

Making Work Fun

Paul McGhee, PhD, www.LaughterRemedy.com

Work vs. Prison

In prison, you spend most of your time wanting to get out, looking through bars from the inside.

At work, you spend most of your time wanting to get out and go inside bars.

In prison, you get three free meals a day.

At work, you only get a break for one meal, and you pay for it.

"Most of the time I don't have much fun. The rest of the time, I don't have any fun at all."
(Woody Allen)

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

A funny thing is happening in American companies these days. From very small companies to Fortune 500 corporations, businesses are learning to put fun to work. The word is out that employees who enjoy their jobs work more effectively and are more productive, and companies are reexamining a long-held assumption that has formed the core of the American work ethic. That assumption is that work and play don't mix.

Why Companies are Putting Fun to Work

The most striking feature of most corporations today is change. The pace of change is faster than ever before and continues to increase. Companies recognize that if they want to survive—even thrive—in the global market place, they have no choice but to be able to adapt quickly. They also know that employees tend to resist change. I often hear employees saying, "It takes us a full year to really get to the point where we've mastered the new technology. And then, what do they do? They change it! They say, 'We've found something that will be much more efficient and help you do your job better.'"

"A company that has fun, where employees . . . put cartoons on the wall and celebrate, is spirited, creative, and usually profitable." (David Baum)

Most companies have become leaner in recent years, but are still trying to increase productivity, creating the need to "do more with less." There are also constant pressures to do things faster, to assimilate more information, and to learn new skills and adopt new responsibilities. All of these changes in the past decade have triggered more job stress than ever before. And it is precisely because of the growing conviction that stress levels are getting unmanageable that employers are now trying unorthodox approaches (that they would never have considered a decade or so ago) to help employees deal with their

stress. Companies want stress management techniques which help their employees deal with job stress, but which make work more enjoyable and boost productivity at the same time!

Learning to lighten up on the job—to take yourself lightly while continuing to take your work seriously—achieves all three of these goals. Your sense of humor is one of the most powerful tools you have for coping with any source of stress in your life. When you're able to find a light side of deadlines, conflicts and other aspects of your job—especially on the tough days—you have a tool for letting go of the frustrations and upsets of the moment. This enables you to sustain a frame of mind conducive to dealing more effectively with the problem of the moment. Bringing your sense of humor to your job (when appropriate) also goes a long way in helping make your work fun. Reduced job stress, greater enjoyment of your work, and sustaining a frame of mind conducive to effective working all make a significant contribution to the goal of increased productivity and quality service.

The productivity benefits of humor are evident in the following letter, which was sent to me by a corporate manager following my program for the company.

"Working with people on a daily basis can be so rewarding when there is laughter in the environment. In many crises I experience on the job--work stoppages, natural disasters, and emergencies—laughter helps ease tensions, and the focus on getting the tasks done becomes more enjoyable and less stressful. I've heard other managers and their employees comment on my employees' attitudes. I often hear, 'How do they make their sales and service objectives? That group laughs from the time they come in until the time they leave.' But the laughter is infectious, and the employees and myself enjoy coming to work with each other every day."

The idea that work should be fun is not new. John Naisbitt noted long ago, in his book *Reinventing the Corporation*, that

"Many business people have mourned the death of the work ethic in America. But few of us have applauded the logic of the new value taking its place: 'Work should be Fun.' That outrageous assertion is the value that fuels the most productive people and companies in this country."

I have often had companies for whom I'm doing a humor program tell me that in filling many of their positions, they specifically look for some evidence that a potential new employee (especially for management positions) has a sense of humor. They know that this is a skill that will serve both the employee and the company well, because people with good humor skills are more likely to take the initiative to do whatever it takes to be responsible for making their work enjoyable—perhaps, even fun—and that doing so will help make them and their co-workers more productive.

The Importance of Making Work Fun

The growing trend toward making work fun is evident in an editorial written by John Brandt in *Industry Week* magazine April 1, 1996. He expressed regret that in his own on-the-job training (by the Corporate Management Development School), he was advised to avoid humor and fun on the job. Years of work experience, however, had shown him just how wrong this advice had been. He used his April 1st editorial to invite all employees to use April Fools' Day as a starting point to begin making work fun.

When people start to have more fun on their jobs, they become energized and more productive. And yet, many organizations are afraid to try putting humor and fun to work, because they fear that employees will take it as a message that it's OK to goof off. The *New York Times* reported as far back as 1989 that the intentional waste of time on the job costs American companies \$170 billion a year.¹ That figure is sure to be higher today. I know of no company, however, that has found that introducing a lighter attitude on the job led to goofing off by employees. In fact, the opposite is generally reported. Making work fun helps employees sustain peak performance and consistently provide quality, because it provides an outlet for tension and stress and makes work more enjoyable. Employees learn that they can lighten up on the job, and continue to be competent and professional. The key is taking your work seriously, while taking yourself lightly in doing that work.

