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Talking about Cultures of Joy...part 2

Reflections from Vanessa von der Heyde

We continue the discussion, sharing practical ways of bringing joy into the every day of an organisational environment.

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Inviting more joy

What are small, tangible shifts organisations can make to invite more joy?

One of the simplest things is to notice and make visible what is life-giving. We are often very good at discussing what is wrong, late or unfinished, but less intentional about recognising growth, contribution and moments of genuine connection.

- Organisations can create more space for people to talk to one another without every conversation being driven by an agenda.
- Leaders can ask what is energising people as well as what is draining them.
- Teams can celebrate progress before immediately moving to the next task.
- People can also be given more freedom to shape how they do their work.

These may sound like small things, but repeated experiences become culture.

We sometimes imagine that creating joy requires a large initiative or organised team-building event. But many of the most joyful moments I have experienced at the SI have been quite simple: eating together under a tree, doing Ilima, being called together to dance or practising a flash mob.

What makes these moments meaningful is not only the activity itself. It is the intention and quality of attention around it. Sharing thoughtfully prepared food in a beautiful place, for example, feels different from eating a takeaway while continuing to work. It says that nourishment, place and connection matter.

Perhaps the small shift is to create moments in which people are not expected to produce anything. They can simply participate, connect and enjoy being together. These moments do not have to be expensive or highly organised. Sometimes joy comes from allowing a little more spontaneity into the working day.

"Sometimes joy comes from allowing a little more spontaneity into the working day."



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Contribution creates joy

What role does meaning, creativity, or autonomy play in cultivating joy?

They are central.

- Meaning connects us to why the work matters.
- Creativity allows us to imagine and make something that did not exist before.
- Autonomy gives us a sense that we are participants in the work rather than simply carrying out someone else's instructions.

At the SI, imagination and agency are particularly important because we are working towards futures that cannot simply be planned using the thinking and systems that created our current challenges.

People need opportunities to experiment, question and contribute. Joy often appears when someone recognises that they are not powerless and that they can help shape what comes next.

"People need opportunities to experiment, question and contribute."

Co-creation creates joy

How can teams co-create cultures of joy rather than having it imposed top-down?

Perhaps the first step is to ask people what joy actually means to them.

We cannot assume that everyone experiences or expresses it in the same way. For one person it may be laughter and collective energy. For another it may be quiet, focus, beauty, movement, learning or feeling deeply connected to a purpose.

Leaders can help create the conditions, but they cannot prescribe the experience. Teams need opportunities to identify what gives them energy, what depletes them and what practices they want to build together.

Co-creation also means that people must have some real influence. Asking for input without allowing it to shape anything is unlikely to create either trust or joy.

"Leaders can help create the conditions, but they cannot prescribe the experience."

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On exploring the broader impact of nourishing cultures of joy...

Healthier conditions

What might change in society if workplaces prioritised joy alongside performance?

Workplaces shape far more than what gets produced during working hours. They shape how people see themselves, how they relate to others, how much energy they have for their families and communities, and what they come to believe is normal.

If workplaces cultivated dignity, connection, agency and joy alongside performance, perhaps more of those qualities would flow out into the wider world.

This is part of how I understand creating just and regenerative futures. We are not only trying to produce different outcomes. We are trying to create healthier conditions from which different ways of living and relating can emerge.

"We are trying to create healthier conditions from which different ways of living and relating can emerge."

Opens up possibilities

How does joy connect to innovation, resilience, and long-term impact?

Joy opens something in people. It creates the energy to be curious, to make connections and to imagine that something different might be possible. That matters for innovation, especially when we are dealing with complex problems for which there is no ready-made solution.

It also matters for resilience, although I would be careful not to use resilience as another way of asking people to tolerate unhealthy conditions. Real resilience is not simply the ability to keep going. It is the capacity of people and systems to adapt, learn, repair and remain alive.

Long-term impact depends on that aliveness. If our work produces impressive short-term results while depleting the people doing it, I do not think we can call it regenerative.

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Recognise value beyond output

Could joy be a quiet form of resistance against extractive or dehumanising systems?

Yes, I think it can. Extractive systems reduce people to what they can produce and encourage us to treat time, attention, relationships and even ourselves as resources to be used.

Joy interrupts that logic. It reminds us that being alive has value beyond productivity. Making space for connection, beauty, play, rest and collective imagination can be a way of refusing the idea that our worth is determined only by our output.

But this cannot be reduced to telling individuals to find joy within damaging systems. The deeper resistance lies in changing the conditions that are causing depletion and creating spaces in which more people can flourish.

"Joy reminds us that being alive has value beyond productivity."



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In closing

What do you want readers to walk away with?

Ask yourself: Are the wider conditions supporting life?

When we see joy among our staff, learners, young people and other participants, it tells us something about the ecosystem we are creating together. People may be feeling safe enough to participate, connected enough to care and free enough to imagine and act.

If we want to contribute to just and regenerative futures, we need to pay attention not only to what we produce, but to what becomes possible in the environments we create. Joy is not proof that everything is healthy, but its presence or absence is something worth taking seriously.

Perhaps our moments of eating, doing ilima and dancing together are small signs of life within the wider organisational watershed. They do not tell us that everything in the system is healthy, and they should never prevent us from noticing where people are struggling. But they show us something about what becomes possible when people have space to connect, participate and be fully human together.

The question is how we protect and deepen those conditions, not only for our staff but also for the learners, young people and adults who participate in our work. If we are serious about just and regenerative futures, then people should be able to experience some sense of those futures in the present. Joy may be one of the ways we recognise that possibility becoming real.

"We need to pay attention not only to what we produce, but to what becomes possible in the environments we create."



Find the article here:

Nourishing cultures of joy, Part 2

Read Part 1 here, where we looked at what is meant by joy in the workplace, and what is needed to authentically nourish joy as an essential part of an organisation's culture.

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