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## Executive Book Summaries®

# The Best Place to Work

## The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

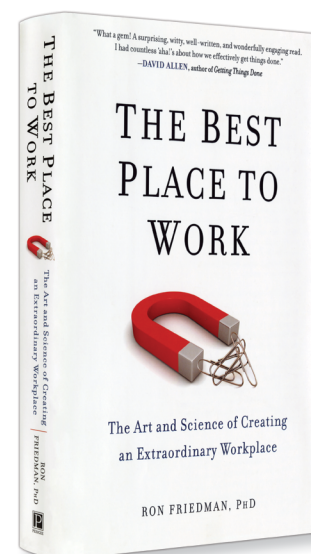
In *The Best Place to Work*, award-winning psychologist Ron Friedman uses the latest research from the fields of motivation, creativity, behavioral economics, neuroscience and management to reveal what really makes us successful at work. Combining powerful stories with cutting-edge findings, Friedman shows leaders at every level how they can use scientifically proven techniques to promote smarter thinking, greater innovation and stronger performance.

Among the many surprising insights, Friedman explains how learning to think like a hostage negotiator can help you defuse a workplace argument, why placing a fishbowl near your desk can enhance your thinking, and how incorporating strategic distractions into your schedule can help you reach smarter decisions.

Brimming with counterintuitive insights and actionable recommendations, *The Best Place to Work* offers employees and executives alike game-changing advice for working smarter and turning any organization — regardless of its size, budgets or ambitions — into an extraordinary workplace.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why successful teams make more mistakes than other teams.
- How the design of our workplace impacts our performance.
- Six insights to delay the adaptation that erodes happiness.
- Why the best managers focus on themselves.
- How to provide daily opportunities for autonomy, competence and relatedness.



by Ron Friedman, Ph.D.

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE BEST PLACE TO WORK

by Ron Friedman, Ph.D.

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## PART I: DESIGNING AN EXTRAORDINARY WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE

### Success is Overrated

What do Shakespeare, Dickens, Tolstoy, Picasso, Monet, Bach, Mozart, Wagner, Schubert, Brahms and Dostoyevsky all have in common? They produced far more than their contemporaries.

Importantly, not every one of their creations was a masterpiece. Today, in fact, they are remembered for a mere fraction of their complete body of work. Creative geniuses simply do not generate masterpieces on a regular basis. Yet, the quality that distinguishes them would be impossible without the quantity of attempts.

Creative geniuses don't just attempt more solutions — they also miss quite often. Before the iPhone and iPad revolutionized the world of personal computing, Steve Jobs accrued a remarkably long list of failures that includes the Apple I, the Apple II, the Lisa, the Newton personal digital assistant and NeXT hardware.

The willingness to grow through failure is an approach that's not limited to individuals; a surprising number of leading organizations tend to do the same. Take Google. We all know about its game-changing products, including its search engine, Gmail and Google Maps.

But what about Google X, the homepage customization tool that lasted all of one day? How many of us remember Google Reader, Google Web accelerator or Google Buzz?

Google co-founder Larry Page said, "Even if you fail at your ambitious thing, it's very hard to fail completely. That's the thing that people don't get."

And in a way, that's what makes them so prolific. It's the successful innovator's dirty little secret: They fail more than the rest of us.

### Why Successful Teams Make More Mistakes

In the mid-1990s, Amy Edmondson was analyzing the data to what she thought was a fairly straightforward study when she noticed something peculiar.

She was exploring team dynamics within hospitals, as part of her graduate work in organizational behavior at Harvard University. The question at the heart of Edmondson's research was this: Do nurses with better colleague relationships perform fewer errors?

What Edmondson found was that the better the nurses' relationship with their manager and co-workers, the more errors they appeared to make.

Edmondson was dumbfounded at first, but slowly the answer revealed itself. Nurses in tightly knit groups don't actually perform more errors — they simply report more of them. The reason is simple: When the consequences of reporting failure are too severe, employees avoid acknowledging mistakes altogether. The fascinating implication is that fearful teams avoid examining the causes of their blunders, making it all the more likely that their mistakes will be repeated again in the future.

