



Using Effective Leadership Strategies in the Workplace

If All Else Fails, Laugh

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What's so funny? Not much, apparently. The news out there depresses you. You fret too much. Your best friend is getting divorced. Budgets are tight. You're afraid that you might be the next one to get "downsized". And how about those holiday bills?

So, what should you do? What keeps you going in the face of all this bad news? A big part the answer is something that many of us often forget we have, and therefore often don't use. You used it much more when you were younger and much less now that you're older. And it's one of your most effective weapons in handling the ups and downs of everyday life. It's your ability to laugh at the absurd, acknowledge the incongruous, and appreciate the ridiculous. It's your sense of HUMOR. It's a uniquely human quality that can come to your rescue during difficult times.

Let me explain. I'm not talking about joke-telling and stand-up comedy here. There's a difference between being funny and having a sense of humor. Few of us have the ability or desire to make up and tell (or repeat) jokes to a large group of strangers. To laugh, and to make others laugh (a.k.a. "being funny"), is quite physically demanding. Just think of the things you can't do while you're laughing. Pause. Are you thinking - and laughing?

We all like to laugh. It feels good to laugh. It's emotionally cathartic. It's like, well... I'll let you describe what it's like. But having a good sense of humor is different. Laughing is a physical action. Having a sense of humor is more cerebral. It's a mental attitude, a way of looking at people and events around you and appreciating the unusual and the absurd. Humor is the observation and celebration of the ordinary. It's anything that surprises us in an enjoyable way.

Humor has many uses:

Managing conflict - A faculty member, quite upset, came into my office recently and started yelling at me about something that had happened at a recent meeting. I immediately reached for my smile on a stick, a simple prop that resembles an oversized clown's mouth that I keep in my pencil jar at all times, and placed it in front of my face while inviting him to have a seat. The situation was diffused and we had a productive conversation.

Motivating people - People work harder for you and with you if they like you. Your likeability is directly related to your sense of humor.

Reducing stress and increasing morale - A well-placed comment, while, for example, pushing hard to meet a deadline at work, can relieve tension and energize others to complete the task at hand. It provides an opportunity for us to step back and bring perspective to the situation.

Improving communications - When's the last time you used humor in a memo or joked with a colleague on the phone? What were the results? And who needs to say anything? Often, a simple look is enough to inject humor into a situation and make your message more meaningful. I have a friend at work who won't sit across the table from me at meetings because he doesn't

want me to look at him and make him laugh at something he shouldn't (I wouldn't do that, would I?).

Increasing creativity - Here's the equation: humor = perspective = relief = increased creativity = new solutions to old problems.

Humor creates a positive "afterglow" that is remembered long after the content fades, and allows you to look at people and things in new ways. You don't have to be funny to have, and, more importantly, to use, your sense of humor. All I'm suggesting is that, whenever possible, you take yourself lightly while continuing to take your responsibilities seriously. This is not always easy to do. Try it anyway. When's the last time you laughed at something you did? How about that time when you wore two different colored shoes to that important meeting? Or accidentally walked into the wrong restroom. Or, ... you provide an example. Self-deprecating humor sends a powerful message to others that it's okay to take risks with you and with a given situation.

Look around you, there is humor everywhere:

Road signs: "Ped Xing" (just who is this Chinese diplomat, and when is he going to get here so we can take down all the signs?); or, on a restroom continuous towel dispenser, "Warning, Use Only to Dry Face and Hands, Any Other Use Can Be Dangerous" (like what?).

Other people: the restaurant guy who has such a loud, distinctive laugh that soon everyone else in the whole place is laughing at him laughing; the news reporter who keeps saying, "the accused was released on his own reconnaissance" (a secret mission, perhaps?); my nine year-old son, who recently asked, "Dad, does spaghetti taste the same to everybody?" (I guess I never really thought about that).

Newspaper headlines: "Sick Family Plans Reunion" (I'd be careful what I had to eat - with apologies to everyone out there with that last name). Or how about "Normal Artist Attends Summer Institute" (as opposed to abnormal?) That's Normal, Oklahoma, of course. The headline writer meant to say Norman, Oklahoma, but that's another story.

What do you do at work and at home to cultivate humor? Funny pictures? Signs? Quotes? Practical jokes, tastefully done? Do things "just happen" that are hysterical at the time but are hard to explain to others later (a.k.a. Y.H.T.B.T. humor: You had to be there)? Try this: for one week, write down two or three things every day that you think are funny (i.e. amusing, strange, odd, ridiculous), or that are just interesting. Keep your list handy and add to it whenever you get a chance. Then, after you watch the evening news, or any other time you're feeling down, pull out your list, look it over, and feel better - at least a little bit. Soon you'll have your whole family, or the people at work, doing the same thing. Humor is contagious.

James Thurber recognized the difference between being funny and having a sense of humor when he said, "Humor is emotional chaos remembered in tranquility". We're constantly thinking, analyzing and making judgments to ourselves and about ourselves. Too much of this "self talk" is taken up with worrying. Let's face it, there's enough bad to go around several times. The world around us is changing rapidly. Many of the changes that occur in our lives are positive, but some are not. Change - positive or negative - equals stress. Each of us can use humor more effectively as a way of reducing this stress and softening what is often a hard world - while at the same time trying to effect positive change on the problems that concern us the most.

There are times when humor may not work, or not seem appropriate (although I can even remember laughing quite hard at several funerals). Bad things will continue to happen to good

people. But if you can count on your sense of humor to put things in perspective, you can begin to create new meanings for your life. It's worth the risk. Remember, not one shred of evidence exists that life is serious - at least not all the time. Give yourself a break. You're only human.

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