



Book Corporate Celebration

Play, Purpose, and Profit at Work

Terrence E. Deal and M.K. Key
Berrett-Koehler, 1998

Recommendation

This elegantly produced book is authoritatively and beautifully written. It is not - repeat not - a shallow, silly, piece of self-help nonsense. Backed by plenty of research and the professional and academic expertise of its authors, Terrence E. Deal & M.K. Key, the book takes a serious look at the role celebration plays in the success of corporations and other organizations. It also shows you how to plan and implement such events. *BooksInShort.com* recommends this book to leaders and managers of organizations and others interested in the profitable role of celebration in corporate and organizational culture. Now, go party.

Take-Aways

- Corporate celebrations directly increase morale, productivity and profits.
- There are seven kinds of celebrations.
- Celebration can be planned or spontaneous.
- Corporate leaders are recognizing the value of celebration and play.
- Disasters can be celebrated in ways that inject humor and boost morale.
- Celebrations build loyalty.
- Celebrations build relationships.
- Celebrations reflect an organization's culture.
- Having no celebration is better than having a bad, boring or stressful celebration.
- Celebration can fit any budget.

Summary

Why Celebrate

Celebration isn't frivolous - it's an important part of addressing the major issues in today's business environment: leadership, purpose, team building, community and even profit. Celebration and fun are linked to the financial bottom line. Since ancient times, ritual and ceremony have played an important role in all kinds of human organizations. In business they play an equally vital role, from recognition, triumphs and tragedies to transitions, product launches and community outreach. Celebrations have psychological benefits and can revitalize the workplace (and ultimately profits) in this era of restructuring, reengineering and downsizing. The seven types of celebration are:

1. Cyclical celebration
2. Recognition ceremonies
3. Celebrations of triumph
4. Rituals of comfort and letting go
5. Succession rites
6. Altruistic celebration
7. Play

"All corporate activity requires human energy to succeed, and human energy is fueled in large measure by ritual and ceremony. Always has been. Always will be. So to excel, captains of industry must now become champions of celebration."

Corporate celebration can be spontaneous or meticulously planned and implemented. The important thing is that you have them. Research shows that celebrations are a beneficial part of corporate culture. Executives who seek ways to develop and encourage their colleagues and employees find that celebrations help form a more meaningful business environment.

"Without ritual and ceremony, organizations quickly become sterile and devoid of meaning and buoyancy."

Since all businesses are people-driven, the human side of commerce can't be overlooked. A January 9, 1997 headline in the Wall Street Journal, "The Search for Meaning in Meaningless Work" encapsulates the current dilemma. In his classic book *Working*, Studs Terkel noted that work "is about a search too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than stupor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying."

"Livening up rather than tightening down will become the key to greater profits. Celebration will help lead the way to economic prosperity."

Some corporate leaders are recognizing the value of celebration and are finding that, much to their surprise, it's a sound investment. England's H.R.H. Prince Philip, CEO of Liechtenstein Global Trust (LGT), was recently asked what it cost for the company's three-day, top-executive gathering in Whistler, British Columbia, attended by 120 company executives (plus spouses) from around the world. The cost was sizable, but without hesitating, he smiled and replied, "About half of what it would have cost to retain a top consulting firm. Moreover, it worked. It started the process of bringing the company together."

"Their shrunken psyches are just as much the victims of industrialization as were the bent bodies of those impoverished children who were once confined to English factories from dawn to dusk."

In *Competitive Advantage through People*, author Jeffrey Pfeffer shows how paying attention to the people side of business can be enormously profitable. The top two performing stocks from 1972 to 1992 were companies that are known for distinctive cultures that focus on celebration, Southwest Airlines and Wal-Mart.

"Evidence is accumulating that shows how much human factors affect the financial bottom line directly and dramatically."

At many companies, celebrations are meaningless events that employees dread, with boring speeches, tension in the air and no fun at all. Offering such events is worse than having nothing at all. Your organization can learn how to host fabulous, memorable celebrations no matter how much or how little you want to spend on the occasion.

"Celebrations are about building relationships - bonding. Events also can be a form of internal marketing to build team spirit among individual people. Involving employees in planning is one way to assure the calibration of the event to the audience."

Celebration is vital to the health of the human psyche, full of emotion and meaning. In an authentic celebration, individuals come together to form a "we." This aspect can be one of the most valuable for any organization. Some other benefits of celebrations include:

- Leveling the hierarchy to provide a common ground where bosses and employees can communicate freely without fear, thus building relationships and strengthening bonds.
- Creating energy, excitement, commitment and loyalty.
- Establishing a connection among the firm's roots, current realities and future dreams.
- Experiencing and appreciating ideas, values and visions.
- Transforming difficulties into opportunities, tragedies into growth and losses into gains.
- Providing a safety valve to release tension, emotions and conflict.
- Creating a forum for sharing stories and ideas, and linking joy with work.

How Leading Companies Celebrate

Anderson Soft-Teach, a Silicon Valley software firm, celebrated its tenth anniversary by taking all 40 of its employees (plus spouses) to Hawaii. The generosity of Warren E. Anderson, the company's founder, led employees to make the event a memorable success filled with plenty of light-hearted moments. Commenting on the benefits of the trip, Anderson said, "We created a company legend complete with lots of stories that are still repeated to this day, especially to new employees (who were) not here for the trip. And it illustrated our system of values and beliefs far better than anything else I could have done."

“One of the hallmarks of a cohesive, focused corporate culture is an abundance of stories. Stories help keep alive echoes of celebrations past. Present and future occasions provide opportunities to swap tales - old and new - that will eventually take their place in a company's enduring legacy of legend and lore.”

