

From Cake to Connection: Redefining Fun in Corporate Culture with John Baldino

Announcer: You're listening to the HR Mixtape Your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is John Baldino, speaker and president of Humareso

Shari Simpson: John, as always, thank you for jumping on the podcast with me.

John Baldino: I am so excited to be here, Shari. Thank you so much for having me.

Shari Simpson: So we are on the Sherm floor. We're actually enjoying some bellinis and we have, I think, the best topic today. We are talking about fun.

John Baldino: Yeah. 100% How could it not be the best topic?

Shari Simpson: And look who you're talking to, of course, if you don't know, John actually does this really awesome LinkedIn live once a week. It's, it's perfect. It's fun. It starts with dancing in their desks. Yeah, it's very entertaining.

John Baldino: Yes.

Shari Simpson: How do we get started?

John Baldino: So, um, so I do this LinkedIn live show with Jackie Clayton and Jackie actually called me and said, here's what I think. People don't know how fun that life is supposed to be in the work that we do. You and I absolutely are the ambassadors for that. So how about we do an unscripted show? I'll, uh, Regis and Kathy Lee in decades gone by. And, and no script, we have a topic, but no quite like nothing. And we just get on and start chatting and people comment, we're responding. And we do this for an hour every Thursday at 10 Eastern time.

Shari Simpson: It's great. It's great. It's so much fun. So you got to check it out. I will make sure to put a link in the show notes for anybody. So let's talk about workplace culture. And how do we bring fun, genuine fun back to the workplace?

John Baldino: Yeah, I think So if we're looking at it in our discipline, right, the discipline of human resources, I think historically what we've seen, and I need to call myself out as well, because I started in personnel a long time ago, many decades ago, and fun was a party. It was hosted lunch. You were an event planner. Yeah. right? We did the, you know, I worked for companies where once a month we had a, you know, a large sheet cake brought in with everybody's name on it that was going to celebrate that month. I mean, honestly, it was like, and, and I want to tell you something, like, I remember September and October, like being awful because just in our workplace, we had so many people that were born those months. that it was impossible to fit everybody's name. And so everybody's name was like minuscule, like font five, you know what I mean? Like, what is why are we doing this? Nobody even cares and knows. And we did this. This was

fun. Yeah, right. That's the definition of fun. Look, look at how we treat you. You know, we bring you cake and we put balloons up and we'll do a raffle once a month for company, you know, related

Shari Simpson: Did you do raffles for jeans day?

John Baldino: Oh, we had charity for jeans day. I mean, I wish I was making stuff up.

Shari Simpson: No, I remember. Yes, I did. I worked for a company once where you could pay \$5 to the charity to wear jeans. I'm sorry.

John Baldino: That's exactly what I'm talking about. Right. And then you and but you in order to also wear the jeans, you did the donation. But then you also had to wear like the paper

Shari Simpson: Oh, you'd like one-upped it.

John Baldino: Yeah, we did. I remember a company I worked with, we were a huge United Way partner. And so everybody had to wear this like United Way paper that we pinned to their, not even, we couldn't even afford the sticker. We literally were copying them on this, on the Xerox and, and then cutting them out. Y'all, if you're listening to me, I'm telling you the truth, cutting them out by hand and then literally pinning

Shari Simpson: How many man hours do you think were involved in the money you spent doing that?

John Baldino: This was fun, everyone. Right. This was fun. This is what we did. And and honestly, that it it moved very quickly from, I'll say, year one fun to year two plus labor. Yeah. The fun was gone because then it became a task, a project. Oh, my gosh, I got to cut all these out. Like the joy was gone. Yeah. Right.

Shari Simpson: I'm sure you know who Jeff Harry is. I'm sure you've seen his stuff. He's hilarious. He is all about fun at work. How do you think we start? Let's start real basic. How do we start to incorporate fun daily tasks, like just drips of fun throughout the day?

