

HUMOR AT WORK (YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!)

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Get serious! Quit horsing around! Act your age! Get back to work! Have you ever heard these phrases at your workplace? Ever uttered these phrases yourself? Considering the "average American" spends 70,696 hours working, it seems a shame to squander that much time being so serious. (Three years of your life in business meetings, ten months commuting, nine months in traffic congestion, six months waiting for a red light to turn green...) As a professional, it should come as a relief to know that it's okay to take your job seriously, but yourself lightly.

"Terminal professionalism" seems to be a sign of the times. But taking yourself too seriously can have some nasty side effects. Did you know that U.S. workers consume 15 tons of aspirin a day? That 1 in 4 workers suffers from an anxiety related illness? That soon job stress will be the #1 reason for worker's compensation? The good news is that humor is a cost effective way to ward off many of the detrimental effects of stress. What are the benefits of practicing a little humor at work?

Humor solidifies a group. Victor Borge once said, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." Sharing a laugh helps coworkers establish a bond, develop rapport. No doubt you've experienced "inside" humor, better known as "you had to be there" humor. While this kind of humor can make folks feel like part of the gang, it can also make others feel excluded. Be careful that you use this constructively, and not to shut out others.

Humor improves productivity. When employees are working on a job that is repetitive, boredom can undermine productivity. Humor can increase length of time on task by reducing tension and monotony. And studies show that humor doesn't detract from tasks requiring concentration. Granted things can sometimes get out of hand. That's why it's important also to have a high performance norm and high expectations of the staff.

Humor is a powerfully persuasive form of communication. It gains and holds the listener's attention. By breaking down barriers and establishing rapport, humor can help convey a message. It also improves alertness and retention-- great benefits when you're trying to get an important point across. And a polished negotiator knows that he's more likely to get what he's bargaining for if he can subtly weave in some humor. Here are some helpful tips for getting started:

--Set the tone: If you're in a position of leadership, don't put on excessive restraint. Try to keep the atmosphere informal. Give the staff permission to banter. After one of my presentations, a group of administrators was so enthused they asked me to come back in a month and address the entire staff. The program was a great success, but one comment that showed up on almost every evaluation was, "Terrific message! I wish my boss could have heard it!" How sad. The boss was the one responsible for my being there. But obviously he was not walking the talk.

--Set the environment: Your surroundings can have a tremendous effect on morale. Humorous posters, memos, and signs can lighten the atmosphere and diffuse tension. One institution that I toured had the following sign posted by the time clock: "This job is a test. It is only a test. Had it been a real job, you would have been provided with bonuses, raises, and promotions." Bulletin boards displaying cartoons, jokes, funny notes and postcards don't take a big investment but can provide an abundance of entertainment. On a grander scale, add some comic activities or theme days to your calendar. A M.A.S.H. day where everyone dresses up like the characters on the television show by the same name, or a western theme where everyone dons cowboy boots and bandannas can lighten the atmosphere for both staff and clients. Use your imagination and see how creative you can be.

--Set the pace: If you agree that humor in the workplace is a valuable idea, don't put off implementation until next year or even next month. While I'm not suggesting that you attempt to be a stand-up comic or laugh constantly, I am suggesting that you attempt to use humor routinely. How about a joke-of-the-day on the computer or a daily humor break? Whatever you choose to do, practice it on a regular basis. When humor happens by accident, you still gain lots of benefits. But there's too many benefits to let these be happening by chance-- make humor happen by choice, today!