

**206 CULTURE | Got Fun? How to boost employee energy, morale, and results!  
w/Dr. Bob Nelson**

*And now taking care of business, your hosts Craig Moen and Shye Gilad.*

**[00:08] Craig:** Welcome to Business Owners Radio episode 206. Our guest today is Dr. Bob Nelson. Dr. Bob is the world's leading authority on employee recognition, motivation, and engagement. He has worked with over 80% of the Fortune 500, presenting on six continents, and has sold over 5 million books. Time to open the studio door.

**[00:32] Shye:** Good morning, Dr. Bob, welcome to Business Owners Radio.

**[00:35] Dr. Bob:** Thank you. Good morning to you.

**[00:37] Shye:** Well, Dr. Bob, I have to tell you we've really been looking forward to this conversation, as the world's leading authority on employee recognition, and motivation, and engagement. And now this new book, your latest book *Work Made Fun Gets Done*, tell us what inspired you to write this book.

**[00:53] Dr. Bob:** Well, every author's writing the same book over and over and out of the same kind of the cloth, it's intangible that only books are research based. And we found research that having fun actually does a lot more than just having a laugh. It's very practical at binding people together and having them be excited about the work they're doing.

**[01:13] Shye:** You know, it seems extremely fundamental, right, that if we have a good time, we're gonna enjoy ourselves more.

**[01:20] Dr. Bob:** Like being there, yes.

**[01:23] Shye:** Yeah, exactly, right. And all the benefits that come with that. We get these words *fun* and *work* are a little bit opposed. What is it about that?

**[01:32] Dr. Bob:** Historically, that's been the case, you know, we're paying you to work, have fun in your own time on the weekend. And that's the way it was for quite a long time. But as our personal lives and business lives have merged, for example, I don't know anyone that doesn't do some emails at night or on the weekend. I was just on vacation and I worked. You try not to, but if you don't want to be overwhelmed when you get back, it's good to keep up. And so as our lives have blurred, most employees expect that there'd be more enjoyment, more meaning and purpose in the bulk of the waking hours they're spending on a job. And especially the younger generation, millennials currently make up two-thirds of the workforce, and 59% of them said they expect to

have fun at work. That's part of the definition of millennials, as they view work as college plus a paycheck. So whatever freedom they had in college, they still want to keep but you got to pay him as well. So there's a real blurring of the distinctions.

**[02:35] Shye:** Yeah. And I guess therein lies a lot of opportunity, right? So tell us about, first of all, a little bit about the research, ground us in sort of what your understanding is about fun and how it relates to the workplace.

**[02:48] Dr. Bob:** Well, we looked at the Best Places to Work Institute out of San Francisco, and every year they create the list of 100 best places to work for in America. And as we looked at those variables, one of them is about fun that those companies on the list of employees, 82% say that where they work is a fun place to work. And compared to the companies that apply for that award but don't get it, it's only 62. It's actually the largest differential of any variable that they look at. So it's the biggest thing that we're sure in terms of **if your culture has fun, it's gonna be easier to attract people, to get more from them, and to keep them longer, which in today's job environment, labor is very tight, it's really employees market.** And so it can help give you a huge edge on the strengths in attracting talent, getting more from that talent, and holding on to them longer. **In fact, if you have a culture of recognition, where you're doing fun things, you're acknowledging people, you're celebrating successes of all types, research indicates that your employees will feel five times more likely to feel valued, they'll be six times more likely to refer to the company as a best place to work to friends and acquaintances, and seven times more likely to stay with their employer, and 11 times more committed to their job, their manager and the mission of the organization. So some pretty big returns on an activity that doesn't cost much, if anything, really.**

And what we tried to do in our book, I co-authored it with Mario Tamayo was to say, well, what are the elements of fun we're talking about here? And it was very eye-opening for me, because I think we didn't talk to any two people that had the same definition of fun. You know, if you asked me what's fun is well, when you're laughing, that's fun. You ask my wife, her definition of fun is if I had a good day, and I got a lot done, and I felt feel good about myself, that was a fun day. I'm going, really? And so everyone had a very different definition and there's some people who want to be left alone to do their job, others are more social over the map, the things that they found fun, which is, I think encouraging because it says there's little a lot of it out there, a lot of people wanting to do it. And we can tap into that, and not just do it one way. So you can't be a company that says, "Okay, we're going to do this, we're going to have fun doing it." That that usually doesn't work. You got to have the idea and do that. And if that works, then invite other people to do what they think is fun. It's not fun or work, it's fun and work. So, how can we make the work itself more fun, or how can we celebrate success when we have it? Or for example, in a lot of high tech firms, they work with Agile, and they'll have two

week sprints where they get a certain amount of work done. Well, at the end of that, you review how it went and what learnings you had. But then you should do something fun to celebrate, we've got that a lot of work done. And whether it's a team building or virtual happy hour, it's all over the map.

