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# Humor in the Workplace: Anecdotal Evidence Suggests Connection to Employee Performance

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“The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living” (Frankl, 1959, p. 64). Viktor Frankl (1959), logotherapist and World War II concentration camp survivor. He defines humor as

... one of the soul's weapons [used] in the fight for self-preservation. ... it is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, if only for a few seconds. (p. 63)

Humor is “any communication (joke, witticism, pun, [etcetera]) that results in laughter or mirth” (Smith, Harrington, & Neck, 2000, ¶ 8). The primary functions of humor are coping, reframing, celebrating, communicating ambiguity, and expressing hostility. Research (Clarke, 2002) indicates that humor may increase a person's ability to cope, persevere, ward off illness, and become more productive. Those activities that produce humor, when incorporated into corporate culture such as those of Southwest Airlines and Ben & Jerry's Homemade, Inc., may increase employee performance (i.e., a person's positive and productive stimulus-based reaction) (Buxman, 1996).

Viktor E. Frankl, MD, PhD (2000), first noted its psychological benefits in the treatment of various neuroses in his research for *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*.

Paradoxical intention—a logotherapeutic technique that lends itself to the short-term treatment of

obsessive-compulsive and phobic neuroses—is intended to muster and mobilize self-detachment in general. In particular, however, it utilizes a unique and specific aspect of self-detachment, namely, the human sense of humor. (Frankl, 2000, p. 110)

Frankl (2000) continued, “it is remarkable and noteworthy that Dr. Iver Hand of London's Maudsley Hospital found that patients who had been treated along the lines of behavior therapy in a group setting ‘used humor spontaneously as one of their main coping mechanisms’” (p. 111). One tenet of logotherapy states that patients must view themselves as “free and responsible agent[s],” and the ability to laugh at oneself or see the humor in any given situation—however bleak—is empowering and aids in the search for meaning (Frankl, 2000, p. 111).

Loretta LaRoche, an instructor at the Mind/Body Medical Institute, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School, teaches a course on humor, optimism, and cognitive restructuring. “She believes positive psychology aids in dealing with life's blows. [Says LaRoche,] ‘Laughter is a catharsis. It allows us to release stress’” (as cited in Clarke, 2002, ¶ 3, 4). Similarly, Clarke (2002) addresses humor's medicinal benefits.

[Laughter] diminishes stress and pain and can increase antibodies that help fight disease and combat anxiety. ... Most of all, humor releases endorphins ... it can change and lower heart rate, lower blood pressure and decrease stress hormones. (¶ 2)

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Researchers at Loma Linda University found that after male participants viewed humorous movies, their white blood cell counts increased. “White blood cells can also attack tumor cells and boost immune-system activity. [Another] study at the University of Maryland Medical Center ... reports that [laughter] may help reduce and protect against heart disease and heart attacks” (Clarke, 2002, ¶ 2).

### **Humor in the Workplace**

The pervasiveness of stress among the American workforce and its resultant cost to employees and employers has made it the ubiquitous unwanted employee. A recent study claims that “workers consume 15 tons of aspirin a day, [and] one in four ... suffers from an anxiety-related illness. Soon job stress will be the [number one] reason for worker’s compensation” (Buxman, 2002, ¶ 1). As more companies lose productive time of their primary assets, their employees, to stress, it is essential that they find ways to minimize its effects and improve employee performance, and humor may be one of the easiest, most cost-effective ways to do so. “Humor improves productivity. When employees are working on a repetitive job, humor can increase length of time on task by reducing tension and boredom. And studies show humor doesn’t detract from tasks requiring increased concentration” (Buxman, 2002, ¶ 5).

Rogers (2002) conducted an Australian industry-wide study of 2,500 employees and found that “81 percent ... believe a fun working environment would make them more productive; 93 percent said that laughing on the job helps to reduce work-related stress. A further 55 percent said they would take less pay to have more fun at work” (¶ 6). He concluded that “people who have a fun disposition and can express this in the workplace have lower levels of job stress and burnout and higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. ... Fun at work reduces stress and increases productivity” (Rogers, 2002, ¶ 4).

Even so, moderation is key. “Humor is like a loaded weapon: If you’re not careful with it, you can do some serious damage! It is imperative that all attempts at introducing fun and humor into the work environment be predicated on appropriateness and common sense” (Torchio, 2002, ¶ 7). Scott Adams, famed *Dilbert* creator, argues that humor cannot be inserted into an organization to cure problems: “Humor comes naturally ‘after you’ve done everything else right’” (as cited in Nilsen & Nilsen, 2000, p. 59).

