

PM

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

INSIDE

- 2 MAP YOUR PATH TO ELECTION DAY
- 16 FIRE DEPARTMENT STAFFING
- 20 A SPECIAL THANKS TO 2015 SUPPORTERS
- 27 COUNCIL RELATIONS: STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

GO AHEAD, LAUGH!

Why Humor Makes For
A Better Workplace



Two muffins were sitting in an oven. One muffin looks at the other and says, “Hey man, sure is hot in here.” The second muffin looks over and exclaims, “Oh my gosh, it’s a talking muffin!”

Get it? Humor in the workplace can be a double-edged sword. It pre-supposes a balance of taste, timing, and intellect. For some reason though, organizations still exist where humor is seen as detrimental to professionalism.

Laughter can be met with a look of scorn and disapproval, and those that engage in such frivolity are seen as less-than-serious, less-than-committed, or less-than-capable contributors to the mission of the work at hand.

We’ve all experienced these environments. Critics of the use of humor will point to the workplace as one of unadulterated solemnity, where work must get done, reports generated, deadlines met, and a serious demeanor must prevail.

Jokes are for outside office hours. Silliness is not tolerated. This is distressing because oftentimes an aversion to humor is the result of narcissism or egotism gone wild, a lack of a trusting environment, or sometimes simply fear.

Depending on the statistics a person examines, the funniness landscape is a bleak one, specifically the comparison of daily laughter between an adult and a child. An average four-year-old laughs as many as 300 times per day, at everything from sights to sounds.

According to Alison Beard in her 2014 *Harvard Business Review* article “Leading with Humor,” a 40-year-old adult laughs four times per day, despite exposure to a much greater array of stimuli. Sadly, we laugh less as we age.

A 2002 study of 2,500 Australians concluded that more than half would take a cut in wages in order to have more fun at work.¹ Research by Gallup also suggested that people who are not engaged in their workplace laugh

less during the workweek than during the weekends.² What does this tell us about our workplaces?

It tells us that some may be taking themselves a bit too seriously.

So is it possible to have both a committed workforce and one that has a little fun at the office? Yes. Is there a differentiation to be made between having a sober disposition and having a little fun while you do your job? There is.

The former can create a host of problems in the workplace. The latter can bring significant benefits to the body, mind, and organization.

The Body

A man with a carrot stuck in his ear, and a piece of celery in his nose, walks into a doctor’s office. He says, “Doctor, doctor, I’m not feeling well.” The doctor says, “I know what the problem is, you’re not eating right.”

In a purely anatomical and physiological context, laughter is a full-body endeavor. The level of activity in the brain alone is enough to amaze. The left side of the brain makes sense of the words used in a joke; the right side of the brain analyzes the word structure to allow us to understand the joke and why it’s funny; and the frontal lobe kicks in for a social and emotional reaction.

Ultimately, the hypothalamus helps to generate our ability for irrepressible laughter that can be heard outside the confines of the meeting room.

Meanwhile, the visible external effects of laughter catch the attention of those with whom we work. This occurs as a result of the contraction of no less than 15 facial muscles, including the zygomatic major muscle that allows a visible smile to begin forming.

The epiglottis constricts the larynx, resulting in an audible wheezing or

gasping, along with a reddened face, ears, or neck as laughter grows more pronounced. Muscles in the legs may grow weak, arms may flail, and one may even bend at the waist to maintain balance. Tears form when the tear ducts are stimulated, which completes the picture of hearty, sincere laughter.

This physiological symphony improves the immune function by increasing immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies. In one study published in *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, Lee Berk of Loma Linda University and William Fry of Stanford drew on several years of research to assess whether laughter impacted the body’s ability to manufacture cortisol, a hormone known to suppress immune function.³

Fry was tasked with the enviable job of watching episodes of Laurel & Hardy and Abbott & Costello, while Berk ran samples on Fry’s cortisol levels. They determined that laughter actually increased the production of cells that help the body to fight infection.

Healthy laughter can also improve the elasticity and function of blood vessels, protecting against cardiovascular disease. Medical researchers Michael Miller and William Fry at the University of Maryland’s School of Medicine, for example, have had success in linking laughter to increasing blood flow.⁴

Their results strongly suggest that laughter has an impact on the endothelium, the tissue that makes up the inner lining of blood vessels, allowing it to more readily dilate and expand, increasing blood flow to the heart, lungs, and brain.

And while it may be too bold to suggest laughter can replace time on the treadmill, laughter has been linked with benefits similar to those gained through exercise. Vanderbilt University researcher Maciej Buchowski found that 10 to 15 minutes of good laughter expended as many as 50 calories.⁵

And just as when we exercise, laughter can generate the release of endorphins, chemicals that make us feel



relaxed, less stressed, and can even serve to temporarily relieve pain.

The Mind

Buddha has a hotdog stand in Central Park where he sells hotdogs for \$3 each. A man walks up, orders a hotdog, and gives the Buddha a \$10 bill. Buddha

hands him the hot dog, packs up his stand, and turns to walk away. The man yells, "Hey, where's my change?" Buddha looks back and says "Hey buddy, change comes from within!"

