



Managing to Have FUN

By Michael Kerr

NOTED BUSINESS AUTHOR PAUL HAWKEN SAID IT BEST, “WE LEAD BY BEING HUMAN. WE DO NOT LEAD BY BEING CORPORATE, BY BEING PROFESSIONAL OR BY BEING INSTITUTIONAL.” PERHAPS THAT’S WHY MANY LEADERS ARE EMBRACING ONE OF THE MOST UNDERVALUED HUMAN RESOURCES THEY HAVE AT THEIR DISPOSAL—THEIR SENSE OF HUMOUR.

Some managers, however, weaned on a “never mix business with pleasure” attitude, have a difficult time buying into the value of humour. “You can’t be serious?” is the incredulous response to the suggestion to lighten up and they’re absolutely right. You can’t be serious, at least not if you’re interested in improving staff morale or motivating employees to new heights. And if you want to spark creativity, strengthen teamwork, facilitate open communication, minimize stress levels, reduce employee turnover and absenteeism rates, improve trust between management and employees, offer dynamic customer service and improve productivity, then you can’t be serious. You can’t be serious, because humour can help any organization achieve all those goals.

Putting HUMOUR to work isn’t about employees standing around the water cooler exchanging one liners. Having a sense of humour is about having a sense of perspective and using the ability to find the humour in situations to manage stress and creatively problem solve. Adding humour is about celebrating work, not trivializing it. And it’s about mixing humour in an appropriate manner to improve workplace productivity.

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Here are a few “guiding lights” to help you manage to have more fun in your organization.

- 1. Take Yourself Lightly.** Too many of us fall victim to the dreadful disease “acute professionalism”. The symptoms include a furrowed forehead, high levels of stress and blocked creativity. The cure is simple—learn to take yourself lightly, while still taking your job seriously. When you laugh at yourself, you demonstrate your humanity and openness and encourage others to do likewise. As an added bonus, you take away anyone’s ability to laugh at you. As author Bob Ross reminds us, Leaders without a sense of humour are like a lawn mower at the cemetery—they have lots of people underneath them, but nobody is paying them any attention.
- 2. Be Sincere.** Dogs know when we’re not sincere, so there’s a good chance our employees will too. If you show up Monday morning with a transplanted Robin Williams persona, staff may be cynical about your new found attempts to lighten the office mood. So be yourself. Practice sharing your own unique brand of humour and only do what feels comfortable for you.
- 3. Think Small and Simple.** The biggest factors that contribute to employee morale don’t cost a lot of money or take a lot of energy; it’s the small things done on a consistent basis that matter. So look for easy opportunities to introduce a little humour—put up a humour bulletin board, create a humour room (Kodak Eastman and Hewlett Packard have them) include humorous quotes in correspondence and practice spontaneous humour (which as stand-up comedians will tell you, is the most effective form of humour).
- 4. Practice Relevant Humour.** The more you celebrate humour specific to your office, team or organization, the more meaningful the humour is. Relevant, work-related humour becomes part of the corporate history and helps teams to bond around shared experiences. Start collecting a humour file of quotes, cartoons, funny customer questions and anecdotes that relate to your organization
- 5. Practice Safe Humour.** Humour can break down barriers as easily as it can build walls, so make sure the style of humour you practice is “safe”. Non-sexist, non-racist, non-religious humour is the order of the day. Also be aware of times when humour may not be appropriate. The safest form of humour? Laughing at yourself.
- 6. Hire for Humour.** If you want to lighten up the office then recruit people with a positive sense of humour. Southwest Airlines, recipient of a “Humour in the Workplace” award, hires for humour, regardless of whether it’s a front line customer service agent or mechanic, so that every employee will fit their unique corporate culture. Even NASA has suggested that one of the most important attributes of future astronauts will be a great sense of humour.
- 7. Make Fun a Priority.** It’s easy to agree with the idea that we need to have more fun in our organizations, after all it’s one of those “feel good”, motherhood statements. There’s only one problem—this little thing called life keeps getting in the way. If you’re going to take humour seriously then treat it like any other priority—tie into your mission statement (the corporate motto for Grimes Aerospace based in Columbus, Ohio, is “Growth, profit and fun”), list fun as one of your core values, offer training in workplace humour, include it in goals and work plans, and yes, evaluate it every now and then by asking the simple, yet all important question—are we having fun yet?
- 8. Give Yourself and Your Employees Permission to Play . . .** and then get out of the way. Remember, as a leader, people look to you to set the tone for the office. You have the power to decide whether you’re going to be a roadblock on the inspiration highway or a catalyst for creativity and positive energy. ■