

Have a laugh – it'll lighten your load

Having fun on the job can relieve stress, create bonds among co-workers and help companies get through genuine crises.

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By MATT WICKENHEISER, Staff Writer April 1, 2008

ON KEEPING IT LIGHT

FOR BOTH MANAGERS and worker bees, there are guidelines to consider to keep the business environment light, but not lethal. Here are a few suggestions on humor from several workplace authors and consultants:

FROM JAKE GREEN, author of "Whoa, My Boss Is Naked! A Career Book For People Who Would Never Be Caught Dead Reading a Career Book":

Keep the jokes off the Internet, especially if the punch lines involve other people. It is easy to offend co-workers over e-mail because they can never be sure if people are laughing with them or at them.

Just because a prank was funny on NBC's "The Office" doesn't mean it will fly at your office. Remember, those actors are trained professionals, so don't try to recreate their stunts at work. Poor taste and bad timing can severely damage a career.

FROM TERRY SEMBER, vice president of Internet and Technology Services at Chakra Communications Inc. and co-author of "The Essential Supervisor's Handbook":

Make sure that (humor) is never directed at others, but either is focused on an equally shared situation or is self-deprecating. The intent is to offer a breath of fresh air, a needed break from more serious matters.

It should not become a distraction or a performance where anyone feels a need to compete for who is the funniest. It is usually in this environment that lines gets crossed.

The rule of thumb I recommend for those I manage is to take a second, think about what you are going to say. If you wonder if you should or shouldn't say it, DON'T. Better to not say it than to try and take it back.

Managers must set the tone of the humor and the duration. Gauge where the topic is going and be prepared to refocus participants on the tasks at hand. But certainly look for opportunities to inject a little levity into the day.

FROM LIZ BYWATER, president of Bywater Consulting Group:

Humor should never be racially or ethnically based. It should not contain sexist or sexual overtones. If there's any doubt, leave it out.

Humor should never be used to indirectly attack an employee's character or lifestyle.

If an employee is particularly sensitive, play it straight. Remember: what's funny to one person may be offensive or hurtful to another.

– *Matt Wickenheiser, Staff Writer*

Your workplace may not be a bastion of hi-lar-it-y like "Scrubs" or "The Office," but a bit of fun and humor amongst the cubicles can go a long way.

Both local businessmen and national workplace experts suggest that laughing while we work helps relieve stress, creates bonds among employees and gives a work force the mettle it needs when facing genuine crises. The economy, unfortunately, keeps supplying crises and bad news in general – making a light approach at work even more important.

And what better day than April Fools' to take a serious look at your workplace's humor quotient? If other companies can do it, why not yours?

The Falmouth-based MUNIS Division of Tyler Technologies Inc. makes software for town and county governments, supplying everything from cemetery records programs to systems that track water and sewer billing.

On the surface, that may not sound like the ideal environment for yucks. But people working together under tight deadlines can find humor in workplace situations, and that bond helps make the work go a bit easier, said Robert J. Sansone, director of human resources.

"I think it's helpful when times are trying and are really challenging because you're getting a lot of work, and the stress builds quite a bit," said Sansone. "It's a great way to relieve some of the pressure."

Sansone worked at another company, he said, where the stress wasn't from booming orders, but from hard times and layoffs. "It took on a gallows humor," said Sansone. "One comment was 'What's the worse they can do, make us stay?'"

At MUNIS, the type of humor that's OK is pretty apparent from the managers' example, said Sansone.

"We are pretty consistent in what the workplace finds acceptable, top down," said Sansone. "We model good humor, we don't have executives making lewd jokes."

Companies shouldn't confuse humor with fun, suggested Joel Zeff, improv comedian and author of "Make the Right Choice: Creating a Positive, Innovative, and Productive Work Life."

"Your goal should really be to try to have fun. That should be your main goal," said Zeff. "If humor comes into that as part of it, that's great."

In other words, humor is a tool to make the workplace fun.

That said, Zeff said people need to know that workplace humor should never be offensive, exclusive or harmful. Humor should be about everyone participating and enjoying themselves, laughing with each other, said Zeff.

"It is a very powerful bond to laugh with someone," said Zeff. "Companies should strive for that bond. When it happens the right way, we're more patient with each other, more positive with each other. And the end goal: We're more productive."

There are many companies devoid of humor, of lightness, said Ann Fry, workplace consultant and chief executive officer at Humor University (www.humoru.com). Fry blamed a lot of that on employee-boss relations.

"Most people leave their jobs because they're unhappy with their direct supervisor, their boss," said Fry. "The problem is, most bosses become bosses because whatever it is they do, they do well. They get advanced into positions of leadership. But most companies don't provide training on what it takes to be a great manager."

When she consults with these companies, Fry said, she finds the workers are frustrated with their bosses, and the bosses feel inadequate. She helps the bosses with management skills.

"Part of that is serious – (developing) emotional intelligence, empathy, genuineness, compassion," said Fry. "Part of it is helping them figure out what they can do to create an environment in their workplace where people can be happier. Humor's a part of all of it."

Having a work environment characterized by humor and a light attitude can offer another way to deal with a crisis situation, said **Billie G. Blair, president and chief executive officer of Leading and Learning, Inc.** and author of "All the Moving Parts: Organizational Change Management."

Blair said she wasn't downplaying the seriousness of some business crises. But a company that reacts to crisis by agonizing and tearing people apart is wasting time, she said.

"You have to go through a rebuilding," said Blair.

But a company that has a work force that looks at things in a lighter way has another way to react, is well-poised to work as a team and is prepared to function, she said.

"They can move forward when there's a crisis," said Blair. "There's a camaraderie, and humor is always the basis of camaraderie."

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