



Workplace Humor: A Contradiction in Terms?

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"Workplace humor" may be perceived as an oxymoron by some, but what is becoming increasingly clear is that humor in the workplace enhances productivity and work satisfaction. Many employers are now realizing that the benefits of humor outweigh the potential disadvantages. Humor stimulates workplace productivity by energizing employees, increasing their attention, enhancing their problem-solving abilities, providing perspective, improving communication, and providing distractions which help create "incubation periods" allowing problem solutions to "hatch."

Humor Facilitates Both Task and Maintenance Functions

Employers want employees to complete their job assignments efficiently and in a timely manner. Therefore, employers value employee "task" functions—activities that foster the completion of work assignments. In addition, most employers are aware that level of production is directly related to employee satisfaction. Therefore, "maintenance" functions—activities that foster emotional and/or interpersonal satisfaction as the work is being completed—are also encouraged.

While humor facilitates task functions by energizing employees, increasing attending, and facilitating problem solving, it is most recognized for its facilitating "maintenance functions" including building relationships,

reducing stress, and providing perspective. In support of the maintenance function of humor, a Robert Haft International survey found that 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 key attributes of a desired employee.

In light of this philosophy, and since workplace humor is capable of facilitating both task and maintenance functions, one might expect that humor would not only be tolerated, but encouraged as an integral part of the workplace community. Yet, in a survey of 275 employers 8% reported that they discouraged humor in the workplace, and only 8% included fun as part of their values or mission statements while 63% were neutral about humor (according to the consulting firm William M. Mercer Inc., and published in The Wall Street Journal).

A Trip Around the Blocks

Perhaps the biggest block inhibiting employers from encouraging humor in the workplace is the concern that humor will lead to reduced productivity. While it may be true that in a moment of using humor ("maintaining") one is not "producing," in the

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larger picture this moment can actually lubricate the workplace gears facilitating increased production (task). Employers often hold the misperception that humor reduces work activity, when in reality humor can enhance quality work production.

While the benefits of workplace humor seem clear, employers are concerned about potentially increasing employee distress, and inviting lawsuits that might stem from "inappropriate humorous behavior." Employers want to create workplace environments that are free from personal affront and discourage humor which might be perceived by some as insulting, offensive, or inappropriate. No matter how benign the humor, someone, somewhere may find it offensive. Employers run the risk of sacrificing the many benefits of humor because of the very few who may be negatively effected by it.

One's reaction to humor is an interactive process between the humorous stimuli (e.g. the joke, anecdote, pun, etc.) and the receiver's perception of the humor. Reaction to a humorous event is dependent on the meaning the receiver places on the event. We can influence, but not control, another's reaction to a humorous stimulus. A group of people, experiencing the same joke or funny event may react with a wide range of responses.

Another block to workplace humor comes with its own piece of irony. Generally, as demands in the workplace increase, task functions increase to meet the demands. As a result, maintenance functions decrease. When experiencing stress, most employees unconsciously eliminate stress reducers in order to cope with the stress of accomplishing the task. As our work stress increases, we significantly reduce our personal (and stress-reliever) time. We limit time with family, social activities, and athletic activities, and deprive ourselves of sleep--all in the service of

increasing time for work. Frequently we even change our eating habits by eating poorly or not eating at all. These "adjustments" in the service of making us more productive at work, in fact, cause us to burn out. How ironic that the more we attempt to deal with the stress of an increasingly demanding job, we actually compromise our ability to manage this stress. Ironically during these periods of high stress, when we most need our humorous stress relievers, that we lose our sense of humor!

Fun-da-mentals in the Workplace

With overwhelming anecdotal evidence that humor can be therapeutic, it makes sense for employers to encourage "*positive*" humor in the work environment. This invites the question of what is *positive* humor as compared with *negative* humor.

Employers and employees can follow several guidelines to generate positive humor. In general, humor that pokes fun at *situations* will be perceived positively and is least likely to offend or insult others. This type of humor helps individuals to gain perspective. Recently I visited an office where employees are required to keep extensive files, and I discovered a file labeled "screw." Inside the file was an envelope and in the envelope was a small screw. They do indeed file *everything* and, of course, someone was poking a little bit of fun at the policy.

Humor aimed at *oneself* is generally perceived positively because it builds our relationships with others as it increases our "humanness," but it also holds some pitfalls. Humor aimed at oneself may not offend others but may cause co-workers some discomfort if they assume that the individual does not respect herself or take her work seriously. It has been suggested that that we take our work *seriously* and ourselves *lightly*.

Humor directed at *another individual or group of individuals* is generally experienced as

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negative by the receiver(s) and can be offensive and condescending. This type of humor is best avoided as it has the highest probability of increasing tension and stress in the workplace rather than reducing it. Someone once said that "Laughing *at* others is an ice maker, while laughing *with* others is an ice breaker."

The Humor Me

It is also crucial in the work environment to consider one's *audience*. While one might be sharing humor with co-workers at the lunch table, those in the next table who might hear are also part of the *audience*. There are many stories in the nursing profession where nurses, while using humor to reduce their stress and cope with the turmoil of illness and death, have been overheard by the loved ones of those who are ill. The use of humor within the nursing group has a stress reducing function, but for the audience outside of the group (such as the patient's loved ones) the same humor may be experienced as hurtful. Care should be taken to attend to the *audience* when one is using humor.

A workplace environment that facilitates or inhibits humor is influenced by the employer accepting or rejecting the use of humor. If an employer openly uses humor, then employees feel encouraged to do the same. If the employer does not use or discourages humor then employees will learn that humor is not welcome, and the workplace will likely become a more serious, rigid environment. On the other hand, an employer who is able to poke fun at workplace situations, and poke fun at herself, can enhance the work environment by encouraging employees to use humor to help reduce stress--thus increasing workplace productivity and satisfaction.

"Workplace humor" need not be an oxymoron if employers encourage the use of

use of positive humor. While the workplace is an environment which focuses on productivity, the *practice of positive humor* can increase productivity as well as provide a pleasant atmosphere in which employees can accomplish their work-related tasks. Rather than being perceived as opposites, perhaps "*workplace* and *humor*" will eventually evolve into a statement of complements.

Finally, the practice of positive humor is influenced by the relationship between those sharing and receiving humor. In general, the closer the relationship between individuals, the more likely one will "forgive" humor that is a little off color or mildly offensive.

