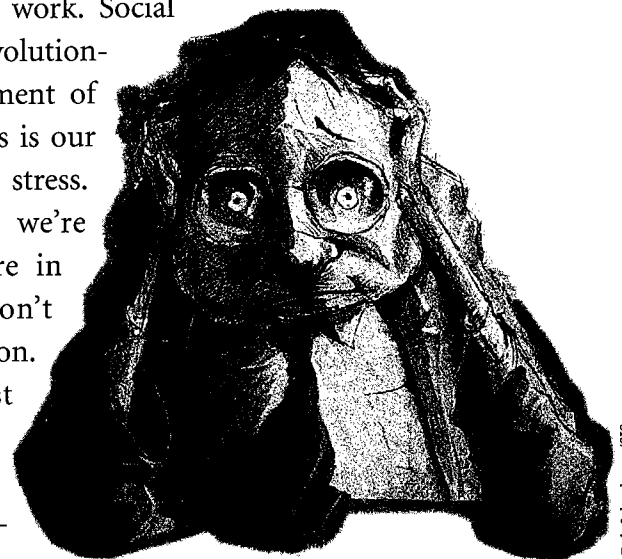


Want to Be a Successful Manager? Now That's a Laughing Matter!

George Barbour

Some years back, when I was developing the creative manager training package for ICMA with Camille Cates Barnett, I was pleased to find that one of my neighbors down the road on the Stanford University campus was an expert on the subject of humor. In fact, his research had given him a life-long career and won him tenure at Stanford. At the time, though, I thought it was a waste of academic resources to study humor.

My initial reaction was, it turned out, a quite common one. Most people think of humor as frivolous, like play, not worthy of serious consideration. In fact, though, humor is an important force in our daily lives and in the lives of the organizations where we work. Social scientists believe that the evolutionary reason for the development of humor in the human species is our need to deal effectively with stress. We laugh nervously when we're embarrassed or when we're in discomfort because we don't know the answer to a question. Individuals who have just come through a traumatic episode often laugh hysterically and involuntarily to release tension.



Bob Schuchman/SIS

These examples show how laughter releases tension naturally. And if our physical make-up dictates a belly laugh to help us through a tight spot, then clearly we ought to take a lesson from nature and use humor more deliberately in our daily lives as managers and leaders of organizations.

Selling this idea as a legitimate management tool, however, is difficult to do. You see, we mistrust humor and therefore relegate it to the Comedy Channel, to the “Dilbert” comic strip, to “Saturday Night Live,” or to the Sunday comics because we confuse seriousness with solemnity.

Here is an example. We’re relaxing with friends and talking about our lives or relationships, children or lack thereof, careers, and mortgages, and we are chuckling all the while. A good joke—seeing the funny side of life’s traumas—helps us gain perspective and share insights. We laugh at our foibles or at a friend’s blunders, not to poke fun or ridicule but to signal that we also have been there and to share that insight, thus reinforcing the learning process.

Solemnity, on the other hand, is overrated. It promotes rigidity and pomposity and thrives on putting folks in their place. Important occasions like weddings, bar mitzvahs, and funerals are no less important when humor is present; they are just less solemn and more human. I want to convince people to look at their careers, lives, families, and workplaces as laughing matters because I believe that humor has four powerful contributions to make. It:

- Helps us and others to learn.
- Helps us to change our behavior.
- Promotes an increase in creativity.
- Lets us and others in our organizations feel less threatened by change.

Humor Facilitates Learning

No matter where we are in our careers, we are challenged to learn something new. My authority in this area doesn’t

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come from Stanford University but from the world of Monty Python and the movie *A Fish Called Wanda*. John Cleese, a Monty Python alumnus and star of *Wanda*, is more than a comic; he is the founder and director of Video Arts, one of the most successful training and development companies in the world. Video Arts develops and markets training films, all of which incorporate humor into the training process.

As Cleese points out, there is a right way and a wrong way to use humor to learn. If you throw a few unrelated jokes into a script or a speech and the jokes are funny, the audience will remember the jokes but forget the learning points. Similarly, if the jokes are clunkers, they will distract the audience, and people will miss the learning points altogether.

The key to using humor to illustrate points or important concepts is to incorporate the learning points into the humor. Wrong-way scenarios, skits, comical situations, or farce can be used to dramatize the desired behavior. By laughing at the behavior, we acknowledge what is wrong, and when we hear others laugh at the same behavior, that laughter reinforces the learning. This principle has been illustrated time and time again by such cartoonists as Garry Trudeau (“Doodlesbury”) and Scott Adams (“Dilbert”).

Psychological research indicates that we learn when we are in a state of moderate arousal, and humor helps us cre-

ate and maintain that state. Often, it is the difference between putting people to sleep and keeping them awake. John Cleese and Bill Cosby are masters at uncovering the funny side to life’s common experiences. If you have heard Bill Cosby’s monologue on natural childbirth, you cannot forget how funny it is. In fact, many hospitals and clinics use the tape to help newly expectant parents feel more at ease about preparing for their happy occasion. It has been especially helpful for young expectant fathers to see and laugh with Cosby about all our manly fears, wonders, and gross sense of inadequacy in such situations. In other words, we can learn from a mistake or a less-than-perfect performance.

So, the next time you are puzzling on how to illustrate an important point in a management discussion, search for a personal experience that didn’t quite turn out right but that you learned from. Share it with your staff. As they begin to smile or chuckle, they are beginning to learn.

