

# Fun Is Good Chapter 1

## What Is Your Passion?

Where do your passions lie? What brings you joy? Consider for a moment where you are at this stage of your life. If during your childhood years you had received a visit from the Ghost of Christmas Future and were able to see where you are right now, how would you have felt?

I bet you might have been at least a little disappointed. (I know I was for a long time.) You probably would not have liked the idea of toiling through your workdays the way you are now. Maybe you ended up exactly where you'd hoped, only to have it not live up to expectations. Either way, you're now wondering where the joy in your life went, at least professionally.

If you're at a point in your career where you're able and willing to make a drastic change, consider using Fun Is Good as your starting point. What would bring you professional happiness? Could you parlay a hobby or leisure interest into a career?

Most of us take the wrong approach to our career. We look at what's out there, and then try to fit ourselves to a role. Shouldn't it be the other way around? We ought to examine what brings us

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joy, and then find the role where we can best put those passions to work.

I understand that some people have financial responsibilities that make a midlife career change difficult. For you, we'll talk at length about how you can introduce Fun Is Good to any workplace, no matter how seemingly miserable.

Passion is the motivation that drives us to be creative, productive, and efficient at work. Passion keeps us going and helps us accomplish goals and overcome the most difficult challenges.

You might find this hard to believe, but it's possible to combine passion with everyday work. We should all be striving to do that. When we're able to incorporate passion into our work, the benefits are immense. Admittedly, it can be challenging. When faced with a lot of responsibilities and not much time, we can lose focus. By concentrating on more menial tasks, we lose energy, enthusiasm, and sight of the overall vision.

Passion does *not* mean being a workaholic or forcing yourself to enjoy some of the tedious elements of your responsibilities. But with passion, we are better able to understand the big picture and the purpose of these everyday tasks. Having passion enables us to enjoy our work in alignment with our values.

If you're someone still trying to find your way, let your passions serve as your guide. Look for environments where people are having fun. When I hire people, I seek out passionate folks with an array of interests, no matter how eclectic. If I need an accountant, for instance, I don't look for just someone with the proper credentials. I go in search of an experienced accountant with other interests, someone I know might not only be fun to be around but perhaps have nonaccounting skills that might be valuable. Perhaps this person is a fly-fisherman or guitar player. That kind of focus and creativity manifests itself in the workplace.

We've forgotten how important people are. Businesses tend to think it's the product or the technology that's most important, but it's really the people.

It's always the people.

When I conduct interviews, I look for passion, and I can tell within 2 minutes if a person has it. Résumés mean little in our organization. Someone with the most impressive background won't fit if he or she doesn't have passion. At the same time, someone with a modest résumé might be a perfect fit.

I run minor league baseball teams. We're not especially significant in society or even in the world of sports. As an employer, I offer long hours and modest pay, yet I have the pick of the litter when it comes to hiring people.

The reason is that I can offer a precious commodity rarely found in business: laughter. People want to work for us. If you can't make your organization fun, you're going to struggle to attract and retain quality employees unless you can offer large salaries and extensive benefits (and those pale in time). People love working in a relaxed environment and having a job that leaves them smiling.

I was disappointed to see the Internet bubble burst because it was a time people seemed to be having fun in the workplace. Maybe most of them were chasing unrealistic dreams, but that's okay. They had a vision and pursued it with passion. It was a time when ideas were valued, and even though people worked ridiculously long hours, they were having a great time.

When the boom ended, the traditional brick-and-mortar executives smirked at the dressed-down Internet wannabes with the casual offices and Ping-Pong tables in the conference rooms. Yep, the market proved that it was no way to run a business.

Actually, the downturn merely proved that they needed sounder business plans and that the market for Internet commerce wasn't as strong as had once been thought. There was nothing wrong with the Fun Is Good attitude.

I admire the people who took the risk of joining Internet companies. Sure, maybe some of them got what they deserved by

hungrily following stock options, but most of them wanted just to be part of something special.

We hear from these people all the time. They're immensely talented but feel disenfranchised from the corporate world. These are the people who will lead you to the money.

Most middle managers hire people who are not as smart or experienced as they are. After all, they don't want anyone to take their jobs.

