

Using Positive Humor in the Workplace

By Avery M. Henderson, PH.D. M.P.H. Henderson and Associates



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Our lives have changed forever! The World Trade Center tragedy has resulted in enormous amounts of anxiety and stress for all of us. Although we go back to work, the workplace cannot be the same anytime soon. We have new challenges, change and new stress with which to deal.

Psychoneuroimmunology research reveals that stress and the resultant way we think can have positive or negative effects on our immune system.

Laughter results in breaking the stress cycle and in positive effects on the

immune system. At this time we need ways to help us stay positive and get back to leading productive and satisfying lives. It is time for “servant leaders” in the workplace to stand up and lead the workers of this nation out of mourning and into constructive endeavors that will help us to deal with such stress. The need to recover is there. The need to laugh, to have some fun, and to reduce stress is there.

Being respectful of the necessary mourning each person needs, I propose that we gradually and intentionally begin using positive humor in the workplace to help recover from the World Trade Center tragedy. Positive humor necessitates positive attitudes, creativity and actions. From these will rise constructive solutions to deal with our new challenges, change and stress. With some supportive research, I assert that ...

People who are humorous are more playful...

People who are more playful are more creative ...

People who are more creative find more solutions ...

people who find more solutions can better deal with every day challenges, change, and the associated stress.

Avery M. Henderson, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Some Suggestions on How to be Humorous in the Workplace

Commit yourself to taking necessary risks to be a humorist (not a comedian).

To be a humorist, one accepts the risk of no one laughing. One has to let go of "looking good" and "not looking bad." A humorist accepts the fact that what he or she thinks is funny may not be perceived as funny to everyone else. We all have different senses of humor. One major lesson I have learned is that you cannot please every-one. ("I cannot tell you the secret to success; however, I can tell you the secret to failure. Try to please everyone." – Anonymous) Making attempts to be humorous, learning lessons about what kind of humor works with this person and that group, and trying again is what the commitment to be a humorist is about. Ya gotta take risks!

Affirm that you are humorous/funny and break down the myth that you are not.

You can create what you want to be right now! "Be" funny now. Take action. Get results. This is the "process of being" whatever you want to be!

Tell jokes.

Most jokes, but not all, are put-downs and that's why I think some people avoid telling them. Some of us tend to use put-downs with our friends to show that we care about one another, to laugh at ourselves and to bond. I'm okay with that. Some of us use put-downs to intentionally hurt others. I'm not okay with this. ("If there is no malice in your heart, there will be no malice in your jokes." – Anonymous)

Rather than avoid telling jokes, what if you are able to tell jokes without hurting others?

Would you try then? Here is how. To avoid putting others down, one can use self-deprecation. By using your creativity, you can turn most jokes so that you are the "target" of the joke. Most audiences like to hear the speaker or entertainer put themselves down. It makes you more real, fallible and someone with whom they can identify and empathize. It's worth a try!

Tell humorous stories.

Tell these one-on-one, in small co-worker groups, or during a presentation just for fun or to introduce a concept or principle. The greatest reservoir for humor is your life, especially your childhood. Take the time to sit down, close your eyes, and reflect on fun things in your life from early childhood, through elementary school, middle school, high school, secondary and post-graduate education.

Then, go through all your jobs, military service, church events and activities, community events. Think about fun things you and your friends did. Now, write them down by title or outline. By taking things from your life, you will personalize your relationships with others. You will get connected!

Use icebreaker and energizer games for group settings.

Make them invitational (some people just don't want to participate). One of my favorite icebreakers involves getting people to share humorous stories about themselves with one another. For a quick and fun energizer with a group, I lead aerobic patting. Starting with my hands, arms, head and neck, then down to the front of my thighs, my shins, my calves, the back of my thighs, ending at my "booty." In both of these cases, people are laughing and no one has told a joke. Like I always say, you don't have to tell a joke to get people to laugh.

Play nonsense, cooperative and low competition games for fun.

Emphasize that it doesn't matter who wins the game; it's for fun! The more mistakes made, the more fun it is. These games are true tests of whether or not people are able to lighten up! A great nonsense game I love to play alone, as well as with others, is Bop-It. It's a game that can be played on short or long work breaks. Caution: It's addictive! You can purchase various sizes of Bop-It at your local toy store.



Use fun props and practical jokes.