Evolution scientist Charles Darwin once suggested that humor was a tickling of the mind. Humor in the workplace not only benefits our bodies, it has tremendous positive impact on our minds as well. The link between laughter and mental health is a significant one, and it

begins with the impact humor has on our minds and the way we think.

Abundant laughter is exceptionally important in our ability to think creatively. Research suggests that comical antics go a long way in allowing us to view issues from a new perspective. Laughter cleanses the mind in ways that

create fertile ground for new thought processes and discovering new connections across ideas and data.

We are no longer prisoners to horizontal mindsets that predispose us to old thoughts and actions. By viewing a

problem through a lens of humor or through the application of a funny metaphorical perspective, we are truly able to see things in a new light.

Laughter connects us with one another at the neurological and spiritual level. In essence, it serves as the great equalizer. Even the most daunting of personalities will fold in the presence of a truly funny situation or in the presence of witty use of disarming humor.

The subsequent bonds that are created with mutual laughter build a positive

rapport between individuals. It is simply not possible for the human mind to feel sadness or stress while laughing.

According to research at Stanford, a hefty dose of humor also helps the brain normalize dopamine levels, which has positive effects on motivation, attention span, mood, and learning. Researchers discovered that when participants looked at funny cartoons, components of the limbic system were stimulated that regulate this important neurotransmitter.⁶

The feelings of inner conflict and disappointment may also be mitigated through the use of humor. The optimistic mindset generated by laughter helps us lessen the impact of sadness by tracking us toward the more positive aspects of life, both in and out of the work environment.

Finally, the production of endorphins created by laughter benefit our minds by allowing us to focus more readily on the tasks at hand. By reducing stress levels and enhancing our stores of mental energy, laughter permits our minds to free up from previously overwhelming thoughts and emotions.

The resultant balance of mind, body, and emotion opens the door to inspiration, hope, and engagement with others.

The Workplace

"A penguin walks into a bar, goes to the counter, and asks the bartender, "Have you seen my brother?" The bartender says, "I don't know. What does he look like?"

Nowhere is the role of humor and laughter tested more intensely than in the workplace. The combination of deadlines, external pressures, and personality conflicts make for a less-than-optimal setting for comedic repartee. The benefits of laughter in the workplace, however, are significant.

Laughter in an organization is a guaranteed morale booster that can build trust. People enjoy coming to work when they feel connected to those with whom

they serve, and when they feel good while they're there. The result is less turnover and fewer sick days.

And when there's laughter, the results can be a force multiplier. Shared laughter allows people to be comfortable letting their guard down and showing their authentic selves. This window to vulnerability is a foundation for building trust.

An environment infused with humor can also increase innovation. One study by Chris Robert at the University of Missouri-Columbia⁷ revealed that humor is something that is generated from inconsistency, meaning that people are more likely to laugh at things that do not normally fit together.

The very combination of words or deeds that don't customarily tie with one another stirs a reaction. As Robert notes, this is the same thing that occurs in the creative mind—putting variables together that do not normally belong that way. It's the foundation of creativity from which so many organizations can benefit.

Robert also goes on to suggest that productivity and employee retention is positively impacted by humor. Since humor leads to positive emotions, and positive emotions make individuals feel good, they naturally communicate better, become more committed team members, and work harder. This also improves retention since happy, productive workers are less likely to leave their jobs.

Humor in the workplace also serves to bring teams together. It allows people to be relaxed around one another. Since laughter is something employees can mutually share, a common bond is realized quickly. And because people prefer to be around people they like, in whose company they are most comfortable, team cohesion is enhanced.

Supervisors benefit as well. Bosses who use humor, especially self-deprecating humor, allow themselves to be seen as "one of us." This releases the barriers often found between leaders and subordinates who find them to be unapproachable. When this occurs, staffers are more likely to be open and honest in discussing previously undiscussable topics.

Finally, a 2012 study published in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology* revealed a comprehensive listing of organizational benefits to workplace humor.⁸ This research concluded that humor is connected with several positive workplace outcomes, including improved performance, enhanced employee satisfaction, better workgroup cohesion, healthier employees, less burnout, and reduced stress.

And for bosses, the news could not have been more impactful. Supervisors using humor saw organizational benefits ranging from improved worker performance; higher levels of satisfaction; an enhanced perception of, and satisfaction with, bosses; and greater work group unity.

The Secrets

In England they do not have a kidney bank, but they do have a Liverpool.

Dr. Madan Kataria's 1999 book *Laugh for No Reason* makes a compelling argument that people should laugh far more than they normally do. And we should. The advantages to our

bodies, minds, and organizations are clear, and so is the path to making more laughter happen in our busy work lives.

Learn to think differently. Be willing to be a little extemporaneous in thought and deed. One way to fuel this spontaneity is through exposure to a diverse array of people and thoughts. This can break you out of old ways of thinking and behaving.

Take active steps to learn more about the people with whom you work. People are fascinating. There are many amazing, inspirational, and funny stories in the lives of others.