We take the opposite approach. We hire people who ultimately can take our jobs, who have the smarts and the passion but just need the experience. I've always been fascinated by the Kennedy White House. Even if you're not a fan of JFK, you have to concede that he was a master of assembling talent. He wasn't afraid to hire people intellectually and artistically more gifted. As a result, he ended up with a cabinet that was a combination of these great talents. It was a group of supremely passionate people that contributed to this perception of the White House as Camelot.

Most of us allow life to beat us up and then down. We fall into routines, especially at work, and over time we sleepwalk through much of our lives, especially at work. It's time to shake ourselves out of this mediocre existence.

Let's begin with a trip down memory lane. When you were growing up, what made you happy? What did you gravitate toward in school? Identify strands from your life that brought you happiness. What were your dreams?

Life takes dozens of twists and turns. The one constant is your passion—at least it should be. I start every job interview with the same question: "Do you love baseball?" I run minor league baseball teams, and it stands to reason that if someone wants to work for me, it's probably because they love baseball.

Sometimes someone replies, "Yeah, I like baseball. But I really love football."

That's fine. I'm fortunate to have contacts in the NFL and at various colleges, and if this seems like a passionate person, I'll di-

rect him or her toward the appropriate person because chances are they're going to be more effective and happy working in football than with one of our baseball teams.

The same is true in any field. If you run a flower shop, it seems logical that the people you hire should feel strongly about flowers. They should be passionate about creating arrangements that will produce strong emotional responses from the recipients. They should feel those responses as they construct the arrangement.

Maybe you're in a career that you're not especially passionate about, but you enjoy certain elements of it and want to remain in it for those reasons. Make a list of the 10 things you like about your job. Maybe you're a numbers geek, someone who really enjoys statistics. We have an accountant in our organization who, believe it or not, loves dealing with audits. He lives for battling the IRS and, not surprisingly, is very good at it.

Another accountant might not find the work so fascinating, but maybe that accountant has a passion for sailing. She loves plotting courses and collects old treasure maps. She ought to be helping the company and its clients plot growth, making 3-year and 5-year projections. If that's not enough, maybe she could open up a freelance accounting business that allowed her more time to pursue sailing. Perhaps she could live on a sailboat docked near some of her major clients.

If you can't come up with even a few things you like about your career, then it's time to find something else. It's probably impossible to match your passion with your career, and that's okay. Career change is good, and the sooner you make the commitment to change, the better.

In fact, if fun is good, change is better. We must always keep evolving.

I frequently hear from attorneys who want to work in our organization. They're burned out from working in the legal profession. Maybe they went in with altruistic visions of helping the little guy. Maybe they were mesmerized by Gregory

Peck's performance as Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or attracted by the glamorous portrayal of the legal profession in television shows such as *L. A. Law*, *Ally McBeal*, and *The Practice*. Maybe they just wanted a decent, well-paying job.

What they come to realize is that they have to work like animals for 8 years to become a partner, and that means they're going to spend 80 hours a week on the job and have no time for their families.

They arrive at age 32 or 35 and get the partnership, yet there's this huge void. They're competitive beyond belief, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but they have problems with personal relationships and have forgotten how to have fun because they define their lives in terms of billable hours and stamina and haven't engaged in what could be defined as a leisure activity in nearly a decade.

Even professionally, the work isn't fulfilling. They start out with this wide-eyed hope that they're going to make a difference, perhaps engaging in some Hollywood courtroom theatrics, but soon realize most of what they do is just paperwork. Any Fun Is Good elements seen on law-themed TV programs don't exist in real life.

When the lawyers reach their mid-30s, that's when they start looking to escape. It's not just lawyers; it's anyone who has toiled tirelessly to climb the corporate ladder. They get to the point where the money no longer matters. They're willing to trade that six-figure salary to work for \$25,000 in minor league baseball or wherever their true passions lie.

Believe me, I know what it's like not to have that career satisfaction. I spent a decade in advertising and worked to the point where in 1989, at the age of 38, I earned \$90,000. But I wasn't happy, and when I got the opportunity to run a minor league baseball team for \$25,000, I grabbed it and never looked back.

If you're just getting out of high school or college, there's no better time to pursue a career based on your passions. You're so

much more technically savvy and immersed in media than previous generations that you have a much better idea of what's out there and what you want.

