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You Can't Be Serious

Humor at work:
Not just for clowns
anymore.

By Karyn Buxman

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Get serious! Quit horsing around! Act your age! Get back to work! Have you ever heard those phrases at your workplace? Ever uttered them yourself? Considering that the average American spends 70,696 hours of her life working, it seems a shame to squander that much time being so serious. You'll spend three years of your life just in business meetings.

Terminal professionalism seems to be a sign of the times. But taking yourself too

seriously can have nasty side effects. Did you know that U.S. workers consume 15 tons of aspirin a day? That one in four workers suffers from an anxiety-related illness? That soon, job stress will be the number 1 reason for workers' compensation? The good news is that there's a cost-effective way to ward off many of the detrimental effects of stress: humor.

It should come as a relief to know that it's OK to take your job seriously but yourself lightly. In addition to

Getting Started

Studies confirm that there are more benefits to being an active participant in humor than being a passive observer. Here are some ideas that will put humor to work for you.

- Make a list of things that you find enjoyable; do one daily.
- See a movie via theater or video, with popcorn.
- Have a marshmallow fight. You can eat the leftover ammunition.
- Write a silly limerick.
- Send a humorous card. You earn bonus points if it's for no special occasion.
- Leave a humorous message on your answering machine.
- Keep a humor file at your desk, and refer to it daily.
- Wear a funny button or pin.
- Lighten up your work environment with cartoons, props, photos, and toys.
- Plan a theme day, dress-down day, wild west day, or beach day.
- Eat fun food—Snickers, Ho Hos, or Cracker Jacks.
- Try your hand at juggling; scarves are the easiest.
- Sing silly songs.
- Use humorous props, such as a magic wand or goofy glasses.
- Share your most embarrassing moments.
- Start your day with 20 seconds of laughter. Fake it if you have to.
- Hold a cartoon caption contest.
- Have a good laugh at yourself.

stress relief, humor at work provides several other benefits.

Humor solidifies a group. Victor Borge said, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." Sharing a laugh helps co-workers establish a bond and develop rapport. No doubt you've experienced inside jokes, better known as "you had to be there" humor. While that kind of humor can make folks feel like part of the gang, it can also make others feel excluded. Be sure to use it constructively and not to shut out people.

Humor improves productivity. When employees are doing work that's repetitive, boredom can undermine their productivity. Humor can increase the length of time spent focusing on a task by making the work less monotonous. Studies show that humor doesn't detract from tasks that require concentration. Humor can get out of hand,

however, so it's important to also have high expectations of employees and a high-performance norm.

Humor is a powerfully persuasive form of communication. It gains and holds the listener's attention. By breaking down barriers and establishing rapport, humor can help convey a message. It also improves alertness and retention—great for when you're trying to get an important point across. A skilled negotiator knows he's more likely to get what he wants when he can subtly weave in some humor.

Now that you know some benefits of humor at work, here are a few tips to get you started:

Set the tone. If you're in a position of leadership, try to create an informal atmosphere. Give people permission to banter. After one of my presentations, the administrators asked me to come back in a month and address the entire

staff. The program was a great success, but one comment that showed up on almost every evaluation was, "Terrific message! I wish my boss could've heard it!" How sad. The boss was the one who brought me there, but obviously he wasn't walking the talk.

Set the environment. Surroundings can have a tremendous effect on morale. Humorous posters, memos, and signs can lighten the atmosphere and diffuse tension. One office building has this sign posted by the time clock: *This job is a test. It is only a test. Had it been a real job, you would have been provided with bonuses, raises, and promotions.* Bulletin boards displaying cartoons, jokes, funny notes, and postcards don't take a big investment but can provide an abundance of entertainment.

On a grander scale, add some comic activities or theme days to your calendar—such as a M.A.S.H. day in which everyone dresses up like the TV characters or a western day in which everyone dons cowboy boots and bandannas. Use your imagination.

Set the pace. If you agree that humor in the workplace is valuable, don't put off implementation until next year or next month. You don't need to be a standup comic or laugh constantly, but you can use humor routinely. How about a joke of the day via the computer or a daily humor break? Whatever you choose to do, practice it regularly. There are many benefits to humor when it happens by accident, but why leave it to chance? Make humor happen by choice, today!

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