



Having Fun at Work: Humor and Creativity as Energizing Forces in the Workplace

by Scott J. Smith

An excellent definition of humor, as it applies to the workplace, is “amusing communications that produce positive emotions and [thoughts] in the individual, group, or organization.” Understanding the multifunctional role of humor in organizations can actually contribute to effective management of personnel and the construction of effective workplace relationships.

Creativity is “the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc.; originality, progressiveness, or imagination.” Humor promotes openness to new ideas by relaxing people and making them less likely to criticize mistakes or new ideas, leading to risk taking, which is the basis of creative thinking. Additionally, a humorous environment leads to increased creativity by establishing a contagious, fun atmosphere in which original ideas are likely to emerge and creative problem solving thrives.

On that basis, humor should be considered an energizing force in the workplace that fosters creativity, leading ultimately to a vibrant work environment, enhanced service delivery, and a productive organization.

Practical Application

Lang and Lee of Singapore’s Nanyang Business School describe a behavioral model that “contrasts the effects of different types of humor on organizational creativity.” Their model is built on three humor types, liberating, stress-relieving, and controlling, and the impact of each in a workplace setting.

Liberating humor refers to humor that facilitates the freeing of old mindsets and of seeing things in a new light. The liberating humor concept is grounded deeply in years of humor and behavioral research on how we react when our normal frames of reference are confronted by incongruous or incompatible frames of reference. The theory states that liberating humor “can stimulate divergent, unconventional, creative, and innovative thinking.”

In situations that we might otherwise find uncomfortable or culturally or socially sensitive, liberating humor affords us an acceptable avenue to discussion. In the workplace, this can be particularly useful in scenarios involving staff members of differing power levels. Liberating humor may provide an opportunity for a lower-level employee to broach a subject with an absurdist or unconventional observation that creates laughter and, simultaneously, opens the door for higher-level employee to consider the underlying idea.

A supervisor may be present at a meeting, with the implied understanding to limit his participation to observation and note

taking. When a discussion breaks out amongst the managers that is likely to negatively affect his business unit production, he or she might say something like, “As long as we fire half of my staff (smiling), we should easily be able to absorb the added cost of implementing the new procedure.” The disorienting, hyperbolic nature of the statement will naturally draw laughs from at least some of those present, but it will also likely lead to deeper consideration of the matter and potentially generate creative thinking on how to avoid any negative effects of the prospective procedure. Liberating humor aids flexibility and openness to the generation of new ideas, creativity through the encouragement of unconventional approaches to routine matters, and leads to an improvement in organizational performance.

Humor influences how people think and behave by elevating their emotional and motivational states. When we are feeling “stressed” or less than energetic, humor can elevate our mood by creating a buffer against the complex, the repetitive, or the mundane. Stress is the enemy of productivity and inspiration. In an organization that encourages the use of stress-relieving humor in the workplace, managers can enjoy an additional tool in the battle for consistency of performance.

Perhaps the most important organizational role for humor in general and stress-relieving humor in particular, is that of motivation booster. Anyone who has spent time in a business environment knows that motivated employees are more creative and innovative than employees who lack motivation.

Southwest Airlines offers a shining example of the benefits of workplace humor. Southwest’s legendary founder and former CEO Herb Kelleher was often thought of as having an unorthodox management style, but he understood the purpose of humor in the workplace. He kept employees smiling, occasionally dressing up as Elvis or the Easter Bunny just for the laughs, or so it seemed. In reality, Kelleher understood that his antics were about more than getting a few chuckles from the staff. They were about decompressing the office environment by allowing managers and line employees alike room for a little stress-relieving, creative expression.

Humor, according to superiority theory, may be used to express superiority feelings one has over others, a concept that goes back at least to Plato. This is a vital concept in the context of an organization, with its need for structure and control and conformity to laws, rules, regulations, and procedures.

When managers, line staff, officers or owners venture near the bounds of acceptable conduct, controlling humor can be an exceptional tool for reminding them to re-familiarize themselves with accepted practices. In this way, controlling humor acts as the organizational behavior equivalent of a

non-lethal weapon. Used correctly, it can have a mild shaming affect that recalibrates conduct in a way that is socially acceptable and may allow the target to laugh right along with the deliverer and the audience.

