

LAUGHING MATTERS



The mood at most companies - tension, stress, ill will - works against productivity. Humor helps break negative patterns.

Betsy's grandson is a bit of a wary kid, not one of those who just jump into the middle of things. Tends to hang back a bit, kind of watch and wait. One can almost see his mind working. What's going on here? Am I going to like this? Then he breaks through, and a grin splits his face. He drops the effort of figuring it out, and just goes with it...and starts laughing.

Laughter comes from that space between thoughts. It catches us, pitches us outward. It's a bursting out of sound and feeling; it breaks the grip of ego and self-centered thoughts. Laughter loosens everything up, shakes loose the chains we impose by our thoughts, frees us from ourselves, softens our boundaries - the thought habits that separate us from each other, and from our deeper wisdom - and breaks the patterns so that we are available, to ourselves as well as to others.

Wise leaders know that lightheartedness is enormously productive. They see that people who "whistle while they work" can do more in less time with better quality. Even the most difficult task becomes easier when we can make light of it.

Unfortunately, the mood at most companies works against us - with predictable consequences. Tension can lead to stress, illness, and lost hours. Fear can paralyze us. Insecurity can cause us to make the same mistakes over and over again. Defensiveness can shift the blame, while leaving the underlying issue unresolved. Loneliness can isolate people. Resentment can limit contributions.

The cost of a corporate bad mood - creating an atmosphere of tension, stress, and ill will - is enormous, although not always obvious. It goes well beyond its visible manifestation, sick days and employee turnover, and reaches into the nexus of every human interaction. As people become withdrawn, self absorbed or short tempered, the goodwill that lubricates human interaction stops working. Friction builds. Leaders see no other way to get the job done than by promulgating rules to govern behavior, holding endless meetings to bring people together who don't even want to be in the same room, tinkering with incentives to motivate the right actions, yelling to vent their own frustrations, or firing the worst malcontents to make public examples.

If this seems counterproductive, why is it that gloominess is the prevailing tone at far more companies than cheerfulness?

Well, one reason is that we are trapped in our thought habits about work. In other words, too many of us are living with unexamined assumptions about our jobs.

Consider some common phrases: we "put on our game face" when we walk through the office door, start our week on "blue Monday," or sometimes admonish our co-workers to "stop joking around and get serious." Of course we want to be professional, but who decided that being professional meant being glum or taking ourselves so seriously?

Educators know that when children are happy, they are learning. When was the last time you saw despondent and dejected kids at school? They may be hard to get out of bed and grumble a bit about going, but the moment they step foot on the school grounds, most kids have a bounce in their step and an eager look on their faces.

But something happens to us when we leave our schoolyards and begin working. When Bob began a job in mid-town Manhattan fresh out of grad school, he was shocked when he took the subway during commuter hours and saw hundreds of people coming out of the cars, packed tightly together and marching up the staircase towards the street, with not one voice to be heard. It was like being a prisoner, marching to solitary confinement, stripped of freedom, spontaneity, and free will. He wanted to laugh out loud at the absurdity of the scene. What was the point?

If none of us would willingly sentence ourselves to a lifetime of drudgery, distress, or depression, then why allow ourselves to work under these crazy mental conditions? Having a positive mental attitude is just as easy as having a negative one. We are not suggesting that we should try to "control" our thoughts. They are far too fleeting. What we are pointing towards is our God-given capacity to remember that "we are the thinkers" - the ones doing the thinking - and have been given the gift of free will, the ability to choose the thoughts we act upon and the ones we turn our back on.

Humor can open a valuable "door" to a change in thinking when that thinking is tending towards negativity - for example, when we are busy minded and lose our creativity, are stuck and can't make a decision, are angry and making people defensive, or are blind to habits that make other people feel insecure. The common factor is that these feelings simply get in the way of positive interaction and constructive progress. In these moments laughter connects us by breaking down our "thought" barriers and bringing us closer together. The condition of being human can be comical and heartwarming at the same time.

We are not speaking about the forced humor that comes at someone else's expense. Pointed comments that poke fun at people's foibles or ridicule their behavior can damage their sense of security and lead to defensiveness and persistent black moods. Humor works best when it's organic - not so much from the stance of "I'm going to make you laugh so you'll like me" as from "I'm using laughter to break the grip of my thought habits, so that my mind is open to and for you."

When Betsy was running the San Francisco office she recruited a senior person to lead one of the key practice areas. It quickly became apparent that the individual was a bad fit, and so she terminated him, but the firm still had to pay severance and suffered charge-offs due to the way he had handled certain client matters.

Come October, she had to make the annual budgeting pilgrimage to the executive leaders. They could get into incredible detail reviewing her budget line by line. So, inevitably the conversation turned to the costs of her bad hire. The president was in fine form going on and on about what a mistake it had been, the client problems he'd caused, etc, etc. After a very long three minutes of ranting, Betsy looked across the table and dead panned, "Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time." He blinked and stopped short. The others in the room laughed; the President laughed; Betsy laughed. The tone lightened, and they went on to have a very constructive conversation about goals and strategy for the coming year.

Inspirational leaders know that job #1 is to pay attention to tone, the mood or feeling, of the people in meetings, in client interactions, on the phone, at all times. Such leaders know that:

- A lighthearted workplace tends to be a productive workplace, in good times, in bad times.
- Meetings where laughter is present are more likely to yield creative decisions, while taking far less time.
- The leader's burden of making a tough decision is lightened through humor.
- A looming deadline or a pressure-packed decision seems less ominous when looked at through its amusing side.

Sometimes when people are just fooling around, they can produce astonishing results. 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.

Great leaders stay closely attuned to their own mood, for they know that feelings clue them into the quality of their thinking. They also know that their "good" mood can be catching, just as their having a "bad hair day" can easily cause their associates to feel tension and stress. The mood shadow cast by a leader is a long one. The next time the leader joins a conference call in a low mood, just watch what happens - conversation dies out, nobody talks, issues are sidestepped, people find reasons to bail out, and the temper begins to feel like a set of gears grinding.

But change can come in a split second. All it takes is for someone to make a joke. Laughter immediately releases tension. Unleashing tension can come as tears or as laughter, or both. Ever laugh so hard that tears streamed down your face?

One difference between them: tears tend to take us further into ourselves. Sometimes, of course, tears come because we are touched by the plight of others, and then they soften our boundaries. But it seems easy for thoughts of compassion to turn into sympathy - and take us further into our private isolation booth.

But laughter mostly pitches us outward - towards others and away from our self-centered, negative thinking. Sometimes you see people walking down the street laughing at a voice that only they can hear. Doesn't this make you smile inside too? Just by creating a minute crack in our ego, we immediately open up wonderful possibilities of connection!

Maybe that's why they say, "Laugh and the world laughs with you; cry, and you cry alone." Take that to the bank.

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