### The Right Way to Reward Failure

Software-development company HCL Technologies invites its executives to create a Failure CV. To enter the firm's highly coveted internal leadership program, applicants are required to list some of their biggest career blunders and then explain what they've learned from each experience. To advance their careers, potential leaders must first show that they have the ability to turn failure into progress.



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If there's one unifying insight we can draw from the experience of extraordinary achievers, it is this: Sometimes the best way to minimize failure is to embrace it with open arms. ●

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## The Power of Place

The last few years have witnessed stunning breakthroughs in knowledge about the way design affects our thinking. Already, organizations like Google, Intel and Cisco are pouring millions of dollars into redesigning buildings, tearing down walls and reconfiguring conference rooms. It's not simply for the sake of giving employees an appealing environment — it's driven by a newfound recognition that there is a connection between space and innovation.

### The Caveman's Guide to Building a Better Office

Ask the average CEO how to optimize a workspace, and they might suggest you consult with an interior designer. Ask the same question of an evolutionary psychologist, and he'll direct you to a very different set of experts: our ancient ancestors.

Evolutionary psychologists argue that many of our current design preferences can be traced back to our shared history on the savanna. We're drawn to environments that promoted our survival as hunter-gatherers, and feel uneasy in situations that would have put our forefathers at risk. These preferences, they argue, are largely unconscious. We simply experience safe settings as pleasurable and dangerous ones as repellent, without being able to identify exactly why.

It's not hard for the evolutionary psychologist to see why so many offices fail to engage their employees. Depriving people of sunlight, restricting their views and seating them with their backs exposed is not a recipe for success — it's a recipe for chronic anxiety. So is placing workers in expansive rooms, inundating them with stimulation and failing to provide them with an area for refuge, where they can recover from attention fatigue.

### Caves and Campfires

How do you choose among cubicles, private offices and open spaces when all three present significant downsides?

There is a simple answer: You don't.

One thing research has taught us is that no single environment is conducive to every task. By offering a selection of options, companies can support both focus

work and collaboration, using the space they have to enhance their employees' efforts. ●

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## Why You Should Be Paid to Play

Sometimes, what appears to the outside world like slacking off is actually the path to smarter decisions and more innovative ideas.

Frequently our most brilliant insights come in the gaps between hard work, when we let our guard down and allow disparate ideas to emerge. In those moments when we distract ourselves with a walk to the restroom, the commute home or the in-flight movie on a business trip.

Think back to your last truly great work-related idea. Now ask yourself: Where were you? Chances are that you weren't sitting behind your desk.

In many ways, problem solvers are like artists. Taking a few steps back provides painters with a fresh perspective on their subject, lending them a new angle for approaching their work. Walking away doesn't just put our unconscious to work: It helps us see our problem with a new perspective. We become less emotionally attached and free ourselves from the influence of those in our immediate surroundings.

One way many organizations leverage this insight is by deliberately scheduling play into the workday. Play may seem like the domain of children, and in some ways that's the point. We are naturally creative when we're young, in part because our brains have not quite developed the capacity to prejudge and censor our ideas. Putting ourselves in a childlike mindset opens us up to alternative ways of thinking.

### The Creativity Diet

A well-timed diversion can help employees process information they already have in a way that leads to better insights. But when you're looking for outside-the-box solutions, sometimes what you really need is a way of encouraging them to be mentally adventurous.

Our minds naturally search for connections between ideas. And where we direct our attention determines the combinations we find. When we stare at a problem using a single lens, being creative is difficult. We get stuck in old ways of thinking. To uncover new solutions, we need to break our mental frames.

A diet of diverse mental stimulation is a vital component of creative thinking. The challenge in most workplaces is that employees are exposed to the same information day after day, making it difficult to come up with new and

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innovative solutions. But a growing number of companies, inspired by well-known success stories at Google, Yahoo! and Facebook, are trying to break that mental rut. They've begun inviting employees to set aside a portion of their time each week for free-form exploration and for pursuing projects of their choosing. The only requirement is that their efforts have the potential for benefiting the company in some way. ●

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### What Happy Workplaces Can Learn From a Casino

How exactly do you foster happiness in the workplace? By taking a cue from casinos and embedding psychological triggers into the employee experience that promote a positive mindset.

