

HUMOR IS GOOD FOR THE BOTTOM LINE



Recently, I had a telephone conversation with a man I have known for many years. Since we had not spoken for several months, we took some time catching up on what was happening in both of our lives. As usual, it was a pleasant conversation, filled with light stories and meaningful discussion on topics of interest to both of us. But, when I got off the phone, I found myself reflecting on this conversation at different times during the next few days. And considering the number of face-to-face and telephone conversations I have, I knew there had to be a reason that this one struck such a cord with me. Finally, it occurred to me why this discussion was memorable. The entire conversation was positive, optimistic and had a few laughs.

Now ask yourself, when was the last time you spoke to someone that the topic or series of topics was cheerful? I'd be willing to put more than a few dollars at risk to wager that most of us regularly encounter fears and negativism in our dealings with others. There seems to be a pervasive depression that has taken over life in general. Friends and colleagues have lost their jobs or worry that they soon will be unemployed. They wonder about takeover attempts on their companies and what will happen to their positions. They are concerned about childcare, paying for college and overwhelming needs from aging parents. While these problems are more far reaching than the workplace, and certainly help to explain the insecurity that is so often evident, this article will focus on why we need to reintroduce confidence and yes, humor to our organizations.

Is humor a frivolous and silly topic for a business article? I don't think so. Psychologists and others that study human behavior state that people are their most open, creative and expansive when they are happy and being challenged. They are the most secure, productive and constructive when they are working in an environment that is cheerful, encouraging and enthusiastic about employees and projects, successes and failures. If ever there was a time that needed original and imaginative thoughts and solutions for business issues, it is now! Humor, and a relaxed workplace are essential to encourage and foster the ideas that will set your company apart and propel it ahead.

Reflect on your company for a few minutes. How would you characterize the atmosphere? Comfortable, or stiff and rigid? What are your meetings like? Is there a free exchange of ideas and opinions, or a careful dialogue designed not to "ruffle feathers"? Think of some typical employees. Are they confident and hopeful, or pessimistic and risk averse?

According to an article by Frank and Monica Boruch, *humor ranks among the most powerful of management tools and serves many functions; it can be a coping mechanism, a negotiation facilitator, a communication instrument, a cognitive tool, a motivator, a creative force, a survival device and much more.* So what does this all mean? Well, to me it says that when the world seems to be squarely on your

shoulders, a conscious realization that this too will pass is useful. It says that when meetings and discussions get bogged down, some carefully placed, lighthearted comments to help participants step back and observe, can work wonders. It says that a smile and a pat on the back can be more powerful than a dozen words. It says that silly team names, good-hearted teasing and sincere belly laughs can open people up and most importantly, move them forward. Humor tends to relax employees and rejuvenate them. It helps to break logjams and importantly, to deflate the overly stiff and pompous.

Humor is not present alongside sarcasm and ridicule. It is not evident with demeaning and self-degrading words and behaviors. Such an atmosphere tends to tighten and strain people. Instead, effective use of humor as a management tool, involves anything that enhances individual and collective well being. The goal is an esteem-building environment where people feel noticed and appreciated.

When humor is part of your culture, employees approach work with enthusiasm. And, enthusiasm tends to encourage spontaneous encounters and synergistic solutions. When people are relaxed, they are more creative, more tuned into problem solving, brainstorming and innovative thinking. And that makes humor good for the bottom line!

**For further information, contact:
Floranne R. Reagan, Vice President/Principal
frreagan@exxelinc.com**