

Sparking Joy at Work with Ingrid Fetell Lee (Transcript)

Chris Congdon: Take a look around you right now, unless of course you're in the car, but just notice if there's anything in your surroundings that just make you smile a little bit. Because our guest today would argue that there's a distinct connection between our surroundings and our wellbeing and our mental health. In fact, she would even suggest that there are times when we can find joy in our physical environment, even if we're not feeling happy. Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host, Chris Congdon, and I'm here with our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Rebecca Charbauski: Hi Chris.

CC: Hi Rebecca. So for people who don't know Ingrid and her background, can you tell us about what made you seek her out and what made you think that she'd be a really interesting person to talk to?

RC: Well, so many people suggested that we talk to Ingrid Fetell Lee. We had to go find her. She is a designer and an author. She served as design director at IDEO and she wrote the book, *Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness*. She also has a website called *The Aesthetics of Joy*, where she preaches about the power of the environment to make us feel good. And if you haven't seen her Ted Talk, you are one of the few because it's been viewed 17 million times.

CC: Yeah, and spoiler alert, she actually mentioned that she's working on a new book and that makes me smile.

RC: Yes, absolutely. And if people enjoy listening to this episode with Ingrid, we hope they'll pass on the joy to a friend or a colleague and share it.

CC: Ingrid's joining us today from our home in New York City. Welcome to Work Better. Ingrid, I am really happy that you are here today.

Ingrid Fetell Lee: Oh, I'm thrilled to be with you. Thanks for having me.

CC: Well, thank you. And actually, I was thinking about our conversation this morning when I was making my tea because my teapot makes me smile and it was a gift from my daughter and it's green and it's my favorite color, but on the spout, on the cap, it says *Whistle while you work*. And it always serves to remind me of that scene in *Snow White* where she's happily cleaning up after the seven Dwarves and she's finding a little moment of joy even in a fairly mundane task. But it feels like we're in this time right now where there are a lot of people who maybe aren't feeling like whistling in their work or maybe they're just really struggling with this idea of joy and work even being in the same sentence. And I'd love to hear what you think about that. What's your point of view as kind of an expert in joy?

IFL: Well, I think that there is a bifurcation in the workforce. So I think what I'm seeing is you have people who are feeling more empowered in their workplaces. Those are people who tend to have specialized skills and they realize that they can go somewhere else and get a similar job elsewhere, and they're feeling more empowered to set better boundaries to kind of demand joy and demand to be treated better in the workplace. And those people, I think, are seeing much better balance. And I have a lot of people in my community who will say, my balance is much better than before because my employer needs me, and if I want to leave, I can just leave. And then I think we see people who are in jobs like teaching nursing, who we would probably class as essential workers, but aren't exactly treated that way by their employers.

They've had their pay cut, they've had their hours increased, they're burned out from the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. And I think a lot of those people are feeling like their balance has gotten way worse, and joy is extremely hard to find in those professions, and we're actually seeing a lot of people leaving those professions because it's so hard to find joy at work. So the upshot of both of those sides is that I think on both sides, people are understanding that joy should be more of a part of their work. And if they're not finding it, they're realizing that that's a problem as opposed to just the way things are.

CC: Yeah, I think what you're saying is so important, and we're actually seeing that it's a pretty broad group of people, certainly like essential workers, but just people who are individual contributors at work having a lot of issues with their work life balance dropping and struggling with mental health issues. And I think one thing that would help us is you've made a really important distinction between joy and happiness. Could you talk us through that a little bit, just so people understand when we're talking about joy, what do we mean?

IFL: I think this is a really helpful distinction, especially when it comes to work. So when we talk about happiness, happiness is a broad evaluation of how you feel about your life over time. It has to do with whether you have a sense of meaning and purpose in life, how connected you feel to other people, of course, how you feel about your work and your health. All of those things go into this complex equation that we call happiness. And sometimes it can be hard to know if you're happy in a given moment, something at home is bothering you, but work is going really great. And so it's hard to know how happy you are, but joy is much simpler and more immediate. So when psychologists use the word joy, what they mean is an intense momentary experience of positive emotion. And this is something that makes us smile and laugh and feel like we want to jump up and down and we feel it not just in our minds, but in our bodies as well. It's a visceral feeling, and so of happiness is how good we feel over time. Joy is about how we feel right now in the moment. And to me, this is really powerful because you can find moments of joy even when you're not happy. So life can be hard. We can be going through a difficult time, and yet you can still find these small moments of joy.