#### Why Workplace Happiness is Hard to Find

One of the more distressing facts about human nature is that we are not particularly good at staying happy. Often the process doesn't take very long. Consider what happens when you order a wonderful dish at a new restaurant. The first bite is exquisite. The second is very good. By the third, you're ready to share. The more you eat, the less enjoyment you derive from your meal, until after a certain threshold you couldn't eat another bite.

The good news about our inclination to adapt is that the same psychological process responsible for acclimating us to positive events is also at work when we experience a tragedy.

Our brains are programmed to adapt to our circumstances, and for good reason. Too happy and we'd lack any ambition; too sad and we'd never leave our beds.

Recently psychologists have begun examining ways of slowing the adaptation process as a means of prolonging happy experiences. If we can prevent ourselves from habituating too quickly to positive experiences, the reasoning goes, we can sustain the initial high for longer periods of time.

How do you delay adaptation? Here's a look at what we've learned so far.

**Insight #1: Frequency is more important than size.** Small, frequent pleasures can keep us happy longer than large, infrequent ones. We may be better off splitting up positive annual events into quarterly ones.

**Insight #2: Variety prevents adaptation.** Increasing the frequency of positive events isn't the only way of delaying adaptation. So is introducing variation. One way

of introducing variety into the workplace is by linking certain happiness boosts to specific seasons.

**Insight #3: Unexpected pleasures deliver a bigger thrill.** How do you surprise your employees? One idea might be renting out a movie theater and taking everyone out for the premiere of a major release.

**Insight #4: Experiences are more rewarding than objects.** Why is this the case? For one thing, it's because experiences tend to involve other people, and being in the company of others elevates our happiness. Experiences also expose us to new ideas and surroundings, growing our intellectual curiosity and expanding our horizons.

**Insight #5: We don't always know why we're happy.** One feature of our environment that we rarely pay attention to is scent. Music can also lift our mood unconsciously. The findings do hint at subtle ways ordinary workplaces can tweak their environments to promote better moods.

**Insight #6: A grateful mind is a happy one.** While traditional staff meetings certainly have their place, their focus on what's missing does little to promote a sense of gratitude. Instead of asking everyone to talk about what they haven't done, use the meeting as an opportunity for staff members to share what they are most proud of having accomplished since the group last met.

Is there value to promoting happiness in the workplace? Absolutely. But it's only by doing so in ways that complement the requirements of employees' tasks and allow them to be authentic about their experiences that we can expect it to drive success. ●

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### How to Turn a Group of Strangers Into a Community

Why would friends be better at working together than acquaintances? A joint study by management professors at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Minnesota offers a clue. Researchers began by asking students in a large course to identify classmates with whom they have a "close interpersonal relationship." They then used that information to assign students to small groups made up of either close friends or mutual acquaintances.

What the researchers wanted to know was this: Could pre-existing friendships benefit some activities but interfere with others? To find out, they had all the groups complete two different assignments. The first was a decision-making project involving collaborative thinking, and the second was a model-building task involving repetitive manual labor.

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The results were definitive: Friends outperformed acquaintances on both tasks. The reason? Friends were more committed at the start of a project, showed better communication while doing the activity and offered teammates positive encouragement every step of the way.

Research suggests that workplace friendships yield more productive employees, and it's not just because friends are easier to work with. It's also because there is more on the line. Feeling a connection with colleagues can motivate employees to work harder for a simple reason. When colleagues are close, a poor effort means more than a dissatisfied customer or an unhappy manager. It means letting down your friends.

## The Key to Lasting Workplace Relationships

As a leader, what can you do to continue to promote new employee connections and help sustain old ones?

Shared activities catalyze workplace friendships in ways few interactions can. They foster proximity between employees who rarely meet, boost their levels of familiarity with one another, highlight similarity of interests and leverage informal, nonwork environments to prompt self-disclosure.