Many companies around the country have in recent years changed their views about the value of humor in the workplace. This shift has also occurred for the broader notion that work should be fun. 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, unprofessional, immature, and not taking your work seriously. Over the past two decades, however, as the pace of change in the way business is done has escalated around the world, companies have thrown out many of their old assumptions about how businesses should be run.

"Some days you're the windshield, and some days you're the bug."

In the past two decades or so, a steadily increasing number of CEOs have become convinced that fun boosts the bottom line, and should take its proper place in corporate culture. According to Joel Slutzky, CEO of Odetics, Inc., a company that makes spacecraft flight recorders and robots, "every company should strive for this fun, loose environment. You can't get too uptight." Slutzky is constantly on the lookout for ways to generate new forms of fun. He says that "intermixing fun in the environment has a very positive effect, because it causes a degree of interaction that you wouldn't normally get."

Many companies now include fun among their core values, including AES Corporation, in Arlington, Virginia. At a conference on business ethics, AES CEO and President Dennis Bakke stated that "We regard our people as creative, thinking, capable, trustworthy, responsible, unique, and, yes, fallible. Building an organization that takes these assumptions seriously is extremely difficult and often leads to unorthodox and

controversial approaches."² He provides a fun working environment to bring out these positive qualities in his employees, even though efforts occasionally backfire.

Bill Dahlberg, CEO of Southern Company, an electric power company in Georgia, leaves no doubt in employees' minds about his commitment to the value of fun and humor. He works out of an office stocked with toys, which serve as a reminder to him and others to find ways to lighten up and make work fun.³

At the end of a job interview, the HR person asked the young MBA fresh out of MIT, "And what starting salary were you looking for?"

The candidate said, "In the neighborhood of \$125,000 a year, depending on the benefits package."

The HR person said, "Well, what would you say to a package of 5 weeks vacation, 14 paid holidays, full medical and dental, company matching retirement fund to 50% of salary, and a company car leased every 2 years—say a red Corvette?"

The MBA sat up straight and said, "Wow!! Are you kidding?"

"Certainly," said the HR person, "but you started it."

Some companies have taken extreme positions on the importance of fun on the job. 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."⁴

This stands in sharp contrast to the memo sent around to employees of one division of a major corporation after the president of the division heard laughter coming from a couple of offices as he walked down the hall. The memo said:

"Henceforth, there will be no laughter or smiling allowed in this building during working hours. Laughing distracts fellow employees. And if you're smiling, you're not thinking about your work."

Hopefully, you've never seen a memo like this. It serves as a reminder, however, that you must always be sensitive to when any form of humor or laughter is and is not appropriate. Most managers are now aware of the distinction between taking your work and yourself seriously. As stress levels on the job continue to mount, it's good to keep in mind that "They who laugh, last."

Dick Kussman, Vice President of one of AT&T's most successful sales departments, encouraged his staff (mainly telephone sales and service people) to find ways to make work fun. He has held team chili cook-offs and monthly unusual dress-up days, and sent

fun video-tape messages to employees spread across the country. Kussman says, "I have yet to find anything worth accomplishing that you just can't have a good time doing."⁵

Royce Haines, president of Royce Medical, a company that makes orthopedic products, installed foosball and ping-pong tables for employees to use during breaks, and often holds trivia and team-sales contests to keep the spirit of fun alive. He finds that "the better managers are at providing this kind of [fun-oriented] leadership, the better results they get."⁶

"This is what it's all about. If you can't have fun at it, there's no sense hanging around." Joe Montana

Some companies also establish a fun work environment as a means of recruiting and retaining employees. This is especially difficult in the ultra competitive Silicon Valley. Remedy Corporation, a California company which produces computer products, has been extremely successful on both counts by maintaining a fun environment in which employees can enjoy their work. For example, it had managers wash the cars of all company employees to show appreciation for their efforts. Employees are hesitant to accept new jobs because they feel they simply wouldn't enjoy a job elsewhere as much.⁷

It is no surprise, then, that in *Fortune* magazine's list of "The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America," many of the top companies place a major emphasis on finding ways to help employees make work fun.⁸ These selections are made on the basis of such dimensions as "trust in management, pride in work/company, and camaraderie." The #1 company on the list has often been Southwest Airlines, the most successful (financially) airline in the country—and also the organization that is best known for its commitment to making work fun.