CC: I love that so much because I think it just gives me hope to think about it in that way that we can find these ways to spark joy. So I want to get into that a little bit because you also make a really important distinction in something that I had never really thought about before, but the term aesthetics. I've tended to think about aesthetics as being maybe a little bit more decorative. I don't want to say superficial, but there's the really high performance functioning things in our lives that are important and that aesthetics are kind of nice. But you argue otherwise that aesthetics play a much more important role, particularly in our mental health. Can you tell us more about that, Ingrid?

IFL: Well, you're exactly right. That is the sort of standard connotation of aesthetics, that they are about beauty, that they're about art, but the origin of the word aesthetics comes from the Greek *aisthē*, which means I feel, I sense I perceive. So aesthetics are really information that comes in through our senses. And I think that many of us discount that information, that those experiences, those sensorial experiences in our day-to-day wellbeing. But in fact, they can be really important. They can influence us on an unconscious level. They can energize us, they can calm us. And I think when you look at the modern work environment, the modern work environment was designed based on a model of productivity that really looks at humans almost like we're machines, right? How many units of X work can we complete and y time? And how do we squeeze the most productivity out of it?

It's almost as if we are on an assembly line and we're trying to just squeeze more productivity out of us. But the reality is that we now understand that it's not linear in that way and that actually human attention is not something that you can just force and direct, but that our attention increases and decreases. So for example, nature, exposure to nature can restore our attention, restore our ability to concentrate. So having plants in your workspace can sort of help with that because otherwise our attention gets depleted and over time we wear out and we're unable to focus. And so if we just put ourselves in a blank room, we sort of lose out on a lot of the benefits that these aesthetics have for our wellbeing, for our productivity, our creativity, and so on.

CC: I would love to just go a little deeper into that one because you've had some really pragmatic tips, if you will, about how to infuse aesthetics and little bits of joy into our day. I know Rebecca, our producer still organizes her bookshelves, they're color coded.

IFL: That's something I do too.

CC: Another way for the designers who are listening today, could you talk a little bit about what are some more of those kinds of things that we should be thinking about in terms of shapes and textures and materiality, et cetera?

IFL: Well, let's start with just the basic idea of bringing more sensory stimulation into the work environment. So one of my favorite studies on this, researchers took people and they put them into what they call lean work environments, which is your standard beige gray cubicle. And then they put them into enriched environments, which are environments that have art and plants and color. And what they found is that people are 15% more productive in an enriched workspace. So just starting with plants is having some more stimulation rather than seeing that as a distraction, understanding that that can really actually help people focus. And then what I think is so interesting about this study is that when they let people choose which are and which plants and have some control over their workspace, that number doubled more than doubled to 32%. So people were 32% more productive in what they call an empowered enriched workspace where people have some control over their surroundings.

So I think those things are a baseline, give people some sense of being able to choose and bringing in color art and plants. I also think that round shapes can be particularly joyful. We work in these cubicles literally in boxes and bringing in round shapes, round shapes have been shown to be a shape that is both calming and joyful. We know that when people look at round shapes in an fMRI machine that a part of their brain called the amygdala is not reactive. When we look at angles, that part of the brain is reactive, suggesting we feel a sense of fear or anxiety. So we're more on edge in angular environments. So bringing in some curves can sort of help calm that baseline level of the nervous system. Also, I mentioned plants. I think plants are beneficial for many reasons and have been shown to influence creativity, generosity, as well as restoring attention and ability to focus.