By allowing colleagues to direct their attention to a common task, shared activities create opportunities for dialogue without the pressure of forced conversation. When shared activities include a physical component, such as running or dancing, they have the added feature of increasing psychological arousal. Research indicates that when we experience a rush of adrenaline in the company of others, we like them more and even find them more attractive. The more opportunities employees have for sharing in physical activities, the easier it is for them to get along. ●

## PART II: MOTIVATING EXCELLENCE

### The Leadership Paradox

Charles Henry's company, Johns Manville, had just been purchased by Berkshire Hathaway. Retirement would have to wait. After meeting with Berkshire CEO Warren Buffett, Henry kept his role at Johns Manville, and not merely until his company had made it through the transition. He gave Berkshire Hathaway another four-and-a-half years.

What was it about Buffett that caused him to change his mind? Much of it has to do with Buffett's unorthodox approach to management, which involves giving his direct reports complete autonomy over their own

decision-making. When he does speak with his direct reports, Buffett rarely instructs. Instead, he uses his distance from the day-to-day minutiae to ask clarifying questions that help his managers find their own insights.

The idea of allowing employees such a high degree of independence when it comes to doing their work can seem a little unsettling. To some it might even smack of managerial neglect. Shouldn't Buffett be telling them what to do?

Perhaps. But from Buffett's perspective, that's not the point. Because the feeling of ownership that's created by allowing employees decision-making freedom is itself an investment, one that pays dividends in the form of better motivation, stronger organizational loyalty and sustained engagement.

### The Man Who Turned Management into a Science

In 1874, Frederick Winslow Taylor approached his supervisor with an idea. In addition to his responsibilities on the factory floor, he would conduct an experiment to identify the most efficient way for cutting metal. Slowly, Taylor's studies evolved. He became less interested in the operations of the machines and turned his attention to the factory's men.

Taylor carried around a stopwatch and measured compulsively, breaking down individual jobs into their component tasks. He then presented his findings, offering painstaking analyses and recommendations for eliminating waste and enhancing performance.

Thinking, from Taylor's perspective, was the concern of management. Doing was the domain of workers. To ensure compliance, Taylor believed in motivating employees using both the carrot and the stick. Pay in Taylor's factories was not determined by job title or experience, as the labor unions might have wished. Instead it was directly tied to an employee's performance.

### Taylor versus Buffett: The Truth About Motivating Performance

From Taylor's perspective, motivation was about one thing: quantity. Employees were either highly motivated or they weren't. And it was up to managers to energize them, by enticing them with seductive bonuses and threatening them with losing their jobs. It's a perspective that continues to be popular in many organizations today. But a growing number of motivational experts argue that this view is not only simplistic — it's actually wrong.

Here's why. Motivation, we now know, varies not just in quantity but also in type. Some employees are motivated by the intrinsic enjoyment they derive from doing their

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work, while others are motivated by the lure of extrinsic factors, like the appeal of money or an important title.

Interestingly, when the work itself is rewarding, an emphasis on rewards can have an unexpected effect. It reduces intrinsic motivation. That's because the moment rewards take center stage, we begin to view our work as a means to an end and start enjoying it less. Economists call it the "crowding out" effect. We stop focusing on the enjoyment the work brings us and become fixated on receiving our reward. Consequently, the more emphasis an organization places on salary and bonuses, the less likely its employees are to enjoy the work for its own sake.

How do you get employees intrinsically motivated about their work? One vital component, according to psychologist Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, involves taking a page out of Warren Buffett's managerial playbook and helping people feel autonomous while doing their job. When people are empowered to make their own decisions at work, they naturally feel motivated to excel for one simple reason: Autonomy is a basic psychological need.

Ultimately, the value of autonomy is that it allows people to fully embrace their goals and see the investments they make as their own choice. It's that feeling of personal ownership that inspires employees to be driven by their own interests, curiosity and desires to succeed.

Psychologists offer a number of recommendations for promoting the experience of autonomy, even when real choice appears to be lacking.

**Provide a meaningful rationale.** Research shows that when people are given a meaningful rationale, they're more likely to invest more effort and to view their contribution as important.

**Define the outcome, not the process.** Why wouldn't you tell your team what to do? Here's why: Spoon-feeding instructions comes with a cost. Sure, overseeing every detail might speed up productivity on this particular assignment, but that short-term lift is likely to undermine your team's overall experience of autonomy, leading to long-term declines in their motivation.

