



## Management Assistance Program

### **USING HUMOR IN THE WORKPLACE:**

Understanding the Importance of Healthy Workplace Humor as a Tool to Develop Positive Relationships

#### **GOALS:**

The goal of this module is to provide organizations, managers and employees with a heightened understanding of the importance of fostering and incorporating appropriate humor in the workplace.

The specific goals are to help organizations, managers, and employees:

- Understand the benefits of nurturing humor in the workplace.
- Incorporate humor into the workplace.
- Recognize humor guidelines and obstacles.

#### **OVERVIEW:**

As the old saying goes, laughter is the best medicine. Workplaces that encourage laughter have happier, healthier and more productive workers and, as a result, see an increase in profits and results. <sup>1</sup>Relationships, rapport, cooperation, influence and staff development can all be enhanced by the appropriate use of humor.<sup>2</sup> Humor creates a pleasant working environment, motivates employees, decreases anxiety and stress, boosts morale, increases creativity, and enhances problem-solving skills.

According to the article "Top 7.5 Ways to Use Humor in Leadership" by Roz Treiber, "research shows that there is a significant relationship between humor and leadership effectiveness. Humor employed by managers and leaders achieve three specific ends: reduce stress in the workplace, motivate employees, and help employees understand management concerns by enhancing communication patterns. A majority of good leaders are shown to have a quick wit, see the point of jokes, maintain group morale through

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<sup>1</sup> *Humour in the Workplace*. Solutions Newsletter. [Canada Family Services](#).

<sup>2</sup> Treiber, Roz. "Top 7.5 Ways to Use Humor in Leadership." [HumorFusion.com](http://www.humorfusion.com/html/articles/article_5.html). Accessed August 4, 2006 at [http://www.humorfusion.com/html/articles/article\\_5.html](http://www.humorfusion.com/html/articles/article_5.html)

extraverted humor vs. mean spirited humor, have infectious laughs, and tell humorous satires in dialect.”<sup>3</sup>

Workplaces that are too serious can create a stressful environment for employees. In turn, employees may be afraid of making mistakes, dread coming to work, resent the solemn atmosphere, and even become physically ill or depressed due to pressure of their job. An environment where laughter is valued will help make employees feel less taxed and more enthusiastic about their job.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

#### **1. Humor, Laughter and Productivity**

Using humor in the workplace benefits employees and employers both physically and psychologically. Laughter and humor increases the immune system response, cardiovascular strength, relaxation, muscle tone, decreases muscle tension and pain, and speeds recovery. It also has the power to increase motivation and energy, socialization, improve concentration and memory, enhance creativity, reduce emotional anxiety and aggression, and nurture self-esteem.

Additionally, humor and laughter can benefit employees because:<sup>4</sup> Laughter releases endorphins that reduce stress, create a sense of wellbeing, and make you feel more alert.

- Humor can help people think more creatively. If an employee is stuck on a problem, a good laugh can help them clear their mind of any negative thoughts and return to the issue with a fresh positive outlook.
- People with a good sense of humor are better communicators and team players.
- Humor builds self-confidence, makes people less afraid to make mistakes, and helps people regroup from negative events.

For employers, here is the bottom line:<sup>5</sup>

*Happy workers are productive workers.* Humor and laughter can lighten the mood of the workplace and make it a truly fun place to be. In turn, your colleagues and even your managers will be more enthusiastic about their jobs.

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<sup>3</sup> Treiber, Roz.

<sup>4</sup> Solutions Newsletter

<sup>5</sup> Solutions Newsletter

- *Laughter and humor can improve communication at work.* A well-placed joke can help you get your point across at a meeting, soften criticisms of colleagues and superiors, and help you deal with difficult customers.
- *Laughter can build stronger relationships:* When people laugh together a natural bond is created. Employees who enjoy each other's company become positive team players—they have more trust and confidence in one another, and are more likely to take a cooperative approach to problem-solving.
- *Laughter and humor can lighten up tense situations at work.* During times of high stress, humor can be a great release. It allows people to forget about their problems for a brief moment and relax. It also can diffuse tense situations between individuals.

In addition, businesses have found that humor in the workplace works because it can:

- Enhance team building
- Aid in recruitment activities
- Foster healthy relationships
- Improve communication
- Assist with crisis management
- Increase morale and productivity.

