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Prevent Hardening of the Attitudes With Humor

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Laughter is the salt of personality. Its presence is an evidence of good nature, of the appreciation of the real values of life and a lack of tenseness. It is the most effective means of easing a difficult situation. -- George Gow

It is generally agreed that good sense -- and a good sense of humor -- are important management tools that will carry you a long way in business and in life. Not as clear is why this is true or how one becomes more skilled at humor. Let's look at an area where you can easily profit from an expanded sense of humor -- setting the tone for the work environment and some simple ways to develop your own sense of humor.

Humor in the workplace works like a thermostat, controlling the climate within the environment. It is a key component of the ambiance that greets and surrounds everyone who enters your workplace. Simply put, positive humor fosters a warm and inviting feeling. Negative, divisive humor makes a place seem cold and aloof.

Humor, or lack thereof, defines the emotional state of a workplace in the same way lighting sets the tone in a theater production, where changing lights indicate a shift in mood. In the theater, the illumination fills in the holes and occupies the spaces between characters, events and sets. In organizations, which consist of sets of human relationships, humor illuminates the dynamics of the group.

It is a language by which people join and identify a common universe. They consciously and unconsciously make statements through humor about themselves, their relationships, their groups, and their company, which they find difficult to say otherwise.

Alan Weiss, author of "Million Dollar Consulting, " believes humor in the workplace works to "remove emotionalism and defensiveness that interferes with candid and honest communication." In the same vein, the cartoon Dilbert is popular because it identifies and names the problems people recognize. It's a soft way of saying, "here's what you are concerned about ..."

In this way, humor is a coping mechanism. When truth is too scary or difficult to face, it enables people to detach themselves from some potentially emotionally threatening situations. The TV show M.A.S.H. is an example of how humor can create moments of sharing and community that offset feelings of isolation, termination, and helplessness. And even before the recent murder of his son, Bill Cosby believed, "if you can laugh at anything, you can survive it."

The quickest and most effective way to become more proficient at the skill of humor is to lighten up yourself. This will positively affect both the climate at work and the flow of honest communication, another direct and helpful result of humor in the workplace.

Begin to use subtle but evident forms of humor. Wear humorous ties or interesting accessories, attach a humorous quote to your memo, or keep your high school graduation picture on your desk. The idea is to expose your sense of humor without having to have other people laugh.

It is important to be able to laugh about yourself in a self-effacing (not self-derogatory) way. Self-effacing is non-threatening to others. If you're making a presentation and you trip over the power cord to the overhead, say something like, "Please keep track of the number of times I do that ... my record is three in an hour." In this way you acknowledge the reality of the situation, show the group that you recognize your humanness, reduce everyone's embarrassment, and put yourself back in control.

Finally, for both selfish and altruistic reasons, it is important to know what makes other people happy so you can bring them joy while making them feel appreciated and respected. Pay attention to what makes your colleagues, employees or customers laugh or smile. The more you feed them humor they like, the more positive the climate becomes.

Because humor is a skill, the more you practice these techniques the more proficient you become. Since it takes about three weeks to develop a new habit, you should be a lot more humorous within a month.