**Use open-ended questions.** Open-ended questions — ones beginning with the words "how," "what" or "why" — unconsciously communicate a respectful interest in the way another person thinks. They also allow the respondent to direct where the conversation goes from there.

**Acknowledge negative feelings.** When people voice a complaint, the first thing they want is to feel heard. Paradoxically, having our feelings accepted defuses some of the negativity by legitimizing our experience.

**Minimize the focus on rewards.** Feel free to offer your team a modest gift, but wait until after the project is done. The key is to let success on the task serve as its own reward while the work is getting done.

The bottom line: Any time you speak from a position of authority, the more supportive you are of others' autonomy, the more likely you are to inspire their best efforts. ●

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## Better than Money

The notion that our happiness is largely driven by the respect we receive from others makes a good deal of sense from an evolutionary perspective. In the past, being a valued member of a tribe meant security, access to attractive mates and influence over important decisions.

Being recognized feels so good because it's the ultimate sign of belonging. And while the data suggest that we adapt to money rather quickly, there is also some compelling evidence that we never quite get used to feeling respected.

What happens when we fail to receive recognition for our work? Our motivation suffers, we lose interest and eventually experience burnout. It's why, year after year, jobs with the highest turnover rates tend to belong to telemarketers, fast-food employees and retail associates. Work that involves continuous sacrifice and garners little appreciation is psychologically exhausting.

One reason that recognition is vital to doing good work is that it feeds our need for competence. When we receive positive feedback, we experience an emotional rush. Competence is inherently motivating, which is why feeling like you're good at your job leads you to invest even more of yourself in your work.

Recognition at work is also important because the positive feedback is instructive. If we're deprived of feedback on our performance — positive or otherwise — we lack the information we need to improve. And when we're missing clear direction on what we need to do to succeed, it's just a matter of time before our enthusiasm wanes. It's a fundamental truth of the human condition: Being ignored is often more psychologically painful than being treated poorly. ●

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## Why the Best Managers Focus on Themselves

Although we like to think of ourselves as independent decision makers, the truth is that we've inherited a brain

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that's designed to mimic. From the moment we're born, we show a tendency to imitate.

Mimicry is quite noticeable when it occurs in children. And as adults, many of us dupe ourselves into thinking we're immune to its effects. But studies show we're prone to mimicry throughout our lives, in ways we rarely detect.

Given how much time we spend with our colleagues, it's natural that the people we work with also have a powerful impact on our behavior. When we mimic the postures, facial expressions and vocal tones of those around us, we tend to "catch" their emotions. The reason is simple: Our minds spend a lifetime associating certain physical movements with specific patterns of thought.

## Mirror Neurons, Social Norms and the Roots of Company Culture

When it comes to setting social norms, some group members are more influential than others. High-status group members are watched more closely and carry more credibility, which is why their behaviors and attitudes often set the tone.

Which behaviors matter most when it comes to shaping company culture? In his landmark book *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, MIT management professor Edgar Schein identifies a number of specific actions by which leaders (often unconsciously) influence the culture of a workplace:

**What leaders pay attention to (and what they ignore).** The more focus a leader places on particular areas of the business — by personally controlling them, measuring them or regularly commenting on them — the more they become priorities for their teams.

**Emotional outbursts.** When a leader's mood swings abruptly, employees take notice.

**Reactions to incidents and crises.** The way in which a leader reacts to unexpected negative developments communicates their core values and contributes to organizational norms about how adverse situations should be handled.

**How leaders allocate rewards and status.** Over time, organizational culture tends to reinforce actions that leaders consistently reward.

Managers are often told that paying close attention to their employees is the key to doing the job effectively. But what this research suggests is that there are times when managers would be better off focusing a little more closely on their own behaviors. ●

## PART III: ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TOP PERFORMERS

### Seeing What Others Don't

Generally speaking, there are two ways of finding extraordinary employees. The first is to get better at choosing between candidates, which is tricky. The other is improving the quality of your applicant pool before starting your evaluation. It's a lot easier to reach smart hiring decisions when the vast majority of your applicants are a good choice.

One way of improving a candidate pool is by turning outstanding employees into recruiters. Research shows that people tend to socialize with those with similar personalities. This means that if you have hard workers with an optimistic mindset, chances are they know a number of people who share those characteristics.