## 2. Incorporating humor in the workplace<sup>6</sup>

Below are some suggestions on how organizations can incorporate humor in the workplace—these are merely suggestions and should be used to help managers develop their own fun activities that fit the culture of their specific organization and management style.

- *Create a humor bulletin board:* Put the bulletin board in the lunchroom or other social area where everyone can post tasteful cartoons, jokes, and funny photos. Make it a point to choose photos that poke fun at circumstances that cause negativity or conflict in the office, and encourage employees to contribute to the board. Remember to make sure to select someone to monitor the items on the board.
- *Create a humor break room:* This room should contain cartoon and joke books, and fun props. Employees can use this room when they feel like they need a good laugh.

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<sup>6</sup> McGhee, Paul E. "More Ideas for Building Fun into Your Work Setting." [The Laughter Remedy](#). March 2000.

## Management Resources

- *Create a tension release area:* This room can contain a pool table, chalk board, mini-basketball hoops, a deck of cards, hula hoops etc. for employees to “play” with when they need a break. This will encourage employees to take a break from their day to relieve some stress to avoid getting burnt out.
- *Have fun dress-up days:* Consider a day in which everyone is encouraged to wear a silly tie, shoes, shirt, etc. Many companies do this on Halloween or April Fools Day, but you can create your own fun days like, “Silly Hat Day” or “Ugly Tie Day”.
- *Give Gag Gifts and Fun Awards:* Give employees funny gifts and awards to recognize their hard work in a humorous way. Give employees mugs with a funny phrase, or a gift that represents a challenge they just overcame. For example, a manager gave an employee who was always “putting out fires” on various projects and plastic fire extinguisher.
- *Laugh at yourself:* If you have the confidence to laugh at yourself and your mistakes, your fellow employees will be more relaxed. You immediately become more approachable when you show others your “human side”.
- *Find humor in everyday situations:* People can easily relate to these types of jokes and they won’t make anyone feel bad.
- *Be aware of cultural differences:* It is essential to for managers to raise the issue of cultural differences in fun and humor. What seems appropriate for one group may not well-received by another.

In addition, managers can use humor effectively by:

- Encouraging employees to be themselves on the job
- Scheduling celebrations for milestones, birthdays and special occasions regularly.
- Planning team social events or functions on a quarterly basis.
- Creating a specific “humor” file for work-related stories for people to go to when they need a good laugh.
- Start meetings with an ice-breaker and give employees a chance to laugh or relax before getting into work related items.
- Developing guidelines on what types of humor are appropriate.

### 3. Guidelines and Obstacles

While humor can be a great tool for improving productivity and relationships, inappropriate jokes and comments will do the opposite. Follow the guidelines below to ensure that humor will influence the workplace positively.

- Humor should always make people feel good, happy, relaxed and accepted.
- Humor should poke fun at situations, not people.
- Humor should never be about a person's appearance, religion, ethnic background, or sexuality. This is not funny and will most certainly cross ethical boundaries.
- Humor has very little to do with practical jokes—they usually make people feel bad and separate from the "group".
- Humor should not be used to make complaints about your workplace, or insult bosses or colleagues.

Humor can be viewed negatively in many organizations because, people may fear being viewed as unprofessional, labeled incompetent, or fear that others may think that they are not taking their job seriously. Therefore, it is important to overcome these obstacles to successfully incorporate humor. As an individual, establish your competence first, and then let your lighter side show. For organizations, managers and leaders must consistently re-enforce the message that humor is accepted and appreciated.

### **SUMMARY:** Tips for Using Humor in the Workplace

- Encourage workers to use appropriate humor in the workplace to make work more enjoyable and less tedious.
- Use laughter as a way to release stress by looking at the lighter side of situation.
- Develop a good sense of humor when working with colleagues and customers.
- Learn how to use humor respectfully and affectively to release the tension of difficult situations and put others at ease.
- Discover ways to use positive humor in conversations to get your point across.
- Do not be afraid to laugh at yourself and let others laugh along with you.
- Be careful to understand the boundaries of jokes and appropriate settings for their use.
- Never use inappropriate language or offensive characterizations when using humor.
- Practice relaxation techniques during the day to regain your sense of humor.
- Gain an appreciation of the humor of others.