



Laughing Your Way to Organizational Health: *A Lighter Approach to Workplace Wellness*

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In today's workplace, wellness is a serious issue. With terms like "stress-related-illness" and "burnout" becoming household words, organizations look increasingly for ways to keep their workforce happy, healthy and productive.

Up to now, many organizations have devalued the idea of laughter at work, seeing it as a distraction from getting the "real" job done. The work ethic many of us were raised with also reinforces this attitude. "No pain, no gain," "Work isn't supposed to be fun," and "It's only worthwhile if you have

to suffer for it."

However, we're starting to realize that all this suffering is killing us. Not only that, but we're finding that it's actually counter-productive to the bottom-line results so sought after in this era of technological change, budget slashing, and downsizing.

Scientific research points to a better way of living and working.

A recent study conducted at financial institutions found that managers who facilitated the highest level of employee performance used humor the most often.

Scientific data also proves laughter to be an integral part of physical wellness. Dr.

William Fry of Stanford University has demonstrated that laughing 200 times burns off the same amount of calories as 10 minutes on the rowing machine.

Another study reveals that after a bout of laughter, blood pressure drops to a lower healthier level than before the laughter began.

Laughter also oxygenates your blood (and thus increases your energy level), relaxes your muscles, and works out all major internal systems like the cardiovascular and respiratory systems.

Furthermore, researchers report that laughter also affects the immune system.

According to Dr. Lee Berk of the Loma Linda School of Public Health in California, laughing makes it grow stronger, with the body's T-cells, natural killer cells and antibodies all showing signs of increased activity.

Workplace Humor Indicators

So what specific indicators that tell us we need to incorporate humor into our workplace? According to Thomas Kuhlman, a psychologist at the University of St. Thomas, in Minnesota, two major factors exist.

The first is being placed in no-win situations. These include being expected to do a job but not having the necessary resources in terms of time, money, policies or people power. It can also include having to serve a difficult or overly demanding client base or boss, or having to enforce unpopular rules or regulations.

The second is the presence of unpredictable or uncontrollable stressors. These can take the form of regularly arising but unpredictable situations that adversely affect stress, workloads, or scheduling. They can also include decisions made at other levels of the organization or government that affect your job but into which you have little or no input.

Sound familiar? In order to illustrate this scenario, Kuhlman uses the example of the TV series "MASH." Here we have medical personnel caught in a classic no-win situation. Their job is to heal wounded soldiers, whom when healed, go back to the front lines to be wounded again. The stressors are also uncontrollable and unpredictable in that the protagonists never know when or how many casualties will arrive. Furthermore, decisions about the war in which they have

no say affect their jobs and lives.

In situations where we have little or no control over our external circumstances, our only control lies in how we react to them. We can either choose to laugh or despair, and in "MASH," Alan Alda's character leads us to laugh.

In some ways, laughter can be the only rational response since in order to survive, we need to find a life-affirming way to cope. Being able to laugh about ourselves and our situation helps us to release the tension, regain our perspective, and accept that which we cannot change. Not only that, but as already stated, it also gives us the physical energy and resilience needed to survive.

As more and more groups realize the benefits of laughter, they incorporate it into their wellness programs and day-to-day work. I've found from working with hundreds of organizations that they

often have a lot of very funny and resourceful people who just need to be given permission and encouragement to use their sense of humor on the job.

Workplace Humor Guidelines

Of course, when it comes to using humor at work, it helps to have some guidelines, since the term humor is a vague one. People say things like "Just lighten up," "See the funny side," "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade," but it's difficult to turn these wishy-washy platitudes into specific behaviors. How do you lighten up? By seeing the funny side! But how do you see the funny side? By making lemonade?

As a consultant, I've found that in order to create change, people need specifics. Telling Bill to resolve a conflict with a coworker is a start, but the term "resolving a conflict" is unclear and means different things to different people. To

achieve success, Bill needs to be able to define exactly what he's doing and what the steps are to doing it.

And it's the same with humor. Telling Sheila to use more humor on the job is a start, but in order to be successful, she needs to know exactly what humor is, and what the specific behaviors are that constitute it.

My definition of humor in the workplace is: Acts involving some sort of surprise and/or exaggeration that make people feel good. Certainly this can take the form of joke telling, but it can also take many others. Leaving a cookie on a coworker's desk, giving an unexpected compliment, and sending an encouraging e-mail are all acts that involve some form of surprise ("Hey, I wasn't expecting that!") and leave people feeling good. When I worked at the Vancouver Crisis Center I used to have a gorilla mask, and

when things got too stressful, I'd put it on and walk around the building. That act of surprise and exaggeration left people with a smile and sense of relief from all the tension.

In other words, humor in the workplace doesn't need to evoke gales of laughter, just pleasant feelings – something everyone is capable of doing. So if joke-telling isn't your style, and indeed many people find it difficult to remember and tell jokes, then bring some Groucho Marx glasses to work, or maybe a rubber chicken. I've taken my rubber chickens across North America, for use with bankers, loggers, accountants, health care professionals, teachers, senior executives, parole officers, etc., and they've never failed to get a laugh. There's something absurd about props that overcomes our rational adult programming and brings out the desire to laugh and play. It's as if their presence

gives us permission to slip out of our grown-up personas and experience an irrational moment or two of shared joy, something I call a "wellness break."

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Thus our "inner clown" can now emerge as our lifeline in these times of change and uncertainty. Giving him or her free rein not only results in healthier workplaces, but also increased morale and team spirit.

Remember, the group that plays together, stays together!

Counsellor and stand up comic David Granirer leads Stand Up For Mental Health, a program teaching stand up comedy to people with mental illness as a way of building confidence and fighting stigma. For more information call (604) 205-9242 or go to <http://www.standupformentalhealth.com>

For information on his humor in the workplace presentations go to

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