

Making Work Fun *A Key Part of a Positive Workplace Culture*

It's unfortunate that some business leaders view humor as unprofessional because the positive effects of humor are widespread. Humor has been proven helpful in combating stressful illnesses such as cancer, high blood pressure, stroke, and scores of other diseases and conditions. Humor has also helped people survive physical suffering, imprisonment, illness, and loss. In a professional setting, humor can reduce tension and serve as an icebreaker and bonding tool.

Fortunately, the idea that work should be fun seems to be gaining steam...although this concept is not new. John Naisbitt, author of the landmark book *Re-inventing the Corporation* noted that: "Many business people have mourned the death of the work ethic in America. But few of us have applauded the logic of the new value taking place: 'work should be fun.' That outrageous assertion is the value that fuels the most productive people and companies in this country."

Humor and Job Performance

Some of the greatest corporate success stories are about companies such as Google and Southwest Airlines, that actively promote a playful, laugh-filled work environment. Research reveals a definite connection between humor at work and job performance. A study conducted by the State University of New York (SUNY) reported that employees who worked for bosses that utilized humor in the workplace, had higher productivity and better job appraisals. Additional studies show that humor in the workplace can:

- Reduce the number of sick days;
- Increase company loyalty;
- Retain valuable employees;
- Encourage creativity; and
- Improve morale.

Physiological Benefits

William F. Fry, MD, of Stanford University, believes that laughter may trigger specific physiological changes in the body that may help ease pain by inducing the brain to release hormones that stimulate production of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. In addition, Fry suggests that hearty laughter, like a good workout at the gym, reduces the heart rate and blood pressure to below their original levels, and cause chest, abdomen, and shoulder muscles to contract – therefore providing relief from stress.

It's significant to remember that when speaking about "stress," it's not so much the event itself that produces the stress, but rather how we look at the situation.

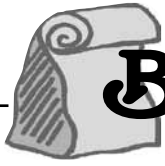
"How many actual life-and-death crises have *you* been involved in?" asks Jeffrey Cotton, a noted trainer. "The reality is that it's impossible to relax if we're actually in a crisis mode all the time. There is a big difference between *actual* danger, and the burnout that's inherent when someone is stuck in a mindset of perceiving situations as *possible* danger."

Margo Escott, a psychotherapist in Florida, recommends that the next time you're late for a meeting and stuck in traffic, instead of blowing a mental gasket, try seeing the situation through comic glasses.

"I actually keep an oversized pair of Groucho [Marx] glasses in my car to keep the right perspective!" Escott states. "Certainly, that may be a bit much for you! However, the point of these suggestions is this: hostility, fear, rage, and anxiety are emotions responsible for heart attacks, while merriment *defuses* anger, rage, and worry."

What is Humor?

Although it's difficult to define humor, two characteristics are usually present – laughter and smiling. Humorous interactions are further defined as an appreciation of humor. For instance, if



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co-workers notice that a certain employee smiles a lot, that person will tend to be viewed as having a good sense of humor.

“Practice smiling until it begins to feel natural,” advises Sophia Dziegielewski, a licensed clinical social worker. “Smile to emphasize a point and people will perceive you as friendly and having a good sense of humor. Everyone has the potential to laugh freely, although some people may suppress it.”

Humor can Stimulate Problem Solving & Creative Thinking

According to Dziegielewski, humor may be used to motivate others to learn about a subject and raise curiosity. “When thought-provoking material is presented in an entertaining way, it can spur a desire to learn and provide a boost for a bored, inattentive individual,” she says. “Don’t be afraid to laugh along with others because humor creates an atmosphere that encourages openness, spontaneity, and a unique perspective about sharing and learning. Always try to see the humor in a situation as it can provide the setting for a problem-solving approach under less pressure,” Dziegielewski adds.

Psychologists note that people who’ve been exposed to humorous materials and have been given the tools to express themselves, will feel more at ease and share the positive message that everyone can find humor and hope in everyday life.

Use Humor in Moderation

Like most anything in life, moderation is the key to effective humor in the workplace, according to Dziegielewski. Her suggestions before using humor in a professional setting include:

- 1) Start with a smile, and go slowly before using humor to make a point.
- 2) Don’t forget the importance of timing. Surprise humor can be the most enjoyable kind.
- 3) Take into account the setting and professional situation, as that will determine the type, timing, and use of humor.

Exercise: List some examples of humor that would likely be effective in your workplace:

According to Dziegielewski, the following are some examples of when NOT to use humor in work settings:

- 1) When it’s used to deny and avoid dealing with sensitive issues;
- 2) When it’s irrelevant to the subject matter being discussed;
- 3) When it’s seen as a put-down; and
- 4) When the timing is inappropriate.

