

Introduction

Humor in the Workplace? You Can't Be Serious!

The one serious conviction that a man should have is that nothing is to be taken too seriously.

Samuel Butler

Humor in the workplace is the Rodney Dangerfield of human resources management.

Like the tie-tugging, fidgeting comedian, the topic just doesn't seem to get any respect. In fact, when I suggest that people should add copious amounts of humor to their work lives, many people react with disbelief. You want us to *what?* Make work more fun? Lighten up on the job? Mix business with pleasure? But, work isn't *supposed* to be fun, these indignant folks respond. AThat's why we call it work, in fact, that's why work is a four-letter word! And you want us to add humor to our work lives? Surely, YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS?

And when these folks tell me, "You can't be serious!" about the idea of putting humor to work, I cleverly respond with, "You are absolutely right—you *can't* be serious!" In fact, that's the entire point of this book. You simply can't afford to be chronically serious in the workplace, at least *not* if you're interested in living a healthier, saner and more balanced life. And you can't be serious if you want to improve morale, motivate yourself or your employees, spark creativity, facilitate open communication, deliver more effective presentations, build trust between management and staff, offer memorable customer service and improve productivity in the workplace. There's no way you can be serious if you want to recruit top-notch employees, retain your best staff and reduce employee absenteeism rates. And if you want to manage stress more effectively, then you

really can't be serious! You *can't* be serious because our sense of humor is one of our most undervalued, under-appreciated and underutilized human resources.

If you still have serious doubts about the value of humor in the workplace, I hope to change your mind long before you reach the end of the book. In the meantime, here's a summary of some compelling reasons to invest in humor, add more fun to your workplace and why, above all else, sometimes, you just *can't* be serious!

Laughter is the Best Medicine. It's a cliché because it's true. A good laugh reduces blood pressure, increases our heart rate, massages our internal organs and reduces serum cortical (a hormone released in response to stress). People who have a positive, healthy sense of humor may, according to some researchers, get sick less often and recover more quickly from illnesses. So if you want to live a healthier life, or if you want to have healthy employees and reduce absenteeism rates, then you can't be serious!

Humor Keeps You Balanced. Juggling personal goals, family commitments and work demands has never been more challenging. A recent *Fast Company* magazine survey reported that 91% of respondents said making their personal lives a bigger priority was "very important" to them. A healthy sense of humor is one of the most effective ways to keep grounded and balanced. After all, if *you're* not balanced, it's virtually impossible to keep all those balls in the air for long. And when you stumble or fumble, your sense of humor helps you maintain your sanity and perspective. So if you want to stay balanced, you can't be serious!

Laughter is a Powerful Stress Buster. Many psychologists tell us that humor is the complete opposite of stress. Humor reduces tension in a stressful situation, provides a realistic perspective when you most need it, gives you control over your emotions and

helps you rise above a crisis. Humor is a thinking response in an emotional situation, helping you connect your mind with your heart. So if you want to manage stress better, you just can't be serious!

Humor is a Catalyst for Creativity. Humor and creativity are about looking at the same thing as everyone else and seeing something completely different. Both involve taking risks, playing with ideas and making new and often unlikely associations. Is it any wonder, then, that humor is one of the most effective catalysts for creativity in the workplace? Clearly, if you want to be more creative or to foster a more innovative work environment, you can't be serious!

Humor Helps Us Manage Change. For the 99.4% of you who are wrestling with major changes in the workplace, humor can go a long way towards making change less frightening and stressful. Humor encourages creative thinking and flexible attitudes, two key traits you'll find in people who manage change effectively. So if you want to master change in your work life, you can't be serious!

Humor is a Powerful Motivator and Morale Booster. Humor in the workplace keeps the mood light and maintains a climate of positive energy where morale is high. And when morale is high, co-workers get along better, people actually *want* to show up to work and employees are more committed to their goals. So if you want to fire up the troops (including yourself) and boost morale, you *really, really* can't be serious!

Humor is a Great Way to Say “Thanks!” Successful organizations celebrate every milestone on their journey to loftier goals; they know that's the key to long-term success. That's why many companies use creative, fun and even downright wacky ways to reward

employees for a job well done and to say thanks for a great effort. If you want to reward accomplishments and employees effectively, then you can't be serious!

