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Talking about Cultures of Joy...

Reflections from Litha Magida and Vanessa von der Heyde

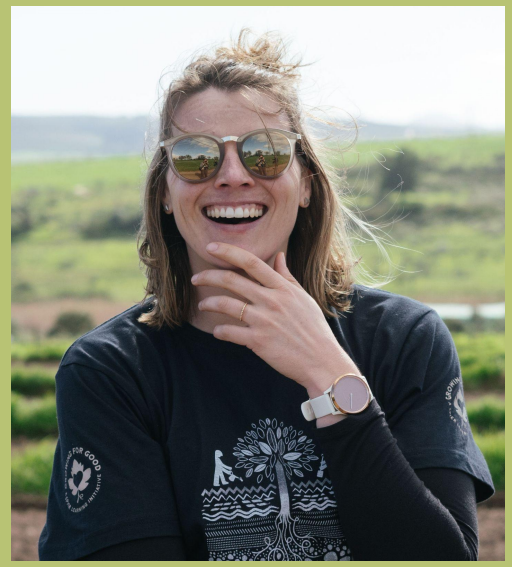
We look at what nourishing a culture of joy means in the work environment, and what enables this to emerge at the SI.

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Litha Magida is the Operations Officer at the Sustainability Institute. He oversees the human resources portfolio, the gardens and grounds teams, as well as contractual and governance related matters of the SI, leading with fairness, patience and care.



Vanessa von der Heyde is the Director of the Sustainability Institute. Her leadership style is characterised by her passion for learning and change, fairness and transparency, consistency, and striving for excellence.



Joy in the workplace

What do you mean by “joy” in the workplace - how is it different from happiness, satisfaction, or engagement?

Litha: At the SI, joy in the workplace is one of our values. In South Africa we know this as “Gees”, or spirited which relates to being energised and knowing your contribution is serving a purpose.

A person experiences joy when they understand that the work they do matters, that their contributions are valued, and most importantly that the environment supports growth, creativity and human connection. Joy speaks to being deeply connected to the work and the people who are contributing to it.

At the SI we do not only look at productivity but also how we support employees emotionally.

Vanessa: For me, a culture of joy is something you experience in the everyday life of an organisation, not only something written into its values.

One of the ways we have experienced this is through Ilima. When we do Ilima together, there is a moment in which we are not relating to one another only through our positions or responsibilities. We are participating together, and connecting as human beings. It changes the energy between people.

We focus on creating opportunities to eat together. This is different from simply ordering pizzas into an office. The place matters, the way we gather matters and the food matters. There is an intention to nourish people and create time in which they can slow down and encounter one another beyond the immediate demands of work.

We also dance together at random moments and completely spontaneously. These moments may appear small or even frivolous from the outside, but they allow people to be playful, embodied and slightly less self-conscious together. They remind us that we are more than the functions we perform.

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The absence of joy

Why is joy often absent from professional environments, and what has normalised that absence?

Litha: The biggest challenge with joy being absent from professional environments is that these environments are designed to only focus on efficiency, control and productivity.

Human well-being is not a high priority and the absence of joy has been normalised because many organisations measure their success through output, performance metrics, deadlines, and profit.

Vanessa: I think many of us have inherited quite a narrow idea of what professionalism looks like. We associate it with seriousness, emotional restraint, constant productivity and having everything under control.

Playfulness, warmth, rest and emotion can be seen as somehow less professional, even though they are part of being human. There is also this idea that if the work is important, particularly in the non-profit sector, we should be willing to keep giving no matter what it costs us.

Busyness becomes proof that we are committed, and exhaustion almost becomes a badge of honour.

When organisations are under financial pressure or responding to very serious social and environmental challenges, joy can even begin to feel inappropriate or indulgent. Joy does not make the work less important. It may actually help us remain connected to why the work matters in the first place.

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Joy is a strategic necessity

Is joy a “nice-to-have,” or a strategic necessity for organisations today?

Litha: It’s definitely not a “nice-to-have” in the workplace and I consider it a strategic necessity for the organisation.

Organisations should promote talent, innovation, creativity, adaptability and long-term resilience.

This focus will enable joy which will translate to employees that are motivated, creative, collaborative and committed.

Vanessa: I would say it is a strategic necessity, but not simply because joyful people might be more productive. If we only value joy because it helps us get more out of people, then we are still working within an extractive way of thinking.

What if qualities such as joy, hope, agency, imagination and ukama might be understood as signs of the “health of a watershed” (or eco-system). You do not manufacture these qualities one by one. They begin to emerge when the wider system is healthy and the conditions support life.

I think the same is true in an organisation. When we see joy, it may be telling us something important about the culture around it: that people feel safe enough to participate, connected enough to care, and free enough to imagine and create. When joy is consistently absent, that may also be telling us something about the health of the system.

This is particularly important for an organisation working towards just and regenerative futures. We cannot only focus on what our programmes produce. We also need to pay attention to the conditions we are creating for our staff and for the children, young people and adults who learn with us. Are people becoming more alive, connected, hopeful and able to act? If not, we may unintentionally be reproducing the same depleted or dehumanising systems we say we want to change.

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When joy is absent

What have you observed or experienced in workplaces where joy was present—or clearly missing?

