when your life is committed to something bigger than who you are, something you find purposeful and meaningful.

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What does this research tell us about our work? As we head toward these darkened times, we need to find motivation and raise morale: we will need to find a way approaching work that is not just pleasurable, not just engaging, but meaningful.

“Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.” – *Studs Terkel*

There is more on this topic to come in the new year. We will be bringing back our annual Breakfast Seminar, which will draw on thirty years of leadership and development to address disruption in business. Our last seminar asked the audience, “What do you do when you don’t know what to do?” Now, there is a different question facing leaders: “What do you do when **no one** knows what to do?”

I’ll leave that question with you over the Christmas break. Thanks for following the blog in 2018, and see you next year.