Maybe you've seen one of your parents unceremoniously released from a job after many years of service. Maybe you've seen one of them lose a pension or 401(k) because the company squandered it or did something unethical that resulted in the stock's becoming worthless.

There are people who have lost millions in retirement funds because of corporate mismanagement, and suddenly they have to rebuild their lives. At least if they had a good time amassing that fortune, they'll have the energy to do it again. If they hated it and were counting the days to retirement, they're left bitter and feeling hopeless.

It's never too late. Colonel Harland Sanders did not begin actively franchising the business that became Kentucky Fried Chicken (and later KFC) until the age of 65.

There comes a time in everyone's life where you must take a hard look at where you've been and where you're going. We have a lot better recall of our emotions than facts. We know when we were happy and when we were depressed. There were times when we were carefree and childlike and willing to take chances.

If you're unhappy, you might think you can't afford to take that chance. In reality, you can't afford to stay where you are. Even if it means you'll take a short-term hit financially or move to another part of the country, the upside in terms of your happiness will be worth it tenfold.

We see this all the time in our organization—one that offers long hours, hard work, and modest pay, but also a Fun Is Good atmosphere that unleashes passions. Many people who have worked for our organization have gone on to successful careers in every industry imaginable. (This isn't because they didn't like working for us, but because they saw a way to apply our formula to other businesses. In fact, our average tenure is much longer

than in a typical workplace.) Others came to us after struggling to find professional fulfillment elsewhere. The common denominator is they never gave up on the dream of finding a career and a workplace where they could have fun.

When most people enter the job market, they rarely use passion as a guide. They follow in the footsteps of a family member or pursue a career because of its financial upside or perceived value in society.

As college students, they fill out those vaguely worded standardized tests that are supposed to match personality traits with jobs. Inevitably, they're told that their skills and personality traits make them best qualified to become, say, an astronaut or funeral director.

College kids also spend a lot of time trying to impress on-campus recruiters, as if such visitors represent the only employment opportunities out there. They try to say the right things and convince these potential employers that, yes indeed, they've always longed to work in (whatever field or industry) and have a burning desire to do so.

It's tough to fake passion. Maybe you can put on an act long enough to get the job, but it's impossible to maintain it. Instead of trying to match someone else's demands, why not try and find something that fits your passions?

If you approach your career that way, whether you're just starting out or making a change, you'll have a greater chance at becoming successful. The early pioneers in computers and technology did not set out to become wealthy. They were the guys who had a passion for taking apart radios in their garages.

My friend Dave Dombrowski, whom you'll hear from later in this book, did not set out to become a highly paid sports executive. But he did identify a passion for sports at the age of 6 and knew he wanted to become a general manager of a Major League Baseball team, even though such work was not especially high paying when Dave set that goal.

Passion is the cornerstone of the Fun Is Good philosophy, and if you let it be your guide, you'll achieve success. Throughout this book, we'll hear firsthand from people like Dave who have benefited professionally and personally from the Fun Is Good philosophy and how they applied it specifically to their industries and careers.

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## Fun Is Good Vignette

**Tom Whaley,**  
Vice President, St. Paul Saints



*The thing I love about the Fun Is Good philosophy is that it embraces misfits like me.*

IN THE EARLY 1990s, I had my own private law practice in Minnesota and was miserable. Like a lot of young attorneys, I went into the law profession thinking that I could make a difference—that I could somehow change things for the better.

In reality, being a lawyer is rarely about change; it's mostly mind-numbing briefs and arguments with disagreeable personalities. When my dad, a successful lawyer, had a debilitating stroke at age 51, I knew I had to do what I loved. He'd always say, "Have fun; you could get hit by a bus today." I've been running from the bus ever since.

People find it hard to believe that I'm a lawyer, and I take that as a compliment. I'm more comfortable in jeans, T-shirts, and 3-day-old stubble. I play drums in a rock band, and I'd

much rather argue about whether Rush belongs in the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame than the Rule against Perpetuities.

I knew I didn't fit in as a lawyer, at least not in the traditional sense. I had heard about Mike Veeck and the Northern League, and I figured there must be a place for me in his zany organization. When it was announced shortly before the Christmas holidays that the Goldklang Group would own the new St. Paul Saints in 1993, I wrote Mike a letter.