CC: Yeah, I love that. For years I've had this issue with rectangular shaped tables, and I know that probably seems like a really weird thing to focus on, but rectangles are so popular, not to me, me. Yeah, thank you. But they're pragmatic because rectangular tables fit in rectangular spaces. But I always feel like not only do they make it hard to see everybody at the table because it messes with sight lines, but exactly what you're describing, those really kind of sharp edges. And that feeling sometimes I think doesn't always make the room feel as inviting as it might if we looked at just some simple changes. So I'd like to hear a little bit more about some of the thinking that you've been doing about different types of happiness. And I know you've talked about this idea of this short-term happiness versus something that's maybe longer. Like hedonism, I know is a term that just feels like there's something wrong with it, but I think you argue otherwise, and I had love to hear your thoughts on that one.

IFL: Well, I think in the positive psychology world for a long time now, there's been this movement toward eudemonia. Eudemonia is this concept of a kind of elevated happiness that comes from service to others and meaning and purpose. And there's been sort of a tendency to diminish the importance of hedonia, the alternative, which is these fleeting moments of pleasure and joy and joy can straddle both. But I think that often these transient moments may not have a purpose, but they're enjoyable and they restore our wellbeing. I think we tend to have a suspicion about pleasure, especially in Americans or puritanical culture. We're suspicious of pleasure. We tend to see it as a little bit less morally good than eudemonia. And so I think we've had this idea of happiness that is very tilted toward this idea of meaning and service. What has happened, I think, is that employers have co-opted that to make people feel that their job is their purpose, their job is their source of meaning.

And that has sort of over-indexed our attention and our effort in our daily lives toward our work because we see it as our calling, as our source of meaning and purpose, when in fact there are many different sources of meaning and purpose, and there are many different sources of joy. And so you could find yourself stuck in a job that is really not pleasurable, but might be very meaningful and feel like you're doing something so important, so you should be happy. And so I think that what we're seeing now, especially as a result of the increasing intensity of the climate crisis, the pandemic, this sense that there are once in a generation events that seem to happen every year, this sense of uncertainty that we're all feeling, where I think people are tilting back toward hedonia and back toward these fleeting moments of joy and saying, you know what? I don't want to wait for happiness and I can find meaning in other things outside of my work. And really reshifting the balance back toward small moments of pleasure and joy.

CC: Well, even within work, you're reminding me of Snow White. There are some times where you can find a little fleeting joy in a mundane task, but it does take some thought to make that happen. And so I'm curious, do you think people that they need to seek joy, is it my responsibility as a human being to say, well, I've got to find joy in whatever circumstance I find myself in, or is joy something that is derived really from an external environment as much as it is from kind of internal motivation?

IFL: I think that internal and the external are always in dialogue when it comes to are people responsible for seeking joy? The way that I tend to think about it is we all have the ability to create joy. I think that many of us grow up with this idea that joy is this thing that is a little bit like luck. We find it if we're lucky enough to find it, and we savor it when it comes to us, but we can't really do anything about it. And the mindset shift that as a designer I'd like to make for people is that you have the opportunity to create joy for yourself and for those around you, and it's not that hard to do. And so it might be as simple as starting with a brightly colored coffee mug, bringing more color into your work environment one little bit at a time, bringing it into your home.

And every time you create something in your physical surroundings that brings you joy, every time you add joy to your space, that's a repeatable moment of joy that you get to experience. I think many people are familiar with this idea of hedonic adaptation, that we get used to things in our surroundings and we get used to the pleasure they bring, but some things seem to bring a repeatable kind of joy, and that brightly colored coffee mug for many people is one of them. So if you can hone in on what are those joyful things for you and do them in a repeatable way, for me, it's my brightly colored nails. I paint my nails in rainbow colors and that when I'm sitting at my keyboard, that brings me a feeling of joy, and that is a repeatable joy that I get over and over and over again. I've been doing it for more than five years now, and it never seems to get old. So looking for those things, I think can be a way to find more joy in your surroundings by participating in the creation of it.

CC: I love that you're also reminding me of my green teapot that brings me joy if I'm not rushing too much that I don't bother to look at it. I also want to ask a little bit, thinking from a design perspective that joy is, it is very personal. And when you think about aesthetics, I mean some people might love maximalism or others love minimalism. What advice or wisdom would you offer to a designer who's thinking about a workplace that's shared by very diverse groups of people who have different perspectives and maybe different things would trigger joy?