Since people generally don't like to be laughed at, depending on the situation, laughter can serve as a means of social control to get wrongdoers back in line, but if done in a mean-spirited, derisive way, controlling humor can have a darker side. This form of humor can conceal malice and allow the expression of disdain, aggression, discriminatory attitudes, veiled cruelty, prejudice, or other forms of behavior that would otherwise be socially unacceptable.

Organizations and their human resource departments would be well served by developing innovative ways to incorporate basic humor theory into managerial training. Happier, more relaxed employees are more motivated. Motivated employees are more creative. Creativity leads to innovation and higher performance. Innovation and higher performance lead to happier guests and a more robust bottom line.

Workplace Trends

Finding practical applications for the use of humor may be the most challenging step and requires not only the ability to think creatively, but also a willingness to accept the risk of being labeled unorthodox. Southwest Airlines has shown that a company can go from unorthodox to industry standard while laughing all the way to the bank.

A starting point for design of an organization's humor initiative is the Organizational Humor Model (OHM). While a detailed view of the concept would require a more in depth discussion than is possible here, the basic concept is fairly simple and will seem familiar to many human resource professionals. The essential steps are selection of an organizational outcome to enhance; selection of a humor style that will convey the intended message and delivery of that message; evaluation of the outcome, i.e., the match between humor style and the audience in the context of the desired outcome. To realize the benefits of humor, organizations can apply the OHM to develop humor-training seminars for managers and team members.

Another trend in the area of workplace humor has been the emergence of humor professionals, encouraging the use of workplace humor as a means of generating ideas and stimulating productive thought. Humor Consultants Incorporated promises to provide "customized steps and solutions to make YOUR workplace a creative, enjoyable environment and help YOU attract and retain qualified employees...." The Laughter Remedy Company president, Paul McGhee, says that the reasons companies are re-evaluating humor as a positive influence in the workplace is because, "humor is related to flexibility – it's intellectual play with ideas. Organizations that are flexible are capable of creative and innovative thinking."

Some organizations have turned to "humor rooms," i.e., places for employees to take time out to play and have fun in the belief that this will raise creativity and productivity. Kodak has a humor room complete with humorous books, video tapes of comedians, and "de-stressing" toys.

Pros and Cons

Managers who can laugh at themselves or difficult situations are often seen as more approachable and in touch with the challenges faced by their teams. Humor also contributes to employees' self-esteem, cooperation, creative thinking, and job satisfaction; it reduces stress, enhances leadership, and increases group cohesion.

While higher status is important for many leadership roles, it can create social distance that may be undesirable in other roles. Humor reduces social distance by identifying similarities between people such as intelligence, needs, and values.

There are also a few important areas that must be recognized and avoided. One is overuse, particularly by managers and other leaders. Too much humor can make it look like the manager is trying too hard to be everyone's friend, or isn't comfortable with his or her elevated status. Such a leader risks not being taken seriously.

Another potential pitfall is inappropriate or insensitive use of humor. This is most evident when members of the audience, at which the humor is directed, are of a different demographic. The humor initiator must be aware of the audience's composition because humor that is expressed at the expense of another person or group alienates that person. Ethnic humor is detrimental to workplace harmony and should always be avoided.

Men and women use humor in the workplace for different motivations. Women share humor to build solidarity while men use it to impress and emphasize similarities. Men and women should realize this when using humor in the presence of the opposite gender to avoid negative outcomes. Gender-based humor is usually aggressive and intended to degrade for the purpose of making the initiator feel superior.

Aggressive or malicious forms of humor must be prohibited. Since many of the problem areas are also considered socially unacceptable, a good number of staff will likely have sufficiently developed self-filtering mechanisms to avoid workplace conflict.

By and large, the appropriate use of humor in the workplace represents another avenue for management to improve staff relations, creativity, and morale while enhancing the bottom line. Since it is generally accepted that happier employees lead to happier customers and that happier customers lead to higher revenues, we can truly say that it pays to have fun at work. ♣

Scott J. Smith, J.D., is the Contracts Administrator at Barona Resort & Casino. He can be reached by calling (619) 328-3540 or email ssmith@barona.com.