John Baldino: So I think there's a couple, if I can, there's a couple answers to that. One, I want to speak to those organizations that I think are hurting the most, and that's around distributed workforces, whether that's hybrid, where there's a mishmash of people who get to see each other at some sort of cadence, or quite frankly, 100% remote, where people are not engaged physically with one another. And I'm starting there because I think you have to be more intentional about how you build fun into the days. And I will tell you, utilizing, leveraging your communication platform is a must. So whether you're on Slack or Teams or whatever you're on, lean into those things unapologetically. So I will give you a great, for instance, very practical at my own organization, Humoriso, not everybody ever sees one another physically. They work all over the place. And so fun has to be intentional things being posted in our full team chat that everybody can see. It's not about title or department or division. Everybody can see these things. And you start by bringing things up. So So for instance, a couple of weeks ago I posted one morning, I want to see the posters that you had up when you were in high school on your bedroom wall.

Shari Simpson: Oh my gosh, I love this.

John Baldino: And I started, like you all, people are going to think some sort of way about me, right? First of all, I have my Janet Jackson poster. And the easy thing about this, and I obviously I don't have these posters anymore. My mom may still have them, but I don't have them anymore. Right. I just went to like Google images and searched for, you know, Janet Jackson poster and sure shooting. There's an image of the poster I had when I was in high school. Yeah. And I just, I mean, all I'm doing is cutting and pasting that right, right into two minutes, maybe three minutes.

Shari Simpson: Yeah.

John Baldino: I did my Janet Jackson poster, my Vanna White poster. She, I mean, Vanna was something I want y'all to know back in the day. I'm just telling y'all she was on a haystack a la Jane Russell. I had that poster, right? Philly stuff. Like I just had this stuff and now everybody's jumping in and doing the same thing. I didn't tell them what to do. I didn't give them the instruction about going onto Google and fine. I just said, share what was hanging on your walls. Yeah. Right. And I, I will say some people are probably already feeling apoplectic about me saying this because they're like, I don't want to see some of the things that they had on their wall. Right. But it's safe. Like, look, put up what you, you know, what you had, and people are putting things up. And then the conversations that were happening between people or people finding out things about another person that they didn't know. And I have to tell you, I have 20 somethings that work in my organization when they saw Vanna White. And by the way, everybody, she's closed. It's not that kind of thing. Like, they, they, they were like, Oh, my gosh. because their frame of reference for Vanna is now. And she's lovely and all that stuff. But it's, you know, she was someone to look to as a young man, different than a young man would look to her today. You know what I mean? And, and conversations around that, like, Oh my gosh, she's really had a career. Oh my gosh, somebody's posting, she wrote a book. You know, she cooks, you know, like all of a sudden these things are being shared. And again, it was so simple to put put out there. And so I'm saying that for those with distributed workforces, just start with something conversational. Yeah, easy. Obviously, if you're in person with one another, get up from your desk, get up from your cubicle, walk around. It's okay to chit chat a little bit. Be thoughtful around shows that maybe people are streaming to ask, Hey, what, what's the latest binge that you've been on? Or, and people will tell you they're like, right. I mean, this Bridger tempting. I'm not, I like, I don't get it. I keep trying to tell people, I don't think historically it's accurate. I, Probably not. I really don't think I appreciate the fantasy of it, but not so much. Right. But even in that, the conversations that came up because, so my wife loves British shows. My wife does not work in my organization. So when people are sharing about Bridgerton, I'm saying my wife couldn't get into it because she didn't find it historically accurate. She's more historical fiction person. And, and somebody else was like, Oh my gosh, I actually am

too. I feel the same sort of way about this show. That's really, and now I'm connecting with someone that maybe if I didn't even say that about my wife, I wouldn't have found out some more about them. It sounds, I know some people are like, John, I don't have time for this, but I don't think, I don't think you're looking at it the right way. It's going to pay dividends in huge ways down the road.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. We did an activity in our team where we shared our prom picture in our team's chat. Oh my goodness. Yeah. It was wild. I mean, I went into prom many, many decades ago.

John Baldino: I got you beat, but I'll let you feel like you're old. Keep going.