Humor Builds Strong Teams. Teams that laugh together work well together. Humor breaks down stereotypes and promotes a sense of unity in any workforce. It builds company traditions and a sense of shared history that reminds employees they are playing for the same team. So if you want to build a great sense of camaraderie in your workplace, then you can't be serious!

Humor Can Make Meetings More Effective. Humor in meetings encourages participation, minimizes conflicts, helps people retain information, opens up dialogue and sparks creativity. So if you catch yourself saying, "We've *got* to stop meeting like this" after every meeting, then you can't be serious!

Humor Facilitates Open Communication. Humor is a powerful way to connect at a human level and build rapport. It breaks down barriers and opens up hearts, creating an environment conducive to open, honest communication. Humor can also liven up dry business correspondence, soften authoritative messages and improve the delivery of business presentations. If you want to improve your communications, you can't be serious!

Humor Improves Customer Service. If you've got customers, then you're in the people business and, above all else, the relationship business. Including customers in the fun is an effective way to connect with clients, retain a loyal customer base and provide memorable customer service. If you are serious about providing outstanding customer service, then sometimes you can't be serious!

Humor Helps Managers Manage with a Lighter Touch. More and more business leaders are embracing their sense of humor as a way to build rapport with staff, communicate more effectively, show their human side more openly, develop trust and foster a supportive workplace climate. So if you want to be a more effective manager, then you can't be serious!

Laughter Can Improve the Bottom Line. If humor helps us achieve all the goals listed so far, then it only makes sense that ultimately it will improve our overall effectiveness and productivity in the workplace. This isn't, as hockey commentator Don Cherry would say, "rocket surgery." We do best what we enjoy doing. In fact, there are countless examples of businesses that, by focusing on their employees' laugh lines, have significantly improved their bottom lines. So if you want to be more successful and productive, then really, you can't be serious!

Humor Improves the Coffee in Your Office. Well, okay, I'm stretching it here (the truth is, I didn't want to leave the list at 13 - I mean *no one* makes a list with 13 points). But you know, there probably is a little truth to this statement. There's evidence that humor increases our tolerance for pain, so if your coffee is *really* bad, a little laughter might actually ease any ill side effects from rot-gut java. And, let's face it, when you're laughing a lot, having fun and enjoying work, isn't the coffee bound to taste a *little* better? Of course it is. Case closed. If you want to enjoy your coffee more, you just can't be serious! (*Are you sensing a recurring theme here?*)

Final Thoughts

There is one last compelling argument for adding more fun to our work lives. Life is simply too short. Yes, it's a cliché, yes, it's corny and yes, it stinks to high heaven of

saccharine, but it's true! You don't hear a lot of people saying, ABoy this life thing sure is dragging, isn't it?" or "I'm only turning 50 today? Gee, I sure wish time would go faster!"

And since we're onto clichés, let's touch on another big one. When we're on our death beds, I'm quite certain most of us won't reflect back on our lives and think, "You know, I wish I'd been a more miserable s.o.b. at work" or ABoy, if I had to do it all over, I'd try to be more somber and scowl a lot more. In our golden years (but hopefully sooner), most of us will have figured out that the real bottom line in life has nothing to do with dollars, profits or stock options.

Life really *is* short. And whether we like it or not, our work has a huge impact on our lives. More than two-thirds of our waking hours (about 88,000 hours over a typical lifetime) are spent working. We often live in the communities where our work takes us. Many of our personal friendships develop out of working relationships (by one account, 50% of marriages result from meetings on the job). Our work helps define us, shape our personalities and nourish our growth as fully functional human beings. A large part of our self-esteem and identity is wrapped up in what we do for a living. For better or for worse, our work has a profound impact on the quality of our lives. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow—The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, goes further, suggesting that the two most important factors in determining our overall happiness are our relations with other people and how we experience our work. Additionally, some health researchers have found that work satisfaction is a better predictor of our future health than most other health-related habits. In other words, it makes a ridiculously monumental amount of

sense to think about and, more importantly, *plan* to improve the quality of our work lives by putting humor to work each and every day.

So, if a serious person with an overly serious scowl walks up to you in the hallway, remind them of Oscar Wilde's wonderful words, "Life is too important to be taken seriously!" Then tell them, "You *can't* be serious!"

We need to stop looking at work as simply a means of earning a living and start realizing it is one of the elemental ingredients in making a life. Luci Swindoll