

Taking Laughter Seriously

Research proves that laughter has many positive effects—not just in helping us to feel good, but also to perform better. Finding space for laughter in your work life can help free your mind up for greater productivity and creativity.

In college I worked for the terror of the biology department, who would regularly storm through the lab and slam his office door so hard that the test tubes rattled. Later, I worked two years for a man who would deliberately pay people far above market rates, lie to help them get mortgages beyond what their inflated income would support, and then threaten them with summary dismissal if they didn't snap to his every command. I worked five years for a man who manipulated end-of-year numbers by pre-billing one of my clients. When that account seemed to underperform the following year, the CEO raked me over the coals—while my boss sat mute. I worked eight years for a woman who took a vacation at a critical juncture of a change initiative even though I had to postpone my honeymoon.

But I can't imagine working for the boss of my friend Joan.

Joan is a consummate professional who brings graceful preci-

sion and dedication to every task she undertakes. She recently became marketing director for a small food processing firm and now reports to a newly minted MBA who's determined to deliver impressive numbers. Recently, Joan and a coworker couldn't help laughing over something surprising that had come in the mail. The boss rushed out of his office, scowling. "He believes that we couldn't possibly be getting work done if we're laughing," Joan laments.

What century is he from? Even 150 years ago, a great leader recognized the benefits of humor. "With the fearful strain that is upon me night and day, if I did not laugh occasionally, I should die," Abraham Lincoln reportedly said during America's Civil War. This quote is included in a 2010 children's book, whose title underscores the famously melancholy President's deft use of humor: *Lincoln Tells a Joke: How Laughter Saved the President (and the Country)*.

But let's assume that Joan's boss doesn't troll the shelves of his local children's library. He could easily surf the Internet to find research that scientifically proves the benefits of laughter.

"Laughing lowers blood pressure, reduces stress hormones,

increases muscle flexion, and boosts immune function," sums up Holisticonline.com. "Laughter also triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers, and produces a general sense of well-being...A belly laugh is equivalent to 'an internal jogging.' Laughter can provide good cardiac conditioning."

Certainly a healthy worker is more productive than one taking a lot of sick days or "working through it" and spreading germs throughout the office. But wait; there's more.

Anyone aspiring to lead teams or organizations in these stressful times can appreciate anything that lightens the load. Other data, as collected by Changingminds.org, points to laughter not just as an antidote to problems, but a force for achievement.

No less a resource than *The Harvard Business Review* published the findings of Fabio Sala (September 2003), who reported that, "The executives who had been ranked as outstanding used humor more than twice as often as average executives, a mean of 17.8 times per hour compared with 7.5 times per hour...When I looked at the executives' compensation for the year, I found that the size of

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their bonuses correlated positively with their use of humor.”

And R. Wilburn Clouse and Karen Spurgeon conclude from their research: “A good joke or playful laughter can boost creativity, initiate conversation and generally build a more trusting atmosphere.” (“Corporate Analysis of Humor,” *Psychology: A Journal of Human Behavior*, 1995.)

Humor can loosen the grip of negative thought loops, such as when we are busy-minded and lose our creativity, are stuck and can’t make a decision, or are angry and make people defensive or insecure. When it isn’t at the expense of someone else, laughter cracks open enough space for fresh thinking to emerge, like getting the kinks out of a garden hose. It breaks down barriers and facilitates connection to each other and to our own common sense, insight, and creativity.

For example, while I was running the San Francisco office of a global public relations firm, I recruited a senior person (i.e., high salary) to lead a key practice area. Within weeks it became apparent that the individual was a bad fit, so I terminated him. We had to pay thousands of dollars in severance and suffered charge-offs because of the way he had handled certain matters.

A few months later, I made my annual pilgrimage to headquarters to discuss performance and plans. Inevitably, the conversation turned to the bad hire. The president got more and more revved up, declaiming against how much it had cost, what bad judgment I’d shown, etc.

My stomach clenched as I felt

the urge to defend myself. It wasn’t all my fault. I wasn’t the only one who had interviewed the guy, and my boss had pressured me to hire quickly. “You need somebody there by next week,” he’d stressed. “If you don’t hire him, what are you going to do?”

Another day on another subject, I got hooked by such bait. We were talking about a new assignment. I heard the president outline expectations beyond our original agreement—beyond, frankly, my belief in my abilities. Panicked, I protested. Challenged, the president insisted. Our volleying spiraled down until the president said, “You are both defensive and offensive” and cut off the call.

This day, however, I retained perspective. Yes, I had made a mistake. I had a bad feeling as the recruit and I shook hands, but I’d caved to time-pressured insecurity. Still, I’d done a lot of things right during the year, and the office had prospered. Even more important, I had come to the meeting with a larger purpose: eliciting support for new initiatives. So when the president took a breath, I found myself dead-panning: “Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time.” The president blinked and stopped short. The others in the room laughed; he laughed; I laughed. The tone shifted, allowing us to move on to constructive conversation about goals and strategy for the coming year.

I’m not suggesting that we should try to control our thoughts. That would be as futile as *Alice in Wonderland’s* Queen of Hearts insisting that all roses be painted red. Rather, I’m pointing towards every person’s innate

capacity to be aware that we are the source of our thoughts. We always have a choice—to act on a thought or drop it, to take things personally or keep a little objectivity, to release tension by crying in frustration or despair or by laughing in surprise and wonder.

“Sometimes when people are just fooling around, they can produce astonishing results,” the late Bob Gunn wrote. “These moments spark innovation. Time slows down because people forget to mark its passing. People grow close and lend each other a helping hand. At times like these, it seems that the leader’s only task is to point towards the proper goal so that this positive energy is channeled in the right direction.”

So get your nightly news analysis from Jon Stewart. Or read *The New Yorker* for the cartoons and *Reader’s Digest* for the anecdotes. Or keep a silly hat or toy in your office. Above all, look for life’s ironies and paradoxes.

In short, if you’re serious about leading, laugh more. **SF**

Betsy Raskin Gullickson is an executive coach and coauthor, with Bob Gunn, of On the High Wire: How to Survive Being Promoted. You can reach her at bgullickson@sbcglobal.net.