Funny glasses are always great props. You have a choice of Groucho/Beagle Puss glasses, huge sunglasses, thick bottle glasses, zany shaped and colored glasses, and glasses with funny shaped eyes. Turn your back to a person or group, slip on the glasses, turn around and make a funny comment. You'll get a laugh or a groan (a groaner is better than nothing) every time.

Noisemakers and humorous musical instruments really get attention. I love the sliding flutes, train whistles, zinger whistles, kazoos and nose flutes. People can't stop laughing when I play a "nose" flute for them. Even better is when I try to teach them to play. It has something to do with images, I think!

There are practical jokes you can buy, e.g., the whoopee cushion, the hand buzzer, exploding golf balls, etc., but the best ones are those you think up on your own. Be careful; have fun but avoid scaring people into heart attacks. And remember, what goes around, comes around. Be willing to accept what comes back to you.

Use string figures and balloon sculptures to tell funny stories, to teach points in a fun way, to help a coworker get out of the dumps (make their favorite balloon animal), and to decorate in fun ways for celebrations. Both are easy to learn. You can find books on string figures at bookstores. Appropriate balloons, balloon pumps and books on balloon sculpting can be found in magic stores and toy stores.

Celebrate successes and achievements (small and big) and recognize coworkers with fun gifts and cards.

Recognition is something everyone wants. Whether it's job success, personal achievement, birthday, holiday, other special occasions, or "just because I'm thinking of you," we all like the special attention given to us. Whether it's giving humorous cards, gag gifts, crazy candy,

goofy flowers, funny skits or birthday roasts, coworkers will appreciate one another and enjoy their jobs better when they are celebrated and recognized. Important Note: It's okay to buy things for people, but making something for them will be appreciated more and be more memorable. Why? We show our love when we take time to personalize gifts.

Share humorous audiotapes and watch humorous videotapes.

On work breaks, coworkers can share humorous audiotapes (purchased or self-recorded) or watch humorous videotapes. Human Resources can use some humorous videotapes for training, as well. Try "edutaining" instead of boring training! The old time radio bloopers are my favorite. Taping radio pro-grams, like Prairie Home Companion, Car Talk, etc., is a good way to store humor for a later time when a humor boost is needed. Remember the scout motto: Be Prepared! John Cleese and other humorists/comedians have some great training videotapes available.

Read humorous material.

Reading is usually thought of as an individual activity; however, reading to others is another possibility. After reading some humorous material, one can share it during work breaks, during training, before or after work. Sharing humorous resources might pique the interest of others enough for them to start reading similar things. Who knows when it will help someone who is always in a bad mood?

Sharing cartoons (we usually read the punch lines), by clipping them out of the newspaper, photocopying (sometimes modifying) and posting on a bulletin board, or just giving them to someone personally, can help coworkers get a laugh. Cartoon books are great gifts, not only for others but for yourself, also. I have given myself all the collections of "The Far Side," "Calvin and Hobbes," and "Herman." With CRS (Can't Remember Stuff), I get to read them again every year and laugh just as much as the first time.

With many people having e-mail now, sending and receiving humorous material is much easier. (Yes, yes, yes, let's not overdo it! Eliminating it altogether prevents some much needed stress relief.) I keep a humor buddy list and exchange materials on a daily basis. When I get notes back from someone saying that a particular piece helped her or him to cope, I know it's a good thing to do.

Learn new skills or renew old skills to share with coworkers in humorous ways.

Here are some suggestions unmentioned heretofore: magic; buffoonery juggling; mouth sounds and cartoon animal voices (e.g., Mickey Mouse & Donald Duck); linguistic play with regional accents and brogues; play fun musical instruments for a tub band (e.g., kazoo, nose flute, wash board, jug); sing humorous songs; write humorous songs, poems, and tongue twisters; cartooning; dancing; hand shadows, etc.

By now I hope you realize that there are many more possibilities for being humorous in the workplace than just telling jokes. And, I hope you will choose something to try. If you need resources, please check out the bibliography that I have posted on my web site: www.whoopedoo.com. Along with titles of books, I list names of companies from which you can order catalogues of games, props, gag gifts, magic, juggling equipment, etc.

In closing, I want to leave you my favorite line. "If you don't keep a good sense of humor; sooner or later, you won't have any sense at all!" Best wishes for great health, humor and creativity!

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