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Team-building Through Humor

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To managers in formal business settings, the use of humor may seem childish or unprofessional. Yet whether you manage an elite group of white collar workers or a relaxed staff in a casual work environment, you can effectively use humor to build bonds among your team.

Chris Robert, Assistant Professor of Management at Missouri University, has reviewed hundreds of studies touting the value of workplace humor. His findings show that humor, especially when related to events on the job, has a positive impact on the workplace. Humor among colleagues can:

- Enhance creativity
- Foster department cohesiveness
- Boost overall performance

Edward Dunkelblau, a past president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, works with companies on using humor to reduce stress. Says Dunkelblau, “Humor can soften the truth. When comedians do stand-up (comedy), what makes it funny is irony or truth. At work, we sometimes have to deal with an unpleasant truth—financial stress, physical danger—which is not funny at all. But if you can begin to find the humor, you see your way out of it. It’s so engaging to laugh with someone—it’s team building and stress reducing. It reminds us that we’re in the same boat.”

So the question to be asked is not whether humor should be used in the workplace, but rather where, when, and in what context it is appropriate.

Using humor

It’s wise to use humor with care. According to Steve Wilson, a psychologist and “cheerman” of the board at World Laughter Tour, you want to ensure that laughter truly lifts people up rather than puts them down. Managers should avoid sarcasm, ridicule, and language that might be offensive. Encourage staff members to laugh with—not at—each other.

Dunkelblau suggests these tips to ensure the appropriate use of humor at work:

- **Know your audience.** Be sensitive to them and aware of their responses. If you cross a line, catch it quickly and respond—don’t ignore it.
- **Practice “no hurt” humor.** If someone has to be the butt of a joke, it should be you or someone who you know won’t feel hurt.

- **Learn what appropriate humor is.** Perhaps you grew up in a family that used sarcasm and put-down humor. Find ways to develop humor that is more positive and playful.

Creating a playful environment

Ensuring that employees enjoy humor doesn't have to rest on you alone. Create a setting where they can share a laugh with each other, or enjoy humor when they least expect it. Wilson offers these ideas:

- Post a "cartoon of the week" on the bulletin board. Invite staff to share ideas.
- Send anonymous notes of thanks and praise.
- Celebrate often: birthdays, completed projects or milestones, offbeat holidays. (In the United States, April is National Humor Month and October is National Popcorn Popping Month.)
- Prepare a "Humor First Aid Kit" for your team. Include toys and games and keep it in a central location.
- Organize a humor task force whose role is to infuse the place with laughter each week.
- Once in a while, have the leadership team serve coffee or cook breakfast for everyone.
- Give awards for unusual accomplishments, such as a "hazardous duty" award when someone turns around a problem customer.

Resources

Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor

World Laughter Tour

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