Shari Simpson: And they were like, Oh my gosh, Shari, that's really you. Yeah. I was like,

John Baldino: That was a different human being then. I mean, we did high school graduation pictures, like we've done. Oh, love that. And so I've got all this hair, all the Italian hair you can imagine, all the hair. And so there are people who are like, oh my gosh. Yeah. Because they don't have their frame of reference, right? Like they would have no idea. It's funny. Yeah. And that's cool.

Shari Simpson: I was thinking about your poster thing, back to my high school days. You will find this hilarious. So I grew up, I have three siblings, so there's four of us, so doubled up in the rooms. Not a big house. My sister's six years younger than me, so totally not the same age, whatever. My bedroom was decorated in jungle gym cabbage patch wallpaper.

John Baldino: I'm obsessed with that. You have to find that. I need a picture.

Shari Simpson: I was not allowed to hang anything on.

John Baldino: So it was so it could be fully exposed and enjoyed. Oh, my gosh. How is that not the most awesome thing?

Shari Simpson: Lovely. Lovely. Lovely. Great. When I had my high school friends over, please don't look at the cabbage patch kids on my wall.

John Baldino: Listen, do you have your original cabbage patch?

Shari Simpson: You know what I do? I gave it to my niece, actually.

John Baldino: I mean, these

Shari Simpson: complete with birth certificate.

John Baldino: Oh, man, Xavier, somebody or other signed all those birth certificates. Because I had to like schlep around with my mom to find one for my sister. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. This is the kind of stuff like look at us just laughing about this. Yeah, it's so easy. And it ought to be this conversational in the workplace. Yeah, it ought to be that kind of because there will be people I know some people will find this hard to believe, where we bring up cabbage patch, And we might have a 24 year old at the workplace who's like, I'm sorry, I don't know what that is. And then you're bringing up real quick, you grab your phone and bring it up. Yes. Furby. Like, it's really interesting to see the iterations of things.

Shari Simpson: Tamagotchis. Yes.

John Baldino: Yeah. Oh my gosh. We could sit here for hours.

Shari Simpson: We could, we could. How do we bring, how do we bring the fun back to corporate training? You know, I, I, I get it. I think our managers learn so much from role playing. I really genuinely do. But I have attended as an HR person, a ridiculous amount of forced fun learning under the context of learning that I'm like, no, your CEO doesn't want to go on a ropes course. I'm sorry. They just don't.

John Baldino: Don't know. Yeah. And honestly, you're by the way, for some of that, your workers comp policy doesn't cover that.

Shari Simpson: Very good point.

John Baldino: I just want to make sure I say that because I know people are like, we're going to do the trust fall. You miss that guy. And it's going to be months of claims.

Shari Simpson: I'm just imagining that scenario in my head. Right.

John Baldino: Yeah. And then was it worth it? No. Yeah. I think you bring up, like, it's a great question. Um, if fun in training is transactional, it's going to feel empty. This is the time in our program where we're going to get up and stretch and, and, you know, walk around with a bingo card and find one other person who also, you know, went to therapy for five years ago, you know, and you're like, wait, what, what are we

Shari Simpson: How did this happen? It's so random like that all the time too.

John Baldino: Yeah. If you, you know, if you had X when you were young and I'm like, Hey, Hey, that could be triggering for some people.

Let's not ask, you know, are you an only child? Some people feel that like, I'm the only child in the room. And there's one who's like, please, I don't want everyone to talk to me. What are we doing? And I know we're cracking up here. I wish you all could see us like we are cracking up. But it's true. Like this is the kind of and here's HR saying this is fun. Yeah. And I think that what we have to remember is, again, if fun is transactional, it's baked into the program as a line item. Right. Stand up. Spread your hands. Now say, you know, it feels like that. Very inauthentic. Rather, I think in training, leave room for something to be unscripted, for there to be a randomness in it. if you didn't plan on taking a break at a certain point and saying, tell me where you all are with the information I'm sharing with you now. Do you even see this as being applicable to your work? Like even in that, I know that sounds scary, but you can have a lot of fun in that when someone is like, no, I don't know why we sit for this. I never get to use this stuff. And all of a sudden you explore that. I guarantee you, if you travel to explore it and keep it light on your end, people will start smiling and laughing. Because the common experience is, remember that training we did two years ago, we made such a big deal. We didn't do anything. And remember, Jim had to wear that bird suit. And now people are crying laughing. And when five minutes ago, they were trying to figure out how they can get out of this training. Now they're happy they're there. They're connecting, they're bonding over, even if it's something silly, but it was organic. It wasn't scripted fun. And HR sometimes in training leans into the scripted fun too much. And that's why we're not perceived as

