



Humor ... the Social Catalyst at Work

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Humor can change a dull organization where work is a burden, to one where people like coming to work and being together with coworkers. Humor is an important factor in organizations because of its positive effect on a variety of factors relevant to management such as: group cohesiveness, communication, socialization, leadership effectiveness, creativity, and stress reduction. However, despite overwhelming evidence to support the important role that humor can play in organizations, many people dismiss it as irrelevant to the workplace. This is outdated thinking!

Humor is highly relevant in the modern workplace. Today's workforce is noticeably different from the past. Evidence indicates that today's workers expect work to be fun and enjoyable. Humor can help managers create an enjoyable environment and contribute to employee retention efforts. Humor is so useful that it is an important element in the organizational culture of numerous successful companies. Southwest Airlines, Google, Ben & Jerry's and Zappos are great examples of how humor is used effectively in business. They demonstrate how humor is an important part of unconventional companies that beat the competition.

Social Catalyst

Humor is essential to most of the relationships that we cherish. Think of your best friend or favorite relative. A major reason why you enjoy being with them is that you can share a lot of laughs together. Humor can do the same thing at work. It creates a positive atmosphere that is conducive to social interaction. Therefore, if humor is discouraged in organizations, it results in dehumanizing work, and why would anyone want to do that? In fact, given the importance of the service sector and teams across many industries, helping people work well together is crucial. In such environments, leaders need ways to bring people together and humor does that in an enjoyable manner.

Maybe a financial example would help the skeptics see the value of humor. Comedy, in its many forms, is very popular and a major business. Movies, TV shows, stand-up clubs, sitcoms, novelties, commercials and many other forms of comedy comprise what is surely a multi-billion dollar industry. Movies alone can earn hundreds of millions of dollars. Companies and people would not spend money on comedy if it did not provide a significant benefit to them. In particular, humor helps people feel good. Appropriate humor can do the same thing at work. Using humor at work is also far cheaper (usually free) than other approaches that

companies use to bring people together (e.g., retreats, parties, etc.). Additionally, humor is self-generating. In other words, once people use humor and like it, they will continue to use it and derive the benefits listed above with little if any managerial effort.

How to Use Humor at Work

Most leaders can use humor at work and it would likely be welcomed by their employees. Even if you have no sense of humor, at least some of the following ideas can be useful in creating a fun work environment.

- Make jokes about your faults or when you make a mistake
- Have fun competitions; costumes, funniest catch phrase, etc.
- Give funny names to things; meeting rooms, nicknames, teams, etc.
- Have a roast of top leaders in the organization. This is where a panel of people take turns making harsh jokes about someone. (find examples on comedycentral.com)
- Occasionally play fun games involving the whole organization
- Create a fun room where people can take a break and play games or just goof-off
- Take and share funny pictures of work related themes
- Create funny songs or rhymes about teams, people or events at work, the competition, etc.
- Tell funny stories of events at work; embellish and/or exaggerate for additional humor
- Watch a funny TV show (ex. The Office) or movie together (ex. Airplane)

Things to Avoid

While humor is useful, sometimes it can cause problems or go too far. This is no reason to eliminate it entirely. It just calls for some reasonable limits and leadership interventions if needed. When humor fails, it is usually harmless, particularly if people are conditioned to not be overly sensitive to things they don't like (ex. anti-political correctness). Below are some things to avoid:

- Using humor to intentionally upset or hurt people
- Most organizations should avoid ethnic, gender and similar types of humor. In fact, using such humor could be better described as harassment.
- While humor is fun, if it starts to distract people from work, it should be pulled back, but not eliminated.

Summary

The benefits of using humor are far more than just fun, they are good for business. Since humor is part of being human, it should not be discouraged at work. Much to the contrary, it should be encouraged so that the organization and people working in it can enjoy the numerous practical benefits it provides.

Humor can be an important part of an unconventional culture and competitive advantage by helping people work better together. This can result in better

communication, leadership, team cohesion, creativity and stress reduction. Humor can help you beat the competition!

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