And what we have in this book, over 400 real life ideas that people are doing right now that are working for them. And part of what you could do, really, is to listen to my books, they're more like resources, you can open the book anywhere and there's a usable idea. If that one doesn't work for you, just turn the page and there'll be another one. It's not prescriptive in terms of doing ABC, it's like you have a conversation. In many ways, that's all we have to work with. And then try something, you know, brainstorm, prioritize, do the top thing, and list those top things that don't require much, if any money.

**[06:25] Craig:** Bob, there's so many things that everyone's tried in our businesses. And looking at multi-generational environments, which is quite a bit of the norm for established businesses, and you mentioned a little bit of the brainstorming, if there are sort of the top five elements of having fun that seem to gel well for most businesses, is there a few that we should start looking at?

**[06:52] Dr. Bob:** Yeah, absolutely. I'd say, have a conversation about the topic. So, the president of Belmont College in Nashville, for example, he took a year off, a sabbatical to look at high performing companies and came back, and the first thing he said was, "Every company I visited was a fun place to work. We need to have more fun here." So he created a fun committee, got some volunteers and kind of charged them with doing stuff. And if they need some budget, they'll let him know. But you can get a long way just by being creative, and looking for opportunities to call out success. Recognition is very close to my heart. It's my doctoral dissertation on the topic of why we thank and praise people and why we don't as leaders. And from that research, I found that the leaders, the top reason why they don't use recognition, the most proven principle of managing performance, by the way, is that they don't feel they know how to do it well. So, that's a short jump to get them to try something. They also didn't believe or know that was the most powerful driver performance. And then they said that they were too busy to do that. So, who has time to do things that we don't think are important to begin with, right? **If people are really your most important asset, and if you don't realize that, you shouldn't be in business, then you got to do things to recognize, energize and have fun along the way with them.** Leading the charge yourself as a leader. And if you're not good at this, then get someone else to do it.

In the book, I've got an example about a CEO who said, "Well, we tried to do a couple, you know, company things each year, and no one seems to really enjoy what we do." And nobody -- what the CEO picked, and he gave it to another executive to do and same results. And finally, they stopped pushing on a rope and he found someone that

wanted to do it, and it was the millennials, younger person. And they used social media tools to brainstorm and prioritize, rank what people wanted, and then schedule what worked best for them. The CEO was picking times that worked for him, he didn't care about other people, or due to his actions being short-sighted, it showed like he didn't care. And they ended up doing like a medieval shows where they do jousting and serve you turkey legs, and everyone loved it. Everyone loved it. And so they have a new format to get there and to have people that are more into it come up with stuff. So that, I think, is a good model.

I was presenting in Seattle to 800 people and this woman looked really familiar in the front row, and I said, "Did we meet before? See, I heard you speak like six weeks ago, and I can tell you what happened." What happened is, she's a manager at a company in downtown Seattle. And I said, well, I left the room saying, "This is real. I'm going to do it. I'm not asking permission of anyone. I'm just going to do it in my work group." And she did similar types of things. I created a happiness committee, has five people on it. No one knows who any of them are, it's anonymous. And any one of those five people could say, "Hey, it's time to do something. Morale is low or we just got a new client or whatever it might be, it's time to do something. Well, I said, "What would you do?" "Well, we had a picnic on top of the roof. That was fun. And we bartered meeting space for the company on the next block that was a limo company so they give us limo rides. We let them meet in our offices once a month." And on and on, it was all very creative, very theme thrifty. And long story short, she got a buzz going in her department and another manager started saying, "Hey, you people are so excited over there. What are you doing?" "Well, come to the next meeting, there's no secrets here." And it got bigger and bigger. And fast forward 18 months later, that company, Perkins Coy, a law firm entered the 100 best place to work for in America at number 23 on the list, I would contend from one person, not the top but in the middle organization, she was a manager of finance department sort of saying, "I'm doing this." So it could be as easy as that. Took some time to rule it out and get it going, but it all starts with a conversation and action.

**[10:54] Craig:** It's so exciting that, Bob, we hear some of these success stories and we also know that people leave because of their management, and people stay because of their coworkers and the environment that they have. And so this just reinforces this. And so it's exciting when it's working.