genuine. And that's a shame because we are lovely people. I promise you, most of us, there are some awful HR people. I mean, I guess I should say that.

Shari Simpson: It exists.

John Baldino: Right. But by and large, we really are. But we unintentionally put walls up around fun because we've made it be transactional in the program rather than relational in the moment.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. I'll give you two examples where this came to life in our org. Do you know what the... I'm hoping I'm saying this right. The Pachacucha method is... Oh, yes. Okay. So we had a training on delivering presentations in that method. Okay. And we were given the topic. So split up into cross-functional teams, you know, TA, L&D, core HR, compliance, all split up together, right? So already you're like, okay. Okay. And we were given the topic, right? And we had, I think we had 20 minutes to create the deck and deliver the presentation. Okay. The topics were wildly hilarious. So mine was around platypuses. It was, it was the funniest five minute presentation I've ever given in my life. Our, our team went down this whole rabbit, rabbit hole of, is it platypuses? Is it platypi? How do we do this? It was so much fun. Um, and then the next year we had presentations and it was a serious topic. So it was, you know, as we look at our workforce, what do you think is the biggest challenge we have right now and how are we going to address it? But the delivery of it, we gave complete creative control to the team. So you can do a play, you can do whatever. And we ended up talking about how you think about accommodations for people. And we did a skit on bringing animals to work. And I was able to make myself cry, like literally, that we weren't able to bring baby lambs to work. I was, I was, everybody was dying laughing, right? But like, we got the point across. I was very upset about the baby lambs.

John Baldino: I mean, so here we are, I'm not even there, right? I was not at this training. Let me be clear, right? I was not at this training.

Shari Simpson: You were not at the training.

John Baldino: But I'm having this shared moment with you. I can picture things because I have a frame of reference. Yeah. I wasn't there, but I can imagine things. And now I feel like I'm a part of stuff. You know what I mean? So I say that to say, not everything that's fun means that everybody has to be in the room. It's the energy that's taken from those that were there. back into the workplace and say, oh my goodness, you should have seen this. Joe had to pretend to be a Rottweiler for this role play skit thing we did for training. And somebody else who's newer to the company is like, I'm sorry, what? He pretended to be a dog and everybody was okay with this. Oh my gosh, it was the funniest thing. You are giving them insight into culture. You're giving them insight into rapport development. These are important intangibles. that stories will help to create. So I love that.

Shari Simpson: How do we get our CEOs on board?

John Baldino: Yeah. So first of all, my go-to typically is film your

CEOs at any large function. So holiday parties, those kinds of things. You want to film them. Ideally, you'll catch them at a moment where they've had a little too much to drink. They do something they shouldn't. And then you just leverage that every time you want to do a program.

Shari Simpson: Hey, let me show you this.

John Baldino: Oh, you don't have budget for us for this. Let me show you something that I happen to have in 12 different cloud drives that you could never get rid of. Like what I would, I mean, I'm half kidding. What I would say though, seriously about your CEO is I think I would, I would sit with your CEO and say, if there's tension or if there's a lack of understanding around what's the ROI on this, why would we spend time on this?

Shari Simpson: Yeah.