Spectrum Healthcare Services in St. Louis, Missouri, celebrates in inexpensive but meaningful ways throughout the year. Employees find a "You are Loved" pin on each desk every Valentine's Day, and helium balloons wait for them on their birthdays. Every Easter, the company creates a display of baby pictures of the executives and holds a contest to identify who's who. It hosts costume contests every Halloween, green popcorn on St. Patrick's Day and a potluck dinner at Thanksgiving. While these events may seem silly and trivial to those outside the company, managers report that these gestures have had a significant impact on morale, motivation and commitment.

“To avoid costly errors, celebrations need the same level of attention as ... strategic planning, financial forecasting and other important business functions.”

Southwest Airlines celebrates disappointments as well as triumphs. The company found itself in the midst of unusual chaos when it announced \$25 fares in July 1996. People lined up at the airport and reservation clerks faced 66,000 calls in an hour; the reaction literally shut down phone lines. Southwest CEO Herb Kelleher issued a formal apology for the chaos to the airline's regular customers and gave "survival kits" containing gum, granola bars, popcorn, and other foods to employees who were working overtime to answer calls and deal with customers. These survival kits added a touch of humor to a stressful situation, lifted employees' spirits and gave them additional energy to "weather the temporary storm."

“Engaging people's hearts as well as their minds is key to a spirited workforce.”

Anita Roddick, CEO of The Body Shop, notes that business can be a tremendous force for positive social change, and reminds people that corporations were actually invented to serve people and society. She has pictures of missing persons posted on the sides of the company's transport trucks, which makes the vehicles into effective moving billboards that help the search process. When a missing person is found, Body Shop employees gather to celebrate.

Play at Work

Plato wrote, "Life should be lived as play." Incorporating that philosophy into the workplace can invigorate the organization and lead directly to profits.

“The antidote to fear is open communication, which has its place in celebration.”

Southwest Airlines is "the epitome of a party community." Celebration and play are the company's way of life and contribute to its joyful work environment and unbroken string of yearly profits. Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream has a permanent committee aptly named the Joy Gang. When Mobil Oil accepted the fact that their previous dealers' meetings had been boring and unproductive, the company vowed never to let that happen again. Their next meeting, bringing 8,500 employees together in Las Vegas, featured entertainment by the Temptations, Mary Wilson of the Supremes, Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, and the Four Tops. The evening built bonds that previous events never achieved and it built loyalty toward a company "that would invest so lavishly in its people's sheer joy if only for an evening." It created memories that became part of the company's legend and lore.

Planning Celebrations and Fun Activities

Ask yourself the following planning questions:

- Why are you having this event?
- What do you want to accomplish? What is the message? Reward?
- What is your organization's history of celebrating?
- Has attendance grown?
- What did you learn the last time you did this? What worked and what didn't?
- What is the condition of the company? Have you had a bad year? A good year?

“Many leaders are reluctant to celebrate due to the risk of failing or losing face.”

Remember the following points:

- Plan around a theme or purpose, even if it's just play.
- Celebrate often, seasonally and for "no apparent reason."
- Know the values and ideas you want to exemplify.
- Be authentic. Be true to your corporate culture or the one you'd like to develop.
- Be sensitive when it's time to change traditional ways.
- Emphasize building relationships. Be as inclusive as possible.
- Honor guests.
- Appreciate the clothing preferences of your guests.
- Create an atmosphere of beauty, safety, freedom, grace and respect.
- Stress openness, flexibility and informality.
- Orchestrate the mood.
- Stand back and let it happen.

“Celebration does not always have to be high cost.”

Martha Stewart explained that, “parties are productions, not unlike theatrical productions. Some have lavish sets and big casts, like Broadway. Others use makeshift spaces and exotic décor. Each has a style, a season and a *raison d'être*.” Celebrations appeal to all the senses through décor, food, lighting, dance, scent and music, which can create any mood.

Believe it or not, corporations have actually participated in a survey in which they've named their favorite songs used in celebrations and organizational rituals. Here are the Top 30 - you can save this list for your next bash: New Attitude, All Fired Up, The Best, Celebration, I'm so Excited, The Power of Love, Ghostbusters, Winners, Victory, Shout, Man in the Mirror, We are the Champions, Danger Zone, The Greatest Love of All, Footloose, One Moment in Time, I Heard It Through the Grapevine, You Got It, Wind Beneath My Wings, 40 Hour Week, Don't Worry Be Happy, We Are Family, Flashdance...What a Feeling, Nine to Five, The Way You Do Things, Put a Little Love in Your Heart, Taking it to the Streets, Takin' Care of Business, The Heat is On and You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet.

Spontaneous events are just as important as those where every moment has been planned. During spontaneous events, give a theme or a reason, and then let go. Trust the participants to create their own good time and give them permission to have fun. Create an

environment without fear. Remove the obstacles to creativity and spontaneity, which are surveillance, judgment, evaluation, pressure and fear.

As Harvey Cox wrote in *Feast of Fools*, "We have pressed so hard toward useful work and rational calculation that they have all but forgotten the joy of ecstatic celebration, antic play and free imagination."

About the Authors

Terrence E. Deal, Ph.D., an author, teacher and consultant, has written 17 books, including the best-selling *Corporate Cultures*. He has taught at Harvard and Stanford, and currently teaches at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. **M.K. Key**, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical-community psychologist, an organizational development specialist, a writer and trainer, and an adjunct faculty member at Vanderbilt University.
