

Changing Corporate Perceptions of the Value of Humor

Paul McGhee, PhD, www.LaughterRemedy.com

Work vs. Prison

In prison, you spend most of your time in an 8 x 10 cell.

At work, you spend most of your time in a 6 x 8 cubicle.

In prison, the reward for good behavior is time off.

At work, the reward for good behavior is more work.

[Adapted from P. McGhee, *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*. Call 800-228-0810 to order.]

It wasn't very long ago that virtually every company in the country drew a sharp distinction between the notion of work and play. If you had fun, or were found joking, laughing, or showing a "playful attitude" on the job, it was assumed that you were goofing off, not taking your work seriously, immature, unprofessional, etc. Over the past two decades, however, as the pace of change in the way business is done has escalated, companies have thrown many of their old assumptions about how businesses should be run out the window. There is a new openness to any management strategy that works; i.e., that supports the bottom line. It is precisely this openness that has led many CEOs to consider the idea of putting humor and fun to work. Every year, more and more successful executives and managers are finally beginning to see that humor is a powerful tool in meeting the challenges and stress that are now a daily way of life in every workplace.

As early as the mid-1980s, a survey found that 84% of Vice Presidents and personnel directors in 100 of the largest corporations in the country felt that employees with a sense of humor are more effective on the job than people with little or no sense of humor. The organization conducting the survey concluded that "People with a sense of humor tend to be more creative, less rigid and more willing to consider and embrace new ideas and methods." Another mid-1980s survey of 737 chief executives of major corporations showed that an amazing 98% of those completing the survey said they would hire a person with a good sense of humor over one who seemed to lack a sense of humor.

I have had many companies tell me following a program I've done for their staff that they specifically look for evidence of a good sense of humor in employees they hire (especially for management positions), because they are convinced that this helps them continue to do their jobs effectively without getting "bent out of shape" or overwhelmed on the tough days.

Your job is still better than asking, "You want fries with that?"

In one recent survey of business executives and Deans of Business Schools, 62% of the Deans responding to the survey said they felt that humor contributed to executive success; and nearly all the CEOs who responded felt that humor has an important role to play in the conduct of business, and that humor helps keep business healthy. The individual conducting the survey noted that nearly all the responding CEOs said that ". . . all other things being equal, they would hire the job applicant with a better sense of humor." Consistent with this trend, an article in *Human Resources Magazine* as far back as 1994 specifically called for Human Resources managers to begin instituting programs that help employees learn to lighten up. My book, *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*, provides managers the tool they need to begin instituting such a program.

Tom Peters has long had his finger on the pulse of American business. He is now convinced that every company can boost its creativity, team spirit and productivity by building more humor and a lighter style of collegial interaction into the workplace.

Herb Kelleher is probably the best known example of a CEO (Southwest Airlines) who insists on hiring employees with a good sense of humor. In filling any position, says Kelleher, "what we are looking for, first and foremost, is a sense of humor . . . We don't care much about education and expertise, because we can train people . . . We hire attitudes." In fact, during job interviews, job candidates are specifically asked to give an example of how they've recently used their sense of humor on the job, and how they've "used humor to defuse a difficult situation." This approach has helped make Southwest Airlines the most successful airline in the country. Employees love working for Southwest, and do whatever it takes to sustain high levels of performance and quality service. And they have fun in the process! If it works for Southwest, it can also work for you.

A New Kind of Leadership

As the 1990s and the first decade of the new century progressed, more and more employees who used to love their jobs have joined the ranks of the frustrated, angry, overworked, burned out, anxious or depressed. Morale remains down, and people just don't enjoy coming to work any more. They feel burned out, overloaded, short of time, and unable to keep up with the information explosion. They are tired of the demand to do everything faster and are anxious about losing their jobs. And they're afraid that they haven't yet seen the worst.

Increasing employee dissatisfaction is just one sign of a growing need for a new kind of leadership. Other changes leave companies no choice but to rethink the demands of leadership. As a result, most companies now have a horizontal rather than a vertical structure. Employees are more empowered to make decisions than ever before, but they also have heavier work loads, more time pressure, the demand for constant learning and a faster pace of change to deal with than ever before. Today's leaders must know how to motivate employees to sustain peak levels of performance, with a constant eye to sustaining quality. They must know how to bolster team spirit and nurture open

communication. And they must do all this in the midst of a sense of job insecurity at all levels of the organization.

Leaders today must recognize the strong desire of an educated work force to have work that they enjoy doing. The resistance often encountered to the idea of making work enjoyable is surprising, since any corporate culture that enables people to feel good while they're doing their work increases the odds that employees will take pride in their work, be committed to quality, and do whatever it takes to help the team get the job done. Leaders must also know how to identify and develop resilient employees who can perform well in a demanding work environment. In the future, successful companies will increasingly be companies with resilient employees.

All of these considerations have supported the trend to put humor to work. To the great surprise of many CEOs, helping employees lighten up on the job has boosted productivity at the same time that it has provided an invaluable skill in coping with ever-increasing levels of job stress. While humor and fun are generally not mentioned in the context of Total Quality Management, they are essential to getting employees to "internalize" the commitment to quality. When the majority of employees love their jobs and have fun doing them, the motivation to provide quality comes from within.

"I don't want any yes-men around me. I want everybody to tell me the truth, even if it costs them their jobs" Samuel Goldwyn

At the top levels, of course, leadership involves the development and application of the basic values and philosophy of the company. Other articles at this web site include numerous examples of CEOs who have become convinced of the value of humor and fun on the job, and their organizations reflect this value. The employees in these companies generally enjoy their work, and the CEOs believe this is crucial to maximizing productivity and quality.

According to the CEO of Rosenbluth International, Hal Rosenbluth, it is "almost inhumane if companies create a climate where people can't naturally have fun . . . Our role and responsibility as leaders and associates is to create a place where people can enjoy themselves. I know our company is doing well when I walk around and hear people laughing."

In June of 2000, *CEO Magazine* sponsored a roundtable discussion among 25 CEOs of major American companies. Human resource concerns were the main focus of the discussion. The conclusion reached by these CEOs was that in order for any company to be successful in today's competitive global market, it has no choice but to find ways to get employees to work more effectively, more rapidly and more creatively—and here's the kicker—and to enjoy their work in the process! In my view, this is one of the greatest challenges to leadership today. Many companies persist in raising the bar a bit higher for employees each year, but how many are able to sustain high levels of job enjoyment in the process? As other articles at this website document, appropriate forms of (and

appropriately timed) humor in the context of everyday work efforts go a long way in helping achieve each of these goals

In the early 1960s, President Kennedy created a bold vision for people to work toward when he said that the United States would land a man on the moon and safely return him to Earth before the end of the decade. There was no technology available to do this at the time, but his commitment made it happen. My own belief is that companies today need to make the same kind of commitment to finding ways to make work enjoyable, if they want to survive and thrive in the 21st century. Humor is one of the most powerful allies you will find in achieving this goal.