Litha: Where joy was present people are eager to ask questions, do not fear to make or admit mistakes and are willing to share ideas with no fear of embarrassment or punishment.

Where joy was missing, people are not willing to communicate, things seem tense and employees feel they're micromanaged or undervalued. There is a fear of failure which does not promote innovation and honest feedback.

Vanessa: For me, you can almost feel the difference when you walk into a workplace. Where there is joy, there is an ease between people. There is laughter, openness and people ask questions, share half-formed ideas, admit when they do not know something and help one another without everything feeling transactional.

Where joy is absent, people tend to become more guarded. They may still do their work well, but there is less generosity and spontaneity. People protect themselves, ideas stop flowing and even small interactions can feel tense. It is not necessarily about whether people are smiling. It is more about whether there is life moving through the organisation.

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Conditions that allow joy to flow

When have you personally felt most alive, energised, or purposeful at work? What conditions made that possible?

Litha: Realising that I'm contributing towards something meaningful has made me feel alive, energised and purposeful at work.

Conditions such as a clear purpose and goals, trust and teamwork help opportunities to emerge, encourage positive feedback and a positive culture all of which help me to feel alive and energised.

Vanessa: I feel most alive at work when I am making connections between ideas, people and possibilities, particularly when something that previously felt fragmented begins to make sense. I also feel energised when I am learning with others and when we are creating something that none of us could have developed alone. Joy tends to disappear for me when every moment is consumed by urgency and there is no room left for imagination.

Some of the moments when I have felt most alive at work have had very little to do with completing a task. They have been moments when we have danced, laughed or eaten together. There is something about seeing colleagues step outside their usual roles and relate to one another differently that restores energy and reminds me that an organisation is, before anything else, a group of human beings.

"An organisation is, before anything else, a group of human beings."



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Tensions

What tensions exist between productivity, professionalism, and joy?

Litha: The tension between productivity, professionalism and joy is at times caused by the fact that workplaces often prioritise efficiency and results over human connection and well-being.

Vanessa: The tension arises when we assume that productivity and joy are competing priorities. We can begin to think that time spent connecting, reflecting or enjoying one another is time taken away from the work. So much of our work depends on relationships, creativity and collective thinking. Those things cannot always be rushed or measured immediately. Sometimes the conversation that appears least productive creates the trust or insight that makes everything else possible.

The tension is real because organisations still have deadlines, responsibilities and difficult decisions. A culture of joy is not a culture without accountability. The question is whether accountability has to depend on fear and pressure, or whether people can be responsible and rigorous while also working with warmth, trust and humanity.

"Tension arises when we assume that productivity and joy are competing priorities. A culture of joy is not a culture without accountability."



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Challenging myths

What myths about work culture might be preventing joy?

Litha: There might be several myths about work culture that could prevent joy. These could be things like to be productive you should be seen to be constantly busy and work and personal well-being should be kept separately.

There is also a misconception that joy reduces discipline or accountability and that leadership must rely on pressure, or control to achieve results.

Should success require sacrifice at all costs, and stress, exhaustion and burnout become signs of dedication?

Vanessa: One myth I have had to question is that serious work requires a serious posture. Because our work responds to inequality and ecological crisis, it can feel as though lightness or delight somehow diminishes the gravity of what we are dealing with. But I am not sure we can imagine a different future if we cannot experience some of it in the present.

Another myth is that professionalism requires us to separate who we are from what we do. Of course boundaries matter, but people do not stop being human when they arrive at work. We bring our histories, emotions, relationships, cultures and hopes with us.

Expecting people to leave all of that at the door does not make a workplace more professional. It often just makes it less honest.

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Hustle culture

How has hustle culture or burnout culture shaped our expectations of work?

Litha: Hustle culture which is essentially burnout culture has promoted an idea that if one is constantly productive, working long hours and becoming exhausted is a sign that the individual has ambition and success.

Vanessa: It has taught us to confuse being busy with being useful. We fill our days, respond quickly and keep moving, but do not always stop to ask whether our activity is taking us where we actually want to go. When there is always more to do, rest can feel irresponsible and joy can feel like something to earn once the work is finished.

But in our kind of work, the work is never finished. If joy, reflection and connection are always postponed, eventually they disappear altogether.

"We do not always stop to ask whether our activity is taking us where we actually want to go."



Joy requires intent

Are organisations unintentionally designing systems that suppress joy?

Litha: It's possible that many organisations unintentionally design systems that suppress joy, because most prioritise productivity, control, and measurable outcomes without necessarily giving attention to human well-being and connection.

Vanessa: Yes, and I think this often happens despite very good intentions. An organisation may say that it values creativity and initiative while designing approval processes that leave people with very little agency. It may value well-being while rewarding those who work beyond their capacity. It may speak about collaboration while structuring people into silos.

This is why culture cannot only be expressed through values on a wall. We have to look honestly at what our systems reward, what our leaders model and what people experience every day.

Often the absence of joy is not about individual attitude. It is a response to the conditions people are working within.

"We have to look honestly at what our systems reward, what our leaders model and what people experience every day."



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Find the article here:

Nourishing cultures of joy, part 1

In Part 2, we'll explore further what nourishes a culture of joy by exploring practical applications for a healthy ecosystem.

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