I knew I had just one chance to make an impression, so I bought some frozen lutefisk, this nasty-tasting Scandinavian dish that consists of dried cod soaked in lye. I included a copy of my résumé with a note that said, "This is what people in Minnesota eat," wrapped it in dry ice, and sent it to Florida, where Mike was still working.

Mike called the next afternoon from Pott's Place, a saloon near the ballpark; he was in the process of being moved by the holiday spirit.

"Tom, what is this?"

"It's fish, Mike, seafood."

"Tom, I live in Florida and know a thing or two about seafood and this is not seafood. It's thawing on the bar. We're paying people 5 bucks if they have a taste. There's a guy over in the corner who tried it. He's either very drunk or dead."

A few days later, I received a letter.

"I hate attorneys," he wrote, "but you seem like a Renaissance lawyer, which intrigues me. We've got this thing going in the Northern League, so call me and I can show you how to ruin your life."

Even though I had a wife and two young kids, I quit my law practice, took a massive pay cut, and joined the circus. Our first office consisted of two phones and a few folding chairs.

In my new role, I still practiced law; like everyone else in minor league baseball, I also did a little bit of everything. At one point during our first season, I had to find a St. Bernard be-

tween the hours of midnight and 6 a.m. that Bill Murray could use in an on-field skit. I learned to move fast, have little fear, and get things done.

I learned from Mike how to promote concerts, a key side business in minor league baseball. Along the way, we started running a massive three-on-three basketball tournament.

In 1999, I followed Mike to Florida when he joined the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. When Mike resigned after a short but controversial tenure, I didn't know what to do. Since I was viewed as one of "Mike's guys"—and made little secret of the fact—I figured it made no sense for me to stay.

Before I could clean out my desk, the phone rang. It was Bill Murray, who was trying to find out what had happened to Mike. I explained my predicament.

"Stay put for another year if you can," he said.

I was incredulous. "Are you kidding me?"

Murray explained that he had probably stayed one year too long at *Saturday Night Live*. His best friends had left, people were making mistakes, and he wasn't having nearly as much fun. But in that year, he said he learned more about the television business than at any other point in his career.

"Stick around and pay attention to how things are done, even if they're being done the wrong way," he said. "You'll learn what not to do, which usually is more important."

When Bill Murray is offering you career advice based on his tenure during the golden age of *SNL*, you know your life is on the right track.

Bill was right, of course. I hung around for another year, learned a lot—good and bad—then returned to St. Paul and re-joined the circus. These days, I'm a part owner of several of our minor league baseball teams.

Would I be a wealthier man if I had kept my law business? Probably, though it wouldn't be nearly as much fun. The stress and the pressure would have gotten to me. I haven't been to

work in 13 years—at least it doesn't seem like work. I go to my office at the ballpark and have fun.

I hear so many people say “if only.” If only they could quit their jobs and do something else, they'd be happy. It's not easy to walk away. But the thing that clinched it for me was realizing that I might be the one who has the stroke. There is no tomorrow, and if you wait around to chase your dream, it's just not going to happen.



Like Tom Whaley (see the “Fun Is Good Vignette” above), you need to take a proactive approach to applying your passion to your career. Fun Is Good is not just for people who own or operate businesses. It's more applicable to those who work for them.

Search for those organizations where you can not only apply your talents but also have fun. They don't have to be mutually exclusive. Tom took a risk by leaving the certainty and security of a traditional law practice, but he knew if he could find somewhere to best apply his passions and skills—all of his skills—he'd be happier and better off in the long run.

People shortchange themselves when it comes to marketing their skills and choosing a career. They think, “I have a degree in accounting; therefore I am an accountant or some sort of finance person.” They forget about their other skills, talents, and experiences, things that on the surface might seem to have nothing to do with their work.

Tom plays in rock-and-roll bands. He has a passion for music. These days, he organizes and promotes concerts in all of our ballparks. His people skills are so good that he can perform (and has) most every role in our organization. He's still a lawyer, but the difference is that he's involved with legal work he thoroughly enjoys.

I know it's difficult, perhaps impossible in some cases, to leave a job. If that's the case, think of how you can revamp your current situation. Do your colleagues and managers know about other skills and experiences you have that might make you more valuable in another role, one you might enjoy more? Could you prove your worth in a different area by latching on to a different project, even if it's in addition to your current work?

