

Humor Improves Employee Morale

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"The beatings will continue until morale improves!"

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

The impact of occasional laughter on morale and productivity is very evident in the following letter sent to me by a corporate manager following her attendance at one of my programs. She said,

"Working with people on a daily basis can be so rewarding when there is laughter in the environment. In many of the crises I experience on the job—work stoppages, natural disasters and emergencies—laughter helps ease tensions, and the focus of getting 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."

One of the most consistent trends I have noticed in companies through the 1990s and into the new century has been a drop in employee morale. People who used to love their jobs are burned out and just don't enjoy coming to work any more. A 1994 Roper poll found that employee morale and job satisfaction was at the lowest point it had ever been throughout the decades in which the poll has been taken.¹ My programs for both corporations and hospitals in 2005 make it clear to me that this continues to be a major problem in most organizations. Reduced workplace morale led the New Jersey Department of Labor in the mid-1990s to recommend that companies create a morale committee, whose purpose would be to come up with ways to boost employee morale.

One of the main causes of lowered morale has been the heavy downsizing that has been occurring for the past 20 years. A 1992 study by the American Management Association ". . . showed that of more than 500 firms surveyed that had cut jobs since 1987, more than 75% reported that employee morale had collapsed."² Again, there is ample evidence that this collapse continues today.

There is strong interest now, among both employers and employees, in finding ways to improve the quality of the work environment and—in the process—boost morale. Educated employees want meaningful work, and they want to enjoy their jobs. Since low

morale generally translates into reduced productivity, it is clearly important for every company to make the effort to find ways to boost morale.

There is no more powerful tool for improving morale (with the possible exception of doubling one's salary) than making work fun. Fun, humor and laughter are enjoyable in their own right, but they also make your work more enjoyable by reducing the stress your job generates—as well as the negative emotional state that goes with it. They help let go of frustrations and upsets that accumulate during the day. Jokes related to the source of the upset provide a means of airing complaints in a way that doesn't feed negativity in the office. This kind of venting is especially valuable in sustaining morale in situations where you simply have to learn to live with a negative situation for the time being.

During the Vietnam war, POWs were tortured and kept isolated in an effort to break their morale. Gerald Coffee, author of *Beyond Survival*, spent seven years in a Vietnamese POW camp. He noted that one way he and fellow prisoners kept their morale up was by telling jokes to each other in Morse code through their prison walls.

In the film *Mary Poppins*, there is a scene (the one where she sings A Spoon Full of Sugar) in which Mary is trying to get the children do some work they don't want to do. She gets them to do it by convincing them that whether it's work or fun depends on your point of view. She says, "In every job that must be done, there's an element of fun. Find the element of fun and it becomes a game." Bringing your sense of humor and a lighter attitude toward your work (while continuing to take your work seriously) assures that you'll always find that element of fun on your job.

Some companies use pranks to boost morale. Sun Microsystems Laboratories, Inc. encourages its engineers to come up with elaborate pranks on April Fools' Day. One day, the vice president of the company found a life-size replica of his office at the bottom of a shark tank in the San Francisco Aquarium. The management encourages these annual pranks, because they're convinced that they boost morale and stimulate teamwork.

While your company probably does not have humor and fun as a cornerstone in its basic philosophy, you still can receive the morale-boosting and productivity-enhancing benefits of humor and fun by taking personal responsibility for finding ways to make your job fun—at the same time that you maintain your usual competence and professionalism.

One of my favorite *Far Side* cartoons shows two devils in hell watching a funny looking guy smiling and whistling in the midst of the fire and brimstone. One devil says, "You know, we're just not reaching that guy." We've all seen people who somehow manage to stay in good spirits on the days they're dealing with the same deadlines and work overload the rest of us are struggling with. When you learn to improve your sense of humor, and to make your job fun, you take a big step toward becoming one of those people.

References

1. Gerstner, J. Good communication, bad morale. *ABC Communication World*, March, 18-21, 1994.

2. Baumohl, B. When downsizing becomes "dumbsizing." *Time*, March 15, 1993, p. 55.