**[11:12] Dr. Bob:** And I'll say this, if you have a small company, I worked around the globe on this topic and all across America for 25 years. And it seems like everything I work with, they always kind of tend to focus on what they can't do, you know. And for small business, I find they often say, "Well, we don't have the budget to really motivate people," because they're assuming that you've got to pay them more and that's it. And well, more money's nice but that's really not the biggest driver of motivation for employees. Maybe if you've got a lot of student debt or whatever, maybe initially it is.

But after you can pay your bills, your focus quickly turns to are you part of something larger than yourself? Are you proud of your job? Are you excited about your coworkers and what you're doing on a daily basis? Do you feel part of the team? Are you trusted and respected? Are you involved? **Ask people their opinion. That's a pretty cheap motivator, because it shows trust and respect. And involve them in decisions. 89% of employees won't be involved in decisions, especially those that affect them. 92% want to be asked their opinion .95% want fluid two-way communication. So don't just tell them stuff, have a discussion and ask them how you can help them do a better job, they're closer to it than you are.** And if they make mistake, don't prove how smart you are and embarrass them in front of their peers. That's a very short window view of the relationship. Take a breath and say, "You know, I don't think I would have done it the same way." But what do you learn from that? It could be the best investment training we've done all year. I'm glad you made that mistake. Take the long view of the relationship with that individual. They're going to remember that and they're going to cling more tightly to working for you. You could be a magnet for talent, and people are going to think twice about leaving is what I found.

So, instead of focusing on what you can't do, focus on what you can do. And if you're a small business, you got daily visibility with staff are able to see the founder or the president on a daily basis, that's powerful. They're not rule-bound by a 300-page policy manual. You could do a popcorn lunch. Go to the movie together and then take a couple hours in the middle of the day, see a new release as a celebration. **What we've done, the project we just finished, focus on the things that bind you closer together, get to know people better and allow them to get to know each other.** In fact, one fun thing that I advocate now, so many people that are working remotely and on Zoom calls and whatnot, even on a Zoom call you can do stuff. One of my favorite activities is doing a praise barrage, very simply. "Today, before we get into the agenda, I just take a few minutes and go around our group. As I call someone's name, I'd like everyone else to say out loud what they most value about working with that person. Let's start with John. Okay, now, Mary, now Sam." And you take 5, 10 minutes, you go around the group, and what did you just do? Everybody got feedback, positive feedback about how people they work with see them. "John, I just love the fact that you're so eager to dig in and help others even without being asked. You really saved me that several times with that attitude. I really appreciate it." Well, John's going to do more of that going forward. I guarantee it, it's human nature. **Whatever gets recognized gets repeated. So take time to do that.**

A senior fellow at the conference board, we have these long boring meetings. But now before we get going, we go around the group and everyone share their favorite movie, you know, just have a lighter moment/ "Oh, you like mysteries? I like mysteries." And as

you do that, you make connections in the group, and the group becomes bound a little bit more tightly together.

I just saw a technique yesterday that manager was using, that before our meeting he asked people to pick one of the three choices, right now are they in a red mood, yellow mood, or green mood. And the red mood is like while they're kind of in the meeting but they're kind of preoccupied with something at work or personal. And yellow, something's not as serious but still is back of their mind. And green is their fully present. And just give that feedback to the leader so he knows who's got some challenges today and maybe they'll talk more with them after the meeting, maybe before, depending on what's going on.

So it's just another communication loop. If people are working remotely, we don't have the visual clues, we don't have the tone of voice. You're not seeing them how they walk in, and are they excited or not. So, you got to stretch a little bit more for that. **And for a leader today, if you have remote employees, you got to be checking in more often. In fact, when the pandemic started, actually, there was a boost employee engagement. Because a lot of managers, they couldn't just rely on people coming to them, they had to reach out and check with their employees. And the action of doing that made people feel more valued.** And so in the short term, I think we're off pretty quickly. But in the short term, people were, "Manager just checking with me" or "Someone called me from the organization to get certain data from me." They felt valued through the actions of leadership. As leaders are busy themselves, top of the list needs to be this connection with their employees and doing the things that maybe you did when they were in the office physically like one-on-ones to still check in to see what questions they have and thoughts about their career and what's next. **And if you haven't done the skip level meetings, where you have your employees speak to your manager, it's a very smart thing to talk about their career. Those are the hooks that keep people in the organization longer, and if they feel that you're focused on what's next for them and what are you learning and are you excited about your current job.**