Fun Is Good can work anywhere and for anyone. Regardless of whether the owners and managers subscribe to the philosophy, it's still up to the employees to take a proactive approach to injecting this concept into their careers and finding a way to pursue their passion within a career.

Throughout this book, we'll show how that's possible.

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## Fun Is Good. Interview

**I**F YOU WANT TO CREATE FUN IS GOOD at your company or go to work at a place where such an attitude exists, then it's time to overhaul the job interview process.

If you're the employer, get rid of the stilted, ambiguous questions about strengths and weaknesses. Instead ask candidates about the last book they read or movie they saw. Ask them what they do on a Saturday afternoon. Get them talking about their passions. This is how you find well-rounded, eclectic people that can help your business far beyond what's listed in the job description.

When sports teams draft kids out of high school or college, they talk about drafting for a specific need or position or just

taking “the best player available.” Companies should look for the best person available. If you’re searching for an accountant and take a tunnel-vision approach to finding one, then that’s what you’re going to get. But if you find a Renaissance person who just happens to have accounting skills, you end up with a person who can help in many other areas and perhaps become a star.

If you’re the prospective employee, turn the interview process on its head. You should be the one asking the questions. Too often the person wants the job—any job—so badly they take whatever is available, regardless of how unappetizing.

To find that Fun Is Good environment, you need to be selective and thorough in the job search process. Think of it as you interviewing prospective employers, not vice versa.

What does the office do as a group for fun? Are there any company-wide volunteering projects? Are there any people here with unconventional backgrounds? How does it celebrate success? Is mentoring common? Are they visible in the community? Are there women in positions of power?

The answers to those questions reveal how much of the “we’re all in this together” attitude exists and the value, if any, the company places on community service. It speaks volumes if the employer knows little about their colleagues’ outside interests.

Ask if the company has teams in sports leagues. Does it have a health club? You want to see what value the business places on teamwork, employee health, and social get-togethers.

Ask about meetings. How many are there? Are they all-inclusive? You don’t want to join a place that’s bogged down with meetings. At the same time, you want to know what value they place on ideas, no matter who presents them.

Don’t ask about the annual review process; it makes you look like you’re counting the days to your first raise. When the interviewer asks where you want to be in 3 or 5 years, turn the question around. Ask if employees typically develop mentoring relationships with those who can help them plot their course.

In our organization, we encourage people to draw up personal marketing plans and review them periodically with me. This might not always be possible with larger organizations, but it should be done at some level.

How do ideas flow? If you have a great idea for a promotion or to improve a part of the company, how should you present it? Does the company have contests for such things?

You can research much of this beforehand. Did the folks at the top start at the bottom? You want to know if the company hires from outside or nurtures its own.

Look around the office. How is it decorated? Do people have their kids' artwork posted? This not only speaks volumes about the emphasis on family but also shows that the people don't take themselves too seriously.

Ask to speak to people in different departments, especially customer service. Note the value given to this area. A company that ignores customer service won't be around for the long haul.

Schedule your interview around lunchtime or during off hours. Who is still around? Are they having fun? How much laughter do you hear while you're there?

Above all else, take an interest in the people you meet. Ask them about their hobbies and family. If you're in the same business, chances are you have mutual acquaintances. Look around their offices for topics of conversation, especially shared interests. Show that you're someone who takes a sincere interest in others.

Remember, the goal is for you to get to know these people better, not to talk about yourself. If you're inquisitive and show a genuine interest in people, not just the company, you'll make a positive first impression.

More important, you'll gather all the information you need to determine if this is a Fun Is Good place or not.



## Chapter 1 Summary and Exercises (What Is Your Passion?)

- Outside of family, name five things you're passionate about.
- Do those passions relate to your career?
- What would you like to do professionally? Are you doing it now?
- Can you turn a hobby into a career? How?
- If not, can the expertise and passion from that hobby be applied to your job? (Think of the sailing accountant.)
- Think back to the times in your life that you were happiest professionally. What about your career made you happy?
- What about your current job excites you? Does it make you more productive?
- If you enjoy nothing about your job, what would you like to do?
- When you go into a job interview, turn the process upside down and do most of the questioning yourself.
- If you're an employer, look for well-rounded people, not just the best fit for the position.