

Humor as a Management Tool

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If at first you don't succeed, try management.

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

I've often heard managers say that their job should be to model and motivate hard-working behavior toward common goals, not to run around having fun. These managers remain convinced that there's no place for fun on the job. And yet, given all the benefits to be derived from bringing humor and a lighter attitude to one's work, it's clear that managers should begin thinking of humor skills as a management tool.

In addition to helping employees cope with change, humor is the only management tool you'll ever find that will do all the following: Strengthen bonds between co-workers, create rapport with customers, get and hold attention, strengthen memory of the points you want to be remembered, persuade others to see (and perhaps adopt) your point of view, make awkward communications less difficult, deflect criticism, reduce tension, frustration and anger, manage conflicts, reduce burnout, remove intimidating barriers between management and non-management employees, bolster eroding trust, boost morale and motivate employees, build resilience, stimulate creative problem solving, sustain a positive attitude on the job, and keep everyday hassles and problems in perspective.

Following a systematic discussion of issues related to humor and corporate culture, Wilburn Clouse and Karen Spurgeon concluded that it is

". . . amazing that a well-developed sense of humor application is not a requirement for all leadership positions. Used appropriately, humor removes intimidation, stimulates creativity, encourages communication, and permits the employees to appreciate the work situation . . . Part of the responsibility of effective leadership includes building a culture that supports a positive working environment to carry organizations successfully into the next century. Leadership that encourages self-esteem, cooperation, creative thinking, job satisfaction, and a place where people want to be is the emerging demand from the work force. Leadership that increases productivity and profit is the emerging demand from corporate owners and executives . . . **humor must be part of the solution** (emphasis added by McGhee)."¹

Leadership today is in turmoil as the transition from a hierarchical top-down structure to a flatter system continues. Each company must find its own path in dealing with all the

issues resulting from this change. Because of the many benefits that result from learning to lighten up on the job, it is increasingly being viewed as essential to hire managers who have a good sense of humor themselves, and know how to sustain a lighter attitude on the job among those who work with and under them.

To be effective as a manager, you must be able to communicate your mission effectively, provide employees with the skills required to reach that mission, show that you're part of the team by being approachable and accessible, create a work environment that helps employees perform at peak levels and continue to provide quality service as the bar is raised higher and higher, nurture creativity, and adopt a "communication style" that makes employees feel comfortable in bringing new ideas to you. Good humor skills help assure that you'll succeed in each of these areas.

McGuffey's Restaurants have no doubts about the importance of making work fun. Managers are evaluated on how much fun they are to work with (this accounts for 20% of their raise). According to Keith Dunn, the president of the company, "We're in a service business with high turnover. It's part of a manager's job to bring fun to the workplace."² In recent years, Hewlett-Packard managers have also been evaluated on their ability to create enthusiasm among employees. Building fun and humor into the corporate culture insures that this enthusiasm exists.

References

1. Clouse, R.W. & Spurgeon, K.L. Corporate analysis of humor. *Psychology: A Journal of Human Behavior*, 1995, 32, 1-24. (Quote on p. 20.)
2. Lancaster, H. Your career may be a laugh track away from the fast track ("Managing Your Career" column). *Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 1996.