Search out the funny. Marilee Adams, in her 2016 bestselling book *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* (Third Edition, Berrett-Koehler Publishers), discusses the practice of using "switching questions" that take you from a judger mindset to a learner mindset. The same approach may be fittingly applied to the drive to find more humor in a workplace situation.



It would be a tragedy for anyone to be seduced by the argument that the use of humor or the presence of laughter in the workplace is somehow unprofessional.

Ask yourself if the issues of the day are really worth getting upset over. Is it worth the cost of organizational upheaval? What can be learned from the situation? And what's funny about it? By all means, when you hear laughter at work, go get involved. Join the fun.

Smile on purpose. Smile. Smiling is the beginning of laughter, and like laughter, it's contagious. It's also the universal sign of happiness and recognizable from across the room. People feel better when you smile at them. Smiling can open the door to fruitful conversations or even disarm a tense moment. It also makes you approachable. Since it takes fewer muscles to smile than to frown, why not?

Don't be a hater. Life is too short, so count your blessings. Author and civil rights activist Maya Angelou once noted that people will not remember what you did or said, but they will remember how you made them feel. This is your responsibility and yours alone.

Find the joy in the work you do and the life you lead. Assume noble intent from those with whom you come in contact and respond with caring and kindness.

Build your toolbox. Keep a selection of puzzles, games, joke books, toys, or funny calendars in your office. Play-Doh, Slinkys, or a candy machine full of Skittles—it can be anything really.

Silly pictures work as well. Something that will challenge the mind and introduce a funny thought into what may otherwise be a tough day at the office.

Laugh at yourself. Nothing levels the playing field more between a team leader and a team member than the leader's willingness to laugh at his or herself. Humor, as with leadership, begins and ends with authenticity.

Acting like the leader is precisely that: acting. Humble, self-deprecating humor doesn't make you the class clown, it makes you relatable. So find a way to not take yourself so seriously. There's something funny about you, so get over it and have a little fun.

All Jokes Aside

Laughter is still somewhat of a mystery to modern science. This is partly due to the challenges in creating the proper scientifically sound settings in which to test the impacts of humor. Controlled environments aren't always the most conducive to natural reactions. After all, if laughter is nothing else, it is a natural reaction.

Techniques ranging from blood samples to electromagnetic monitoring of facial muscles to blood pressure cuffs to urine tests have tried to uncover its secrets. While researchers may not be able to explain 100 percent of why and how we laugh, a growing body of evidence continues to suggest that it benefits the body, mind, and workplace dynamics.

It would be a tragedy for anyone to be seduced by the argument that the use of humor or the presence of laughter in the workplace is somehow unprofessional. Professional environments are marked by mutually shared

values, commitment to an important mission, competent performance, and accountability.

None of these preclude the presence of a little wit in the workplace. As long as the humor is tasteful and not personal, innocent and not hurtful, professionalism and humor will always make for a wonderful pairing and a better place to work. **PM**

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

- 1 Rogers, J. (2002, June 29). "Humor helps the boss's bottom line." *The Gold Coast Bulletin*. Retrieved November 5, 2002, from <http://www.gcbulletin.com.au/news/news.htm>.
- 2 Cite: Harter, Jim. "Mondays Not so Blue for Engaged Employees" 2012. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155924/mondays-not-blue-engaged-employees.aspx>.
- 3 Berk, L. S., et al. (1989). "Neuroendocrine and Stress Hormone Changes during Mirthful Laughter." *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, 298, 390–96.
- 4 "The Effect of Mirthful Laughter on the Human Cardiovascular System." Michael Miller, William F. Fry. Med Hypotheses. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2010 November 1. Published in final edited form as: Med Hypotheses. 2009 November; 73(5): 636. Published online 2009 May 27. doi: 10.1016/j.mehy.2009.02.044. <http://umm.edu/news-and-events/news-releases/2005/school-of-medicine-study-shows-laughter-helps-blood-vessels-function-better>.
- 5 Buchowski MS, Majchrzak KM, Blomquist K, Chen KY, Byrne DW, Bachorowski JA. "Energy expenditure of genuine laughter." *Int J Obes (Lond) [print-electronic]*. 2007 January; 31(1): 131-7. PMID: 16652129, PMCID: PMC3518926, PII: 0803353, DOI: 10.1038/sj.ijo.0803353, ISSN: 0307-0565.
- 6 Cite: Mobbs, D, et al. (2003) "Humor Modulates the Mesolimbic Reward Centers" *Neuron* 40(5). December. pp. 1041–48.
- 7 Christopher Robert, Wan Yan (2007), The Case for Developing New Research on Humor and Culture in Organizations: Toward a Higher Grade of Manure, in Joseph J. Martocchio (ed.) *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management (Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management, Volume 26)* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp.205–267.
- 8 Jessica Mesmer Magnus, David J. Glew, Chockalingam Viswesvaran, (2012) "A meta analysis of positive humor in the workplace," *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 27 Iss: 2, pp.155–190.



PATRICK MALONE, Ph.D., is director, Key Executive Leadership Program, American University, Washington, D.C. (pmalone@american.edu).