

Just another 'Groundhog Day'?



Ever feel like your workplace resembles “Groundhog Day,” the 1993 movie in which Bill Murray’s character wakes up each morning doomed to find people doing the exact same things the exact same way that they did the day before?

While routines definitely have their place, too much of the same-old-same-old can create a stagnant environment in which workers are content to operate on autopilot rather than strive for excellence.

“Familiarity/comfort is a good thing, to a degree, because it helps employees feel confident they can do the job,” says Leigh Steere, co-founder of Managing People Better, LLC.

“But it becomes a bad thing if the employee becomes complacent (no longer feeling the need to stretch and learn new things about the field or type of work), bored (no longer feeling challenged by the work), or disengaged (just showing up for work, putting in the minimum, and not really caring whether the company succeeds or fails).”

So how can a manager strike a balance?

Stir the waters

A good starting point for generating some energy is talking to individuals to learn their career goals and understand how they feel about their current work situations.

Such conversations may yield information about skills they want to develop, classes that would enrich their performance, or new methods of doing things that they would like a chance to try.

Armed with this knowledge, a manager then can assess the role he or she can play in helping each team member achieve greater success.

Team effort

Tackling the issue on a group level also can prove helpful. Develop a corporate culture in which learning and growth is the norm, not a rarity.

Steere recommends making regular “change” part of the culture through little breaks from routine such as:

- Taking the team to a different venue to observe customer service or some other facet of business to get ideas to bring back to your own enterprise.

- Calling a roundtable to get team input on a specific business process. Ask everyone, “What works well about this? What’s not working so well? If you could wave a magic wand, how would you change this process?” Find one or more of their suggestions to incorporate.
- Inviting employees to submit suggestions for roundtable topics.
- Sending employees to a conference in their field or in an adjacent field and having them report their learnings back to the group.

Think ripples over waves

When trying to break the “Groundhog Day” cycle, however, it is important to remember that change can make people uncomfortable.

Instead of massively overhauling the status quo, managers may have better results by looking for subtle ways to incorporate freshness into the workplace.

For example, consider giving employees assignments that are slightly different from their typical role.

Choose projects you know they have all or most of the skillset to do, and let them know it is fine to ask for guidance on anything that is unfamiliar.

As they see your aim is progress, not panic, and develop confidence in their own abilities, don’t be surprised if next time they are more receptive to venturing outside their comfort zones rather than hibernating in their cubicles.

Don’t forget the praise

Make praise a priority, and do it right when the employee deserves it. If you hold all your positive comments for year-end appraisals, employees will have to travel a long distance on just one tank of praise. Praise works best when it’s timely and warranted, not when it’s marked on a calendar.