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 **Tuesday, March 03, 2009**

A Culture of Levity at Work



Business in this tough economy is littered with business closings, pay cuts, low morale and lay-offs. Budgets have been slashed and benefits or perks taken away. Those left on the job are tasked to do more with less; faces are marked with tension and fear. What will happen next and what can you do about it? Well, as unimaginable as it may seem, now might be a good time for everyone to lighten

up at work.

"You don't have to have a team of comedy writers," says David Summers of the American Management Association, "Managers just need to give employees permission to be human, open to giving and receiving humor at work."

Something that is humorous is comical or funny, provoking amusement, a state of mind or mood. While laughter is a way to express humor, it is certainly important to know the difference between laughing at and laughing with.

Annette Goodheart, Ph.D., a pioneer of laughter therapy, coined the term 'plerking' for the perk of applying laughter and play at work. She notes that companies who promote the use of humor report increases in productivity and creative problem solving.

Those employees with a sense of humor generally have a positive attitude and, subsequently, express job satisfaction. When using humor, they are often helping a peer look at events or issues, trying to see the 'light side' whenever possible. And, who can argue with the very real benefits of laughter?

Humor and a good laugh lead to many physiological changes in the body that include increased activity in the lungs, lowered blood pressure and the secretion of pain-reducing hormones that provide a sense of well-being. Laughter results in decreased muscle tension, enhanced digestion, lowered levels of catecholamins (hormones associated with stress) and an increase in the release of serotonin and endorphins (the body's natural painkiller). Even the immune system is given a boost, since laughter is usually followed by deep breathing which helps to send oxygen-rich blood and nutrients

throughout the body. This physical phenomenon is the reason that humor and laughter are so often linked to an increase in employee energy, productivity and creativity.

Humor can be described as one of life's best medicines. According to a study by heart specialists at the University of Maryland, people with heart disease were 40% *less* likely to laugh in a variety of situations when compared to people of the same age without heart disease. Laughter effects the way blood flows around the body, reducing the likelihood of heart disease. This research revealed that 15 minutes of laughter a day is as important for the heart as 30 minutes of exercise three times a week. And, humor is free, with no known negative side effects!



In addition, the use of humor has psychological benefits such as easing depression, fostering a positive attitude and increased self-confidence. The use of humor opens the lines of communication between supervisor and employee, customer and employee or employee and employee. Communication is enhanced when we're laughing and we pay attention to what is being said. Humor also diffuses conflict and builds empathy. An employee with a good sense of humor is usually both an effective communicator and a team player. Think about things you've found funny and you may discover that the humor came, not from jokes, but from daily conversation with friends, co-workers and family.

"Laughter is not primarily about humor, but about social relationships," says Dr. Robert Provine, a neuroscientist at the University of Maryland and author of *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. "In fact, the health benefits of laughter may result from the social support it stimulates."

So what does this mean in the workplace? **Survey research** shows that when people (i.e., employees) are having fun, they are more creative and more productive, with enhanced problem solving skills. The American Association for Therapeutic Humor describes therapeutic humor as any lighthearted, joyful, humorous interaction which is constructively used to maintain or improve well being. Think **employee satisfaction**; think **customer satisfaction**.

Adrian Gostick, co-author of *The Levity Effect*, notes that "levity in the workplace is not about being funny, but about having fun." Most people appreciate and respect someone

who is willing to loosen up and show a degree of humanity, Gostick says. Add humor to training sessions and people perk right up.

At Norton Healthcare in Louisville, KY, the food service department had a very low satisfaction rating among patients. Within six months, the food service department had a 99% satisfaction rating among patients and staff. What happened? The head of food service encouraged his team, with no staffing changes, to think up new ways of doing their jobs, to talk with patients and thank them for feedback. The chef even conducted 'hospital rounds' wearing his chef's hat! The staff started showing up to work on time and coming up with new menu ideas. The team was *engaged*; they were having fun.

One global business consulting firm that helps to make companies more valuable suggests that each of your locations might benefit from having a Company Band, a Company World Cup, and other activities like softball teams and summer retreats. The suggested theme is ways to have fun at work!



One international network of firms offering audit, tax and advisory services, conducts regular employee satisfaction surveys. On one such survey, a highly ranked piece of feedback was that employees wanted to have more fun at work! With employee input, the company instituted fun activities via computers because most employees were unable to leave their desks for long periods of time. Employees soon began enjoying lighter moments at work as they shared pictures from vacations and selected Oscar picks, with prizes awarded the day after the broadcast. As a result of these efforts, the company increased its overall employee satisfaction score by 23%.

Humor expert Steven Allen, M.D. and son of the famous comedian, says that although some companies introduce levity into the workplace through a humor consultant, it is important to follow up by forming a team within the company because it takes commitment from human resources and management to continue the program over time and involve all employees. Other humor experts encourage the company leadership team to begin to change the culture by just starting to have fun.

Not surprisingly, employees are attracted to leaders who show warmth and humor, leaders who are in control and lead with confidence towards the future. This cultivates

employee respect which, in turn, promotes trust. Lightness in the workplace fosters employee satisfaction and longevity.

Some employees in companies who recognize the value of levity at work have set up a 'humor room' where they take breaks and enjoy clearing their mind with puzzles, comic books, toys and games. Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream Co. set up a fund for managers who wish to attend workshops that will provide more ways to bring laughter to the workplace. Google allows employees to decorate their own offices. Boeing has identified levity as a competitive advantage, enhancing creativity and overall employee engagement.

West Suburban Hospital Medical Center just west of Chicago has a 'laugh station' where funny sayings, humorous stories and cartoons are posted. The hospital sponsors 'clown rounds', a free service provided four times a year by a clown group that visits to cheer patients and, coincidentally, the staff. The Communications Department also includes a 'Staff Laff' column in their hospital newsletter.

Every company that wants to be great should be wondering how to have more fun. Employees who have fun at work trust the people they work for, have pride in what they do, and enjoy the people they work with.

Many companies have satisfied employees who work effectively as a team, stay together and are more productive because they have fun together.

If you would like to learn more about how NBRI can help your employees be more productive and creative, contact us now at 1-800-756-6168.

Terrie Nolinske, Ph.D.
Research Associate
National Business Research Institute