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AS WE LIVE AND WORK



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TAKING HUMOR SERIOUSLY

"Take time to laugh - it is the music of the soul."

-- An old English prayer

"Life is far too important to be taken seriously."

-- Oscar Wilde

Approximately 50 years ago, Norman Cousins, editor of the Saturday Review, contracted a serious illness. He was given less than a year to live. Rather than accept the grave prognosis, he decided to humor himself back to health. He watched an endless number of humorous movies and read a ton of funny books. The outcome is that he literally laughed himself back to health. Cousins lived another 17 years and documented his experience in the classic book *Anatomy of an Illness*.

Since that time, researchers have been studying the mechanisms that trigger the body's healing powers and act in conjunction with traditional medicine. Humor remains high on the list. When you laugh, your body temperature gets warmer, your pulse and blood pressure become lower,

your breathing deepens, your immune system becomes stronger, and your muscles contract and relax.

Obviously humor is more than just funny business. It's a powerful vehicle to get a message across. Humor can turn a gloomy forecast into a realistic and optimistic solution. It's a force that can be so powerful that when the punch line is delivered, it literally bowls a person over and leaves them stunned, as evidenced by the line Golda Meir used on a man enamored with his own humility: "Don't try to be so humble," she remarked, "You're not that great."

Humor is a potent safety valve that can defuse pressure at a tense meeting. It can dramatically express the reality of things and put the absurd in perspective. It can liberate the thinking of the oppressed and downtrodden, and establish strong bonds among the underdog. And for many, it can provide a sense of hope by opening up channels that had previously been blocked. Humor directed at oneself is a marvelous way to defend against our fears and idiosyncrasies. And done in the appropriate way, it ingratiates us to our constituencies.

Art Buchwald, the brilliant humorist, spent his early life shuttling between orphanages. He was a short, skinny kid - the perfect target for bullies who needed to exert their power and control. But Buchwald was also a resourceful person who knew how to leverage his strength. He had a great sense of humor, and made up funny stories about himself which endeared him to the bullies. They rewarded him by making him their protected mascot.

Not only does humor serve us well in our home lives, it has a positive effect on our work lives as well. Here are a few basic principles of applying humor to business:

_ Take your job seriously and yourself lightly. Most successful leaders say they prefer to surround themselves with managers who have a good sense of humor. The reason? Humor helps keep your head clear when the circumstances surrounding you are muddy.

_ Use humor as an antidote to stress and fear. We're much more knocked off balance by stressful situations when we're stoic and serious. If we're relaxed enough to laugh, we're better able to roll with the punches. A technophobe, for example, dealt with his fear of computers by remarking: "For all the ways technology has failed to improve life - please press number three".

_ Smile. As humorist Victor Borge observed, "a smile is the shortest distance between two people". A smile, when offered authentically, is an effective way to build strong working relationships, high functioning teams, creative work cultures, and improved morale. A work environment instilled with gentle humor can infuse greater honesty into the culture, resulting in more candid performance appraisals and more stimulating meetings. In an industry beleaguered by fear, Southwest Airlines has built humor into the core of its business model, while Song Airlines encourages its flight attendants to respectfully share smiles and humor with their customers to help reduce the fear of flying.

_ Use humor as a tool, not as a weapon. Laughing *with* others builds confidence, brings people together, and pokes fun at common dilemmas. Laughing *at* others obliterates confidence, shatters teamwork, and singles out individuals or groups as scapegoats. One of the simplest ways managers can bring humor into the workplace is to poke fun at themselves -- an excellent way to build camaraderie with their group. Dustin Hoffman laughed at himself when he remarked "One thing about being successful is that I stopped being afraid of dying. Once you're a star you're dead already. You're embalmed."

_ Know what's funny and what's not. This is the most difficult prescription of all. What's funny to one person may not be appreciated by another. In trying to decide what's funny in your own workplace, get to know what's humorous to your colleagues. And keep in mind the words of John Kenneth Galbraith: "Where humor is concerned, there are no standards; no one can say what is good or bad, although you can be sure that everyone will."

Good humor works because it delivers a message and captures attention with just a facial expression, a few words, or few short lines. The work we do should be taken seriously. But let it breathe; spice it up with moments of periodic lightheartedness. It will improve your sense of well-being and productivity. We're not kidding.

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