Humor Helps Change Behavior

This leads me to my next claim about humor. In learning, we are trying to get ourselves and others to change behavior. But we hardly succeed by just making a resolution. The paths to Jenny Craig’s doors are littered with cans of Slim-Fast, and self-promises to work out are strung across our Day-Timers with good intentions. People have to feel the need to change, but how do we get them to that point? An Asian proverb gives us a clue: “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I will learn.”

Humor involves us. When we laugh at the wrong-way scenes, we are laughing at the disastrous consequences, we feel sorry for the victims of the situations, and at some level we are laughing at ourselves. We feel the pain and embarrassment, and we wince at our flashbacks to ourselves doing the same things. We are



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learning at the gut level, the very place where change begins. So in the future, when we start to slip into old patterns, we can say gently to ourselves, "Ugh! There I go again!" and modify our approach. That kind of insight just keeps on working, like the Energizer Bunny.

In the creativity workshops I conduct, I am amazed at how much humor accompanies the changing of behavior. Setting up the exercises to allow people to have fun making mistakes allows them to experiment even more and to step over boundaries, for instance, by going outside the room to find material to use and generally by operating in a more relaxed atmosphere. More solutions seem to come to those who don't take themselves too seriously.

Herb Kelleher, chief executive officer of Southwest Airlines, is serious about having fun at work. But humor in the workplace is not a program. Actually, he believes that if you make it a program, you impair the effectiveness of humor. In an interview with *USA Today*, Kelleher has said that he would never tell his employees how to be humorous in the workplace; however, he is more than happy to say, "Feel free to be that way." It has to come naturally. Here are some tips from Kelleher's experiences at Southwest Airlines:

- Encourage people to be themselves.
- Get out and socialize with employees.
- Work in casual, comfortable clothes so you feel less stressed and more light-hearted.
- Be the first to find humor in a situation.

Humor Promotes Increased Creativity

Here again, I'm drawing on my experi-

ence with the creativity workshops, which are full of humor, with an atmosphere that is playful, open, and at times childlike. I observed that the participants who allowed themselves to play around with the workshop exercises almost always came up with more inventive and creative solutions. Their success often

was enhanced when they worked in small groups where the norm was relaxed and humor was present.

What do the highly creative participants have in common? Intelligence levels, interestingly enough, are not a deciding variable. What these problem solvers have in common is that they take longer to solve the problems and that they play with them more.

In fact, research conducted at UC Berkeley in the 1960s describes creative behavior specifically as "childlike." Creative problem solvers are curious and often surprised at outcomes, not dismayed by them. Wonder, what-if speculations, and a joy in experimentation are hallmarks of their style. They have an ability to switch themselves into a mood in which to play is okay. I believe that this is the essence of creativity: the ability to get ourselves into a mood or mode in which natural creativity has a chance to blossom.

There are no guarantees, however. Writers like Rosabeth Moss Canter, Peters and Waterman, and Jim Kouzzas have recognized that people in organizations operate in two distinct but parallel modes: open and closed. "Open" is more expansive and experimental, less hierarchical, more relaxed, noisier, more humorous, and less rigid.

The "closed" mode is more focused, purposeful, hierarchical, chain-of-command, and tense. It is the closed mode that we often are locked into, and if we stay in the closed mode, we can say



good-bye to creativity. Humor, however, helps us switch back and forth from the closed to the open mode.

At times people do need to be in the closed mode. It is in the closed mode that we are at our most efficient in taking action. But after the action has been taken, we need to switch into the open mode to be receptive to feedback and to changes in the environment, to know when the decision we have made is the right one.

Let me share an example from a John Cleese video. It is the wonderful story of Alexander Fleming, the British scientist who discovered penicillin. He was examining a tray of dishes with mold on them. When he came to one without mold, he was so curious that he investigated. His researches led him to penicillin. He must have been in the open mode, for in the closed mode, a dish without mold would have seemed an irrelevance; in the open mode, it was a curiosity.

In local governments, managers encounter many instances in which they desperately want people to be more expansive and experimental. But somehow, employees are limited by a reactive, more restrictive vision. Encouraging staff to take a breather, take some time off, exercise, and, yes, "goof off" may be all that is needed to help them expand their perspective.

Humor Helps Us Feel Less Threatened by Change

Because humans are essentially a conservative species (I'm not talking in the political sense), we react negatively to change of any kind. You might have seen those stress charts that calculate the stress levels of various events in life, in which the death of a spouse or a partner registers 100 points, all the way down to

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holidays, which rate 25 points. It is not the negatives of change that stresses us out; it is change per se.

On a more everyday scale, the next time you hold a staff meeting, sit in a different chair, or change the time, and see how most

people react. "Hey, you're sitting in my chair," or "What's behind the time change?" Even slight change raises our panic level. So, how better to counteract the panic and the fight/flight response than to have faith in the future, a belief that we can get through it all, that it is no big deal? Humor puts us at our ease. We all can understand what Victor Borge meant when he said that the shortest distance between two people is a smile.

To put pilot applicants at ease at Southwest Airlines, Kelleher informed the applicants that they could not be interviewed in suits but had to put on Southwest shorts and tee-shirts. Observing the various reactions to this announcement told the company a lot about the pilots and whether they could fit into Southwest's corporate culture, where humor is important.

Southwest is one organization that subscribes to what clinical studies have shown, that there is a direct correlation between humor and good health. Humor works against depression, increases our immune cells, and promotes beneficial chemical changes in our bodies.

I hope that managers will give humor the respect it deserves. And I hope that they will take things easy, view themselves less seriously, and think of their careers as full of chances to see the funny side of life. That's how we will all laugh our way to success. 

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