

# Using Humor to Boost Creativity

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***"Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking something different."* Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, M.D. (Nobel prize winner)**

[Adapted from P. McGhee, *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*. Call 800-228-0810 to order.]

Other articles at this site discuss the growing conviction among upper management in many companies that doing things to make work fun can actually make employees more productive. And bringing your sense of humor to your job is an easy and effective way to make work fun.

One way to boost productivity is to increase the level of innovative thinking and creativity on the job. More creative employees will more quickly find their way to workable solutions to unique problems.

Creative thinking in the workplace is more important now than ever before. With the rapid pace of change that has been occurring throughout this decade, every company in the country has had to face up to the fact that the old solutions don't work any more. In fact, the problems themselves are often new.

This means that it is essential to have employees in your organization who are capable of "thinking outside the box," and coming up with innovative and effective solutions that your competitors have not thought of. In an ever-more-competitive global marketplace, you need all the creativity you can muster up to be successful.

There are three ways to increase the level of creativity within your company: 1) create a work environment conducive to more creative thinking, 2) hire more creative employees, and 3) find ways to build up the creative abilities of the employees you have. For maximum results, you can move in all three directions at the same time, and humor has an important contribution to make in each case.

Sometimes unplanned humor can help move toward a solution to tough problems. In the early 1990s, a few bottles of water from a well-known bottled water company were found to have benzene in them. This was a public relations disaster. In a meeting convened to determine how to minimize the damage and restore the public faith in the purity of the product, everyone was having a difficult time coming up with ideas on how to proceed. Suddenly, one of the managers jumped up and said, "I've got it! Let's just repackage it and sell it as gasoline!"

Everyone laughed, and the tension in the room was noticeably reduced. From that point on, the ideas began flowing and progress was made in choosing a path to re-stimulate sales of the product. While the solution offered was an absurd one, the laughter broke people out of the box and helped create a frame of mind that generated a lot of good ideas on how to proceed. [Actually, I made this example up, but it demonstrates nicely the way in which humor helps come up with solutions to difficult problems.]

There has been research since the 1950s documenting a close relationship between humor and creativity. People with a better sense of humor tend to be more creative. There is even evidence that you can boost scores on a standardized test of creativity by exposing people to humor or other conditions which establish a "playful atmosphere."<sup>1</sup> So there is every reason to expect that you can generate more creative problem solving among your employees by allowing employees to have a good laugh on the job—assuming, of course, that laughter or a joke or other light remark is appropriate in the situation of the moment. In many cases, any form of humor at all would be inappropriate.

A survey conducted in the mid-1980s found that 84% of Vice Presidents and personnel directors interviewed in 100 of the largest corporations in the country felt that employees with a sense of humor are more effective on the job than people with little or no sense of humor. The organization conducting the survey concluded that "People with a sense of humor tend to be more creative, less rigid and more willing to consider and embrace new ideas and methods."<sup>2</sup>

So hiring new people who show some evidence of good humor skills is one way of helping assure that a more creative individual is brought into your team. Providing the employees you already have with tools (like my 8-Step Humor Skills Training Program) to improve their humor skills will also boost the level of creative thinking within the team.

Another way is to create an environment that allows employees to feel comfortable in letting their playful side show up on the job from time to time. Companies like Southwest airlines, Ben and Jerry's ice cream and others are well known for their efforts along these lines. Next month, we'll look in detail at the kind of approaches companies have tried in putting humor and fun to work.

***"Creativity is like having sex in a wind tunnel."*** (Robin Williams)

As noted at the beginning of this article, one by-product of the rapid pace of change now occurring in all companies is that the old solutions to problems don't work any more. In addition, there are new kinds of problems for which we have no prior experience in devising solutions. This means that to keep up with the competition, companies must nurture a corporate culture that supports innovative solutions to problems. They must create a work environment which nurtures the creative thinking skills of the employees they already have, and also hire more creative employees. It is no longer enough to have a few top managers who provide the creative force behind an organization. Creative problem solvers among empowered employees are needed at all levels.