The best scenario from an organizational standpoint is one in which employees recruit others because they want to work with great teammates and believe that their company would genuinely benefit from bringing that particular employee on board.

Getting the right candidates in your applicant pool is only half the battle. Once you do, how do you select among them? Fortunately, there are a number of steps you can take to improve your chances of making the right choice.

The first involves tearing a page out of the orchestra interviewing playbook and using a modified version of the blind audition. There is a workplace equivalent to this approach, and it involves creating an interview that's centered on a work assignment.

What assignment should you ask applicants to complete? The answer depends on the position you're looking to fill. The important thing is to create an assignment that is job relevant, allowing your impressions to form around skills that are pertinent to the role.

Another step to help you minimize your interview blind spots: Include multiple interviewers, and give them each specific criteria upon which to evaluate the candidate. Without a predefined framework for evaluating applicants, it's hard for interviewers to know where to focus.

To create a great workplace, you need to excel at hiring. It's because no matter how well you manage, how often you recognize or how generously you reward, there's simply no substitute for selecting talented people and placing them in the right roles. ●

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## Conclusion: Three Keys to Creating an Extraordinary Workplace

Every year or so, the Gallup organization releases a poll on employee engagement that inspires the collective hand-wringing of news anchors and editorial writers around the country.

The results are as predictable as they are bleak. The latest figures indicate that a full 70 percent of American employees feel disengaged at their jobs. Of these, 18 percent are “actively disengaged,” meaning that they’re not simply failing to meet their potential — they’re acting out in ways that measurably damage their company.

Organizational leaders have tried to increase employee engagement, but they’ve gone about it the wrong way. As Jim Harter, Gallup’s chief scientist for workplace management and well-being, put it, “There is a gap between knowing about engagement and doing something about it in most American workplaces.”

This is where science can help. Here are the three overarching lessons of *The Best Place to Work*:

**Lesson 1. Psychological needs are at the heart of employee engagement.** How do you get employees engaged in their work? By daily providing opportunities for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

To promote autonomy, provide a rationale when tasks are presented, offer flexibility on how and when a task is performed and minimize the focus on rewards. Help employees feel competent by creating a workplace that provides them with immediate feedback, meaningful recognition and opportunities for growth.

Within the business world, relatedness has long been the most underappreciated of the three psychological needs. But connecting employees to one another doesn’t just help them enjoy being at work; it leads to quantifiable gains in their performance. To build employee connections, it’s important to create interactions that harness the natural catalysts of close relationships: proximity, familiarity, similarity and self-disclosure.

**Lesson 2. Organizations are more successful when they address the limits of the mind and body.**

Our brains have limited mental bandwidth, and when the cognitive resources we have are depleted — whether because we’re surrounded by a hectic office environment, inundated with too many requests or working continuously without a break — our mood sours, and our performance slumps.

Instead of ignoring the body’s limitations and insisting that employees power through periods of low energy,

organizations are far better off designing workspaces that allow employees to conserve their mental resources, and offering them opportunities for restocking their energy supply when they are running low.

The nature of work is changing. What might have once appeared to traditional managers as wasted time can today be an important key to delivering high-level performance.

**Lesson 3. Integrating Work and Family Life Improves the Quality of Both**

Instead of pretending that work and personal time are separate, organizations are better off when they actively seek to blend the two worlds. When organizations trust employees to manage their time responsibly, making it acceptable for a worker to take an hour during the day to watch his daughter’s soccer game, they create loyalty and commitment that ends up saving them money in the long term.

The future of great workplaces lies in helping employees fuse their personal and professional lives in ways that position them to deliver their best work.

## Creating an Extraordinary Workplace

We now have striking proof that many aspects of the modern workplace are outdated, counterproductive and even psychologically harmful. Which is why it should surprise no one when Gallup reports that more than 80 percent of employees worldwide are disengaged. They’re working within structures that make it nearly impossible to thrive.

When we fulfill employees’ needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, when we allow them to leverage the full breadth of their mental capacity, when we provide them with the flexibility to succeed in both their personal and professional lives, we achieve more than an extraordinary workplace. We create an organization that performs at its very best. ●

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