John Baldino: I think I would not approach your CEO if you're worried that that's going to be some of the pushback. I'd approach your CEO and have literally a lunch or a cup of coffee with your CEO and say to her, tell me what your first job was like. Oh gosh, Jerry, I worked as, you know, I worked at the cosmetics counter at Macy's, you know, in between classes when I was going to Columbia, right? Something like that. And you're like, well, what was that like? Oh my gosh, it was a nightmare. And like, they start telling you stories and you're laughing with them and, and, um, your CEO may say, why did you ask me that? And you say, because I really love the fact that you, crack up when you share some of this. And I think we have a lot of people that work in our organization that have similar kind of like first job stories, but it made them appreciate work, like that they can look back and laugh on things now. And I'd like to get us to a place where we all can do that safely and in like a healthy environment to even laugh about things now. not laugh at people, but laugh about things now. And that's probably going to lead us to sort of juxtapose a few things in how we communicate with each other or relate to one another. Could you walk with me through this? I really I have some ideas, but I really want your feedback. And I want to know that you and I can sort of talk through this together with everyone else as we roll something out, because I think we're missing out on this, this simple connection that you and I had in five minutes, which was super comfortable. I think a lot of other people need to understand how they can do that too.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. And you just, you just gave the script for everybody. I love that. I love that. Take notes, write it down, grab the transcript. Um, we're always looking for, you know, beg, borrow and steal. Just take John's words. They're perfect.

John Baldino: And if it doesn't work, then you can blame me.

Shari Simpson: I heard it on a podcast. Sorry. So true. We, you know, we're very lucky. We've had, uh, co-CEOs who are always willing to get goofy. Um, one year our CEO ran the 20 flights of our office stairs in shorts and the sweat bands. And it was to raise for charity and it was, it was just genuinely fun. Um, yes. there's always opportunities to find the fun that fits them. Yes. Instead of trying to force them

into, Hey, can you do this thing that they're going to be completely uncomfortable with?

John Baldino: And so I'm going to give a very dated example.

Shari Simpson: Okay. Go for it.

John Baldino: Because I'm a person of a certain age, maybe circa circa. This actually knows circa pre cabbage patch. I'm pretty sure.

Shari Simpson: Okay. So pre 1985. Yeah.

John Baldino: I think I'm going to go seven 1979.

Shari Simpson: Okay. All right. Your eyes born. Oh, I had to throw it in there. I had to take my opportunity.

John Baldino: This interview is going south quickly. OK, so 1979, a new show was put on major network television on ABC. It was called The Love Boat.

Shari Simpson: I'm familiar.

John Baldino: Right. So if you don't know the love boat, my gosh, you have lived a sheltered childhood. Go on to Pluto TV. Watch. There's an entire love boat.

Shari Simpson: You just said Pluto TV and everybody's like, what?

John Baldino: Yeah, it's streaming and it's free y'all. It's in your budget. Anyway, so. 1979, the captain of the love boat, Captain Meryl Steuben, his character was Gruff. That's the design of the character. Everybody else, all the other workers on the boat, were the comedic influences. They got into trouble with one another. And then here came the captain to be the heavy. He was the CEO, basically, of the boat. And after the first half a dozen episodes, the feedback was, we love the show, right? They were talking to the viewers, to the fans. We love the show. We don't think he belongs. We don't think the captain belongs. And so the show producers took that to heart, like, wait a minute, we wanted him to have this role so that there was someone who grounded things. But the perception and grounding for them was to be the serious one rather than someone who participated in the fun. Yeah. And so after those first half a dozen episodes, they did an episode where they allowed him to break. and it turned the ratings around on the show. And that show lasted for like seven years or something.

Shari Simpson: I was going to say, I don't think I've seen an episode where he was sour. So I must've only seen ones after that.

John Baldino: Yes. It changed the whole dynamic. And I'm saying that. So those that sit in leadership positions like that, yeah. Being a participant of it is much more well-received than not being.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. Makes sense. Yeah. Oh, what, what great lessons. I, I feel like we could keep talking forever. Um, but I do have other guests coming to visit the booth. Um, this was great. It was fun. It was a genuine conversation. I think if you're listening, what a great example about let's start with coffee. Let's hear about first jobs. Maybe someday we'll talk about that on the podcast. Cause I have a great first job. So

John Baldino: I've got, I've got one too.

Shari Simpson: So John, as always, thank you for jumping on with me.

John Baldino: Thank you so much for having me.

Announcer: I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes



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