Over the past decade or so the *Wall Street Journal* columns by Hal Lancaster ("Managing Your Career") and Thomas Petzinger ("The Front Lines") have frequently drawn attention to the growing need for creativity in the workplace. As we move into the new millennium, you can assume that your company's competition is learning to work faster and smarter. So to get ahead of the competition, you have no choice but to be innovative. And a company becomes innovative only when it has innovative employees and provides a work environment that nurtures creativity.

Hal Rosenbluth, CEO of Rosenbluth International, has stated that "We know that the only way for us to continuously provide solutions to the needs of an ever-changing business world is to have the kind of environment where spontaneity thrives."<sup>3</sup> Making work fun, in his view, is essential to achieving this kind of environment.

There has been research since the 1950s documenting the close relationship between humor/fun and creativity. For example, simply listening to a humorous recording increases scores on a subsequently given creativity test.<sup>4</sup> People also perform more creatively on a task when it is framed as "play" than when it is framed as "work."<sup>5</sup> Simply watching comedy films is enough to improve creative problem solving, and the amount of improvement is greater than after watching a serious movie.<sup>6</sup>

The employees of Southwest Airlines consistently propose creative ideas which help the company increase profits. An important source of these innovative ideas is the fact that they have fun on the job. The company is committed to maintaining a work environment in which humor, laughter, fun and a playful attitude thrive, because it knows that this kind of work environment produces a frame of mind in which innovative solutions are most likely to occur. By tracking the money saved due to employees' creative suggestions, Southwest has determined that its employees' ideas save the company millions of dollars every year.

Even the memory of past funny situations is enough to trigger innovative ideas. During the Vietnam War, one soldier had the problem of being constantly covered with leeches while wading through swamps. He remembered a scene from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* about weird uses of panty hose and asked his mom to send him the biggest pair of panty hose she could find. It worked! The leeches were unable to penetrate the panty hose.

Because of the power of humor and a playful attitude to boost creative thinking, many companies have adopted the strategy of opening problem-solving meetings with a joke or other form of humor in order to loosen people up and get the creative juices flowing. Consider the impact of humor in the following meeting.

**"Five managers sat nervously listening to the company president relaying a message from headquarters. 'As you know, the For Sale sign has been out on us for almost a year, and there have been no takers,' scolded the chief executive. 'If we don't get our act together soon, none of us will have a job by Christmas . . .'**

**The tension was felt by everyone. The boss wasn't kidding. The color of his face, the look in his eyes, and the perspiration beginning to show through his shirt removed any doubt about the seriousness of the situation. There was a silence for a minute that seemed like an eternity. Then the director of systems development turned to the head of engineering, who had just returned from vacation and was red from overexposure to the sun. 'Tell us Peg, did you use suntan lotion or barbecue sauce while you were at the beach?'"<sup>7</sup>**

The entire management team, including the president, broke up in laughter. This greatly relieved the tension, and enabled the group to move on to a frank and productive discussion of innovative steps that might be taken.

How does humor support creative thinking? One way is by emotionally distancing you from the problem for a while. How often have you heard people say that they had been working on a problem for days with no success? Finally, they gave up and went out and had some fun, and a solution just popped into their heads.

Most people think more creatively when they're not so seriously and intently focused on the task—when they're relaxed, and the pressure is off. The problem in most companies today is that the pressure is always on. So you need something that quickly and effectively reduces the pressure you feel as you look for a solution. Humor creates this more relaxed feeling automatically and naturally.

Humor also nurtures creativity by offering practice at stretching your thinking to make sense out of something. In jokes, for example, the punch line delivers the humor by obliging you to find some new unexpected meaning that is essential for the joke to make sense. It is not surprising, then, that going through a humor training program has been shown to increase scores on tests of creativity.<sup>8</sup> Both humor and other forms of creative thinking involve a shift away from the usual way of looking at things. More creative individuals see meaningful connections between ideas or events that others can see when they're pointed out, but have difficulty coming up with on their own. Humor primes the pump and gets the creative juices flowing.

As the premium placed on creative thinking and innovative problem solving continues to rise, companies in the future may well adopt the tactic of training their employees how to think. Boosting their humor skills and creating a lighter work environment provides training in creative thinking at the same time it makes work more enjoyable.

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