Thomas Edison knew the value of making work fun. Toward the end of his life, he said, "I never did a day's work in my life—it was all fun." While you may not be as creative and productive as Edison (he held over 1,000 patents), doing things to make your work fun will certainly help boost your creativity and effectiveness on the job.

The Fear of Making Work Fun

In my humor programs, I generally ask the audience at some point to tell me the opposite of a string of words that I give them. I'll say "heavy," "tall," etc., and then say "work." The answers that come up from all over the room, of course, are "light," "short," and finally, "play!"

The reason for this little exercise, of course, is to point out the starting assumption that most of us have when it comes to the relationship between work and play. We assume that if you let a playful attitude or a bit of fun come up on the job, you can't be working! Work and play are considered incompatible with each other. That's why employees who know the value of making work fun generally do it on the sly. They know what fellow

employees—especially their boss—will think if they see a lighthearted gesture or hear laughter coming out of their office.

The underlying assumption that humor, laughter or a playful attitude on the job will be viewed negatively is very pervasive in most corporations. When I talk to employees (both management and non-management) in private about this, they almost always say that they have to be careful about letting their sense of humor show on the job. They fear that people will feel they're being unprofessional, and that they're incompetent, not taking their job seriously, etc.

The negative stereotypic views we have (at least in the work place) of people in whom humor, laughter or a lighter style of interacting is a prominent part of their personality are the reasons why my advice is to always establish your competence on the job first, before letting your sense of humor show up. This is true for everyone in virtually all kinds of jobs, but is especially true if you're new on the job, younger and—in many cases—a woman. If people have no prior experience with you, their judgments about your skills and work habits will mainly reflect their stereotypic perceptions of people who play all the time and don't work.

Once you've established that you're good at what you do, and that you're professional and take your work seriously, you'll find that humor and a lighter style will work for you, not against you. The number one rule, of course, is to always be sensitive to when any kind of humor or laughter is and is not appropriate.

We're so conditioned to be serious and stifle any sign of fun and humor on the job that employees often find it difficult to let go and have fun even when specifically invited to do so. I always take a few minutes in my humor programs to play a game that gets people up to do something physically playful—even silly. When the program is at a hotel (e.g., at a convention), most people in the room are able to let go and enter the spirit of fun. But when it's in the building they work in, the percentage of people comfortable with letting the playful side of themselves out is always much smaller. People become nervous and self-conscious, apparently concerned about their image and lack of professionalism.

This is the obstacle I'm helping companies overcome. As information about the health, coping, and productivity benefits resulting from humor continues to reach companies, top management will gradually become more comfortable in adding elements of fun in the work place.

What Makes a Job Fun?

If you're lucky, your company has already become convinced of the value of making work fun and is now doing things to build elements of fun into the job for all employees. Chances are, however, that your company has not been promoting a Yuck-a-Day on the job, so you'll have to take responsibility for building fun into the job yourself.

The Most obvious way to make your job fun, of course, is to learn to find some humor in the things that go on in your office every day. But recent research on how employees view fun on the job shows that there are many things in addition to having a laugh on the job that can make your work fun.

Half the people you work with are below average.

Tiffany McDowell found a difference between in what blue- and white-collar workers—as well as men and women—considered fun on the job.⁹ White-collar men said that fun came up in connection with their working relationships with others, while white-collar women found their job fun when they were doing something they were good at, or doing creative work. Blue-collar men also saw their job as fun when they enjoyed the job itself, and when they were able to use their own initiative to get things done. Blue-collar women saw the job as fun when they felt they were really accomplishing something with their work.

Everyone surveyed in this study agreed with the statement that their work needed to be more fun, but widespread individual differences were found in what they considered fun. This suggests that a "fun committee" should be formed to find effective ways to add fun to work. The committee should consist of representatives from a wide range of departments, and committee membership should rotate.

David Abramis surveyed 930 employees from a range of work settings and interviewed 341 of them.¹⁰ He found that employees were aware of when managers were making efforts to make work fun, and these efforts were generally successful. Those who believed that their company made specific efforts to make work fun did experience more fun on the job. He also found that "people who believe that fun has positive effects in their lives are more likely to try to make their jobs fun." And individuals who made conscious efforts to make their own work fun did have more fun on the job, regardless of the efforts made by their company.

"Fun people" were viewed by their colleagues as being intelligent, energetic, hardworking, outgoing, friendly, competent, not always serious, and able to laugh at themselves." It is precisely because of these qualities that so many companies now seek employees with a good sense of humor. Abramis noted that your own attitude toward your work and a determination to find ways to make it fun are crucial to enjoying your job.

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