IFL: Right. So when I came up with the idea of these 10 aesthetics of joy, the idea wasn't of course that you would use all of them at the same time, but that each aesthetic of joy is appropriate in a different context and based on the needs of the people in it. I would be thinking often when companies think about, or designers think about a workplace brand becomes a big topic because they're thinking about the company and its brand and its personality. And I think personality is interesting, but brand in a space that people are working in doesn't necessarily need to be focused on communicating the brand. And I think it's more important to be focused on creating a space that helps people do the kind of work that they're going to do in the space. And so if you are creating a space, for example, where people need to do a lot of visionary strategic thinking than I would be thinking about an aesthetic called the transcendental aesthetic, which is all about zooming out, getting a sense of perspective and elevation that might include really light, airy furnishings that might include aerial views and sort of zoomed out perspectives.

If I'm thinking about a space where people need to be creative and playful, then I might be thinking about adding a lot of those rounded shapes. So it doesn't mean that everything has to be bright, intense colors. I think you can create a canvas that is really focused on helping people do the kind of work that they want to do and feel comfortable and feel comfort, a sense of ease in the space, and then bring joy in through small touches so that it's not overwhelming.

CC: I think that's really helpful. Another thing I would love to get your take on, there's been a lot of conversations in the business circles about where organizations are choosing to locate their offices, and specifically this term flight to quality like trends of organizations moving away from maybe less desirable real estate into better properties, nicer properties. It feels to me like it's not just about the location, but also aesthetics as a role to play there as well. And I'm just curious what your take is on, what's the motivation behind that? What do you see happening?

IFL: I don't know that I've witnessed that trend firsthand. I'm not necessarily plugged into the trends in how employers are choosing offices, but I would say that there are certainly aesthetic considerations that could make for greater wellbeing should employers decide that they want to prioritize certain features in their offices. For example, I think natural light would be a really important one. And if we're seeing employers shift to offices that have more of that, then that would be, I think, a really positive development because we know that, for example, more natural light influences how much employees sleep at night, how much you sleep at night is actually influenced by how much daylight you're getting at your office, and that's controlled by your employer. So decisions like that could make a really big difference to employee wellbeing just by thinking about the physical plant and the location.

CC: Yeah, no, that's great. That's a really helpful perspective on that one. I'm just wondering if you had just general overall advice that you would offer up to people who are thinking about the workplace and what we should be doing differently if we want to help spark more moments of joy, what would be kind of your overall wisdom on that one? Ingrid?

IFL: What I would say is that joy happens in moments. And so if it feels overwhelming to try to think about how to create joy, focus on small moments. I call them micro moments, just think about what is one micro moment you can create for your team or for your office that doesn't have to be huge and high stakes and a big investment, but start small and think about those small moments because those small moments really do start to add up. And they are often a site where employees start to understand that their employer cares about them. It's not always through these big things, but it's in small yet frequent changes and these moments of joy. Instead of thinking about the office as a place full of stuff, start thinking about the office as a series of moments where things happen and look for how to turn a few more of those moments into joyful ones.

CC: I love that. That is so helpful. Before I let you go, I would love to know about a moment of joy that you've experienced within your work. Did you ever have this moment where you felt like jumping up and down or,

IFL: It's funny. I was trying to think about a specific one, but when I was researching my book Joyful, there were so many moments where I would discover something that either the research was so clear and no one was talking about it, or it was a story that was just a perfect illustration of something that I wanted to express, and I would get this rush where I just would feel so excited and I just couldn't wait to share it. It almost felt like the timeline of the book was just way too long to have to wait to get that out. But those are always some of my biggest moments of joy. And I'm actually working on a new book now, and I've had some of those same moments of joy where I just can't believe some of the things that I'm researching and I can't wait to share them. So that's usually where my joy comes from.

CC: Well, I can't wait to read them, so I'm excited to hear about that. Ingrid, it has just been such a pleasure. You've given me a little spark of joy today, just having the opportunity to talk to you. So thanks for being with us today.

IFL: It was a delight. Thank you.