Exercise: List some examples of humor that would NOT be a good idea where you work:

More Companies are ‘Catching On’

The need to “make do with less” amidst increasing competition has triggered more job stress than ever before. As mentioned, the good news is that an increasing number of businesses *are* catching on that unorthodox approaches – like fun and humor – are needed to help employees deal with stress. Consider the following examples:

❖ *Some businesses include “fun” among their core values.* This includes the Arlington, VA-based AES Corp. They admit that building an organization that takes these assumptions seriously is difficult. However, leaders add that even though its efforts occasionally backfire, a fun-working environment brings out positive qualities in its employees.



❖ *It's almost inhumane if companies create a climate where people can't naturally have fun.* At least, that's the prevailing view at Rosenbluth International. "Our role and responsibility as leaders and associates is to create a place where people can enjoy themselves," states CEO Hal Rosenbluth. "I know our company is doing well when I walk around and hear people laughing."

❖ *When employees start to have more fun on their jobs, they become more energized and interact with co-workers in positive ways that wouldn't occur otherwise.* Making work fun helps workers sustain peak performance and provide consistent quality because a relaxed atmosphere on the job provides an outlet for stress and tension, which produces ideas and makes work more enjoyable. Employees learn they can be relaxed on the job, and continue to be competent and professional. The key is taking your work seriously, while taking yourself lightly in **doing** that work.

Creating Humor in YOUR Workplace

"When I consult with companies to help bring humor to their offices, I emphasize that humor is a very individual matter – what makes Sally roll on the floor with laughter may not even bring a smile to Jack's lips," Escott explains. "It's vital to start small, and bear in mind that by the time we reach adulthood, many of us suffer from TP (Terminal Professionalism). This stems from being told hundreds of times to 'wipe that smile off your face' and 'stop laughing and get back to work.' Consequently, many employees don't believe it's possible to be playful and still get the job done."

According to Escott, employee assistance professionals and human resources can work together to create the following exercises to help loosen up a stuffy workplace (and reduce stress):

- Start taking "humor breaks" during the day. Even if it's just for a few minutes, it can help employees to return to their desks refreshed and able to work more efficiently.
- Plan a party to celebrate a co-worker's birthday, but use "negative comments" to pay for

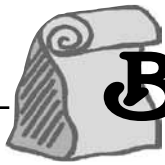
it. Every time someone is caught making a negative comment, have him or her throw a dollar in the party pot!

- Save a favorite cartoon and use it as a memo. If the memo is going to bring bad news, staple a facial tissue to it – for good news, put a happy face sticker on it.
- Have a contest for the best excuse for being late to work – the more creative the better.
- Hold the next staff meeting at the movies – or anywhere off-site, as many employees are better able to "let go" than they will in their normal work setting.
- Create humorous bulletin boards – bring in baby pictures of staff, and let the fun begin as they try to guess who's who.
- Hold team chili cook-offs – or unusual dress-up days.
- Install foosball and ping-pong tables for employees to use during breaks.
- Hold trivia and team-sales contests to keep the spirit of fun alive.
- Form a "fun committee" to continue to think up ways to create company-wide morale boosters.

Summary

Humor is an important coping skill in dealing with stress, and it can even add a colorful dimension to our personality! Many businesses are using humor to relieve stress, but many others need to learn the importance of this crucial, yet easy-to-use tool. ■

Additional source: Paul McGhee, Ph.D., www.laughterremedy.com - author of "Making Work Fun," "Health, Healing, and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training," and "Humor: The Lighter Path to Resilience and Health."



Creating Humor in the Workplace... Testimonials:

“In many crises I experience on the job – work stoppages, natural disasters, and emergencies – laughter helps ease tensions, and the focus on getting the tasks done becomes more enjoyable and less stressful. I often hear, ‘How do they make their sales and service objectives?’ That group laughs from the time they come in until the time they leave.’ But laughter is infectious, and employees enjoy coming to work every day.”
– Anonymous corporate manager

“I have yet to find anything worth accomplishing that you can’t have a good time doing.”
– Dick Kussman, AT&T

“This is what it’s all about – if you can’t have fun at it, there’s no sense hanging around.”
– Joe Montana, former NFL star quarterback

“A smile is the shortest distance between two people.”
– Victor Borge, late comedian and pianist

“You can’t get too uptight.”
– Joel Slutzky, CEO of Odetics, Inc.

“Once you’ve established that you’re good at what you do, and that you’re professional and take your work seriously, you’ll find that humor and a lighter style will work for you, not against you. The number-one rule, of course, is to always be sensitive to when any kind of humor or laughter is, and is not appropriate.”
– Paul McGhee, professional speaker

“A company that has fun, where employees... put cartoons on the wall and celebrate, is spirited, creative, and usually profitable.”
– David Baum, ‘organizational travel agent’

“They who laugh, last.”
– Anon.

“Life is tough, and if you have the ability to laugh at it, you have the ability to enjoy it.”
– Salma Hayek, actress

“I never did a day’s work in my life – it was all fun.”
– Thomas Edison, inventor

EXERCISE: List several examples of humor that would likely be effective in YOUR workplace:

EXERCISE: List several examples of humor that would NOT be a good idea where you work:

Sources: Margo Escott, psychotherapist; Paul McGhee, “Making Work Fun.”