

HumorMatters™



Taking Humor Seriously in the Workplace

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How serious can we be about humor in the workplace, and how humorous can we be about the seriousness we often find there?

According to a Robert Haft International 1985 survey, only 15% of workers are fired because of lack of competence. The remaining 85% are let go because of their inability to get along with fellow employees. When asked about the qualities of an effective employee, senior administrators and human relations personnel checked humor as one of the choice attributes of a desired employee.

Why has humor become a recognized asset in the workplace? Humor facilitates communication, builds relationships, reduces stress, provides perspective, promotes attending, and energizes.

Humor Facilitates Communication

Humor provides a non-threatening medium through which an employee or employer can communicate with others without intensifying the emotional temperature of the relationship. Consider the frazzled secretary who posts the sign "I have only two speeds, and if this one isn't fast enough then I'm sure you're not going to like my other." Or the somewhat scattered boss whose messy desk is complimented with a note that says, "A creative mess is better than tidy idleness." The message is clear, yet the

communication is done in a light and, therefore, less stressful way. The secretary's sign pokes fun at the situation, and the boss's note pokes some fun at himself.

Office jokes taking the "seriousness" of work "lightly" provide us with the opportunity to become more connected with others.

Humor Builds Relationships

The development of staff cohesion and a sense of team effort in the workplace can be effectively facilitated by the use of humor. Bulletin boards, electronic mail, intra-office memos, voice mail, etc., all offer mediums through which we can share humor with co-workers. Office jokes taking the "seriousness" of work "lightly" provide us with the opportunity to become more connected with others.

Humor Reduces Stress

Work is often associated with stress, and we know that stress is one of the main causes of illness, absenteeism, employee burn-out, etc. Humor is a great stress reliever because it makes us feel good, and we can't feel good and feel stress simultaneously. At the moment we experience humor, feelings like depression, anger, and anxiety dissolve.

Taking Humor Seriously in the Workplace (continued)

Humor and its partner—laughter—also reduce stress by activating the physiological systems including the muscular, respiratory, cardiovascular, and skeletal. In fact, we may even lose muscle control, as many of us have, when we laugh so hard that we fall down or wet our pants. Laughter has been labeled a jogging and juggling of the internal organs. When we laugh we feel physically better and, after laughter, we feel lighter and more relaxed.

In addition, humor provides a psychological stress reducer as it snaps our thinking to another channel. Norman Cousins called it “trainwrecks of the mind.” One of the characteristics of humor is that it involves incongruity. We find things humorous when they are incongruous or mismatched. Good jokes guide us down one path only to suddenly track us onto another. The tracking is what we call the punch line. As we are “tracked over,” this shift breaks rigid thought patterns resulting in increased creativity.

***“The whole world isn’t against you...
there are BILLIONS of people
who don’t care one way or the other!”***

Consider the story of the Midwestern farmer crossing Harvard Square searching for the library. He approaches a stately looking gentleman, who happens to be a Harvard English professor, and he asks, “Excuse me sir. Can you tell me where the library is *at*?” The professor looks somewhat disdainful and replies, “At Harvard we do not end sentences with prepositions.” After a pause the farmer turns back to the professor and asks, “Well then, can you tell me where the library is *at...asshole*.” In this joke we are guided down one path and suddenly tracked over to another. The incongruity is what we experience as humorous.

Humor Provides Perspective

Another way in which humor “oils the gears” of the workplace is by providing perspective. Ashleigh Brilliant (known for his one-liners) says, “Distance doesn’t really make you any smaller, but it does make you part of a bigger picture.” Consider the “Ziggy” cartoon where Ziggy is lying on the psychiatrist’s couch and the psychiatrist is saying, “The whole world isn’t against you...there are *BILLIONS* of people who don’t care one way or the other!”

Humor Promotes Attending and Energizes Us

We know that all good lecturers have many jokes, stories, and anecdotes that are shared in order to command attention and energize the audience. Humor wakes us up and increases our attending. An office bulletin board loaded with cartoons, one liners, jokes, pictures, etc., is one way to invite humor into the workplace. A few moments of humor at work can lead to increased productivity as the newly energized employee returns to his task.

In working environments where humor is supported, there develops a culture that utilizes humor to reduce stress and provide perspective. We have all heard humor directed at lawyers, medical personnel, scientists, engineers, business persons, educators, etc. Learning to laugh at ourselves and our work “lightens the load.”

Humor is a major career asset, so let’s be “serious” about humor and use it to lighten seriousness in the workplace. As we increase our personal “humor quotient” and spread our humor contagiously to others, we will begin to see the “lite” at the end of the tunnel.