I know a CEO in Los Angeles, he routinely asked people. It's a small business, when he sees and meets with them, "Hey, are you excited about your job?" Just a simple question. And usually people say, "Yeah, I really am." And sometimes they'll say, "Well, less so than before. I've kind of dragged down in this minutiae." And whenever that happens, "Well, okay, we're going to talk more about this." Or if they're close, take them out to lunch or something to say -- because realize that if people aren't excited about what they're doing, they already got one foot out the door. It's only a matter of time before they leave. And with the younger generation, they're very high tech so they never got completely in the door. They got one foot in the door when they start and they've got their resume out there. They get pinged if someone reviews it.

Average tenure for millennials, 18 months. If you want them to stay longer than that, you got to talk about a longer timeframe even from the first conversation. A job one is doing a good job, don't get sucked into politics and petty-ism and personality stuff. Focus on doing a good job. And that's going to serve you better than anything else in this company. Because we notice, and I notice, and I want to help you do a good job. And wow, that's who I want to work for. Is that who you want to work for? And it becomes a bond and you'll be a magnet for talent.

[18:07] **Shye:** You know, Bob, it reminds me just thinking about, again, the fundamentals here, right. So you said it earlier about like, are you having fun? And I recall a mentor of mine, dang, that's sort of the **two things you always need to ask yourself is—am I learning anything new and am I having fun?** Every day, if you think about employee satisfaction within that experience, if that was some kind of a scorecard, where are they on that spectrum? It really affects retention and all of these things in so many ways. And you've pointed out to us the real cost of this. I mean, companies that do this are saving a ton of money on recruitment and training. And it's cheaper to get new employees because people are recommending to come work at your company. And that reputation grows and grows and grows.

[18:58] **Dr. Bob:** You have a waiting list.

[18:59] **Shye:** And you have a waiting list. And you have a great alumni group of employees that feel like they had a good time and will have good things to say because they had fun. And we'd like to talk about fun experiences, right?

[19:09] **Dr. Bob:** Yes. You really build the culture where people are connected, they stay connected even beyond the work arrangements. You know, you can get on a important thing there, that **Steve Jobs, every morning, he would look in the mirror and say, "Am I excited about what I have to do today?" And if in too many days in a row the answer was no, he said time to change something.** I think we all can benefit from that advice.

[19:34] **Shye:** Yeah, no doubt, especially in this day where business owners are really struggling to figure out how to get this right, and especially small business owners that have to compete often with larger companies with more benefits, more budget, more things that are harder for us to offer. We also have to compete with the changing workplace and people's ability to effectively go into business for themselves and put together a number of gigs, the side hustles into an actual career or job that they might be having a lot more fun with than coming to work for you. So there really is a sense of urgency, I think, for small business owners to figure this out.

[20:11] **Dr. Bob:** And it could be a competitive advantage for them. Because a lot of larger companies are quick to say, "No, you have to come into the office." And you

know, the CEO of Morgan Stanley said if you can go out to dinner in New York City, you can come to the office in New York City. And so everyone will be in the office.

**[20:29] Shye:** No way. Man, talk about a swing and a miss.

**[20:31] Dr. Bob:** Yeah. Well, I guess if you pay people enough, they'll do whatever you tell them. **But I think it could be a competitive advantage for a small business to have a little bit more flexibility, because that's high on the list for employees today, a little bit more autonomy.** No one wants to go back to work five days a week, you know. Even Apple computers, they announced a few months ago that whenever you come back to work three days a week, and they got huge pushback. What bothered employees most was they said, "We know you're all anxious to get back into the office." And we'll, "Why don't you talk to us first before you say something like that, because we're not all anxious to get back to the office." And so it fell just right there. "Don't tell us what we want. Thank you." So they got a lot of heavy pushed back as a result being more flexible. So it operates around what the employees want.

**My definition of engagement is alignment of personal aspirations with company objectives. Everyone has different aspirations. And the better you can learn what those are and wrap around those, and then still get the work done, that's the golden ticket.** And as a small business, you got greater flexibility to allow that. My son just went to work for 100% virtual company, and wow, I talk to him and it's so exciting, because they have no bricks and mortar anywhere and yet they're not missing a beat, wouldn't have meetings. The presenters, they record themselves on their cell phone and post that. Before the meeting, people are expected to look at that. Before the meeting, they do a quick recap and they focus on questions, much more efficient. And they have an archive of their meetings. And once a week, they connect two people at random in the company to get to know other people. And he lives in Seattle, they've done a couple meet-ups with people that worked for the company in Seattle. So you know, where there's a will, there's a way. They're connecting on the social scene and they all love the work. They don't have to waste two hours commuting. And they also feel that they're using the best of what they have to offer.

**[22:33] Shye:** I just can't help thinking about this global pandemic that also became like this global workplace experiment. And it has just destroyed these stigmas and these old ideas of, oh, well, people have to be together in the office place, you know, and accelerated what was likely to occur in the next 10 or 20 years, might have accelerated it by a decade, this idea of remote work.

**[22:58] Dr. Bob:** I agree completely. I do a program on virtual world. And I before the pandemic, I'd spend like half the program just talking about, this is where it's headed and these are this and why. And then I go, "Okay, we're doing it. Let's learn how to do it better."



**[23:15] Shye:** Yeah. So Dr. Bob, in particular, there's this huge challenge that it's going to have to be figured out pretty quickly with folks that are operating bricks and mortar-based, location-based businesses to compete with that value proposition of essentially almost full autonomy. If you don't figure out how to give people a reason to want to come to your place to work, and you simply do not have the flexibility if it's direct customer service on site, physical delivery, man, you're just going to have a hard time. And we're already hearing this, by the way, across the board, right? We're seeing this play in real time. So, I know you have all of these great suggestions. I mean, this book is like an encyclopedia of great ideas. But if you were one of those folks that really had a bricks and mortar environment and were pretty embedded in that, where would you start?

**[24:06] Dr. Bob:** Well, I would start in the heads of the leaders, because there's this inherent belief, old school management, which means if you're older and maybe you're on top of the organization, there's this inherent belief that if I can't see people, I don't know they're working, honestly. And so you got to address that head on. And then the other thing, I think, is keeping the old model going is like, "We've got a five year lease on this building. We're not just going to be there empty. We're already paying for it." So, you got to get out of the lease, you got to get a smaller portion of it and so take the hit. But the days of spending \$50,000 or however much on a building, they don't make sense.

Even government, I work with GSA, the federal government few years ago, they built a new building in DC, and they intentionally built it so it can only house 60% of their staff. So now on a daily basis, people have to plan the schedule. They could be in the office, they have a whole hotel/inn type thing that you reserve an office, and you got to think through where you need to be and where you can best do your work. There's overwhelming evidence that people who work remotely are more productive, not even counting the commute saving time, but there's less interruptions or less socialization. Some socialization is good, but if you're constantly being interrupted with somebody's baby shower and this and that, and depending on the work you're doing, it's hard to get your head into it and get very far.

It's probably 20 years ago, I've managed a department for a company. We experimented with working from home and had people track their hours. And it showed that they were twice as productive, not even counting the commute time, which is a cost as well, as a time sucker. People are not anxious to go back to a two-hour commute. So it's just some ways common sense, but it was -- Voltaire in the 17th century said that common sense is not very common. I think it holds true on this topic.

**[26:03] Shye:** Definitely holds up. Well, Dr. Bob, we have really enjoyed speaking with you today. So excited about the book, and thank you for coming on the show.

**[26:11] Dr. Bob:** Well, thanks for having me. You guys do a great job. I love your show.

**[26:15] Shye:** Is there anything else you'd like to leave with our listeners?

**[26:17] Dr. Bob:** Well, yes. If I sparked an idea for you, as you indicated, my latest book, actually all my books have the same format. I bring real life examples to the topic I'm talking about. So, whether it's *Work Made Fun Gets Done* or *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*, *1001 Ways to Engage Employees*, etc. all my books are proven real life examples with names and results, and even contact information if you want ask them your stuff what they did, and you can get those wherever books are sold. But you can also get them on my website for discounted prices at drbobnelson.com. And it has an online store, which has all my books. If you have a question, you can email me, Bob@DrBobNelson.com. And if you want to pursue some of these strategies, sometimes people are like, "Well, I like what you're saying. Can you help us do it?" Yeah, I can. That's the bulk of my life and career is helping companies do this. So give me a call 858-673-0690, and we'd love to help you any way I can.

**[27:23] Craig:** Our guest today has been Dr. Bob Nelson, world's leading authority on employee recognition, motivation, and engagement. He is president of Nelson Motivation Inc., a management training and consulting company specializing in helping organizations improve management practices, programs, and systems. You can learn more about Dr. Bob, as well as find links to his resources and books on our website at businessownersradio.com.

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