### **Case Studies**

Executives at Southwest Airlines and Ben & Jerry’s have long appreciated and profited from the benefits of humor in business, aware that humor helps create the “resilient corporate culture” that comes when employees are allowed to be “flexible, creative, and innovative” (Clarke, 2000, ¶ 3). Companies and agencies like Deloitte & Touche, IBM, Kodak, Monsanto, Honda, and the Internal Revenue Service have periodically hired humor consultants and organizations to infuse humor into their businesses (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2000). In a recent survey of 737 CEOs, more than 98% indicated they would much rather hire a candidate with a good sense of humor than a person without one (Goodman, n.d.).

#### *Southwest Airlines*

Southwest Airlines is consistently one of the largest, most lucrative passenger air carriers in the United States. It has made a profit every quarter since 1973, which has included airline deregulation in the 1970s, a recession in the 1980s, and the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 tragedy. America’s low-cost airline leader achieves this high level of performance through the quality of Southwest employees. Herb Kelleher, former CEO of Southwest often says, “The most important attribute for a Southwest employee is a sense of humor” (as cited in Adair, 1995, ¶ 47). Southwest’s executives clearly see the connection between humor and performance and use it to their advantage to increase revenues.

Kevin Freiberg (1996) writes in *NUTS!*, a profile of Southwest Airlines,

Fun, humor and laughter are treated as life-enhancing gifts for everyone. So how does Southwest go about creating the kind of relaxing and accepting atmosphere that grants people the freedom to play and have fun? The company is religious about hiring the right people. (p. 66)

A typical interview question at Southwest asks applicants to “explain how [they] have used a sense of humor in the workplace.” The interviewer may go on to ask how a person has used humor to defuse a tense situation (Freiberg, 1996, p. 67). Humor is a valued trait of the “right” person. Southwest has the smallest number of employees per aircraft, serves the most customers per employee, and has the most enviable record of profitability in the industry (Freiberg, 1996). Employee dedication is evident by Southwest’s low attrition rate—9% as of 2000 (Stein, 2000, ¶ 24). This is impressive evidence that humor in the workplace can increase productivity.

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Humor is a part of the daily routines of all departments in Southwest Airlines. Southwest flight attendants are famous for their off-the-wall safety announcements. “There may be 50 ways to leave your lover, but there are only six ways off this airplane.” Pilots get in on the fun, too. “We’ve reached our cruising altitude now, and I’m turning off the seat belt sign. I’m switching to autopilot, too, so I can come back there and visit with all of you for the rest of the flight” (Freiberg, 1996, p. 211). Herb Kelleher was quoted in a 1999 interview when he received the honor of CEO of the year from *Chief Executive Magazine* as saying, “Low costs and high spirits are the ... things I concern myself with, and they’re related. ... One way you achieve lower fares is through high employee productivity—people being really dedicated to what they’re doing and being proud of doing it well” (“Chief executive,” 1999, ¶ 56).

*Ben & Jerry’s Homemade, Inc.*

Ben & Jerry’s Homemade, Inc., a well-known ice cream manufacturer in Vermont, is an excellent example of a company that practices humor in its daily routine. Donna Wood, Katz Graduate School of Business professor agrees. “The company feels that employees are more motivated and productivity is higher when they are satisfied with their work” (as cited in Patel, 2001, p. 14). To increase employee satisfaction, Ben & Jerry’s cofounder Jerry Greenfield proposed the creation of a Joy Gang at a company meeting in the summer of 1988 to “get a group of people together who will put more joy into every workday at the plant” (Greenwood, 1996, ¶ 20). The employee-run committee meets monthly to plan activities for coworkers that will reinforce the value of humor. The first event was a massage and pizza party, and it went over so well that the company decided to arrange bimonthly massages for all workers. The Joy Gang has also arranged such hits as Elvis Presley Day, National Clash-Dressing Day, and Barry Manilow Appreciation Day. The Joy Gang also strives to improve the working environment at the Ben & Jerry’s plant. For example, in the production area, employees listen to music, which rotates among one of the three stations that is broadcast in the area. “Actually, the Joy Gang bought our stereo. We listen to music and enjoy our work,” says one of the plant laborers (as cited in Laabs, 1996, ¶ 55).

As Ben & Jerry’s started instilling humor in its daily routine, “it discovered that the punch line is not that far from the bottom line. If you want to get more out of your employees, make sure that they are having a good time at work” (Greenwood, 1996, ¶ 21). Having a humor policy sets Ben & Jerry’s Homemade, Inc., apart from the majority

of American companies. However, it doesn’t mean that Ben & Jerry’s takes business lightly. According to an employee, “We take business very seriously, and that is evident in the workforce here. Ben & Jerry’s has an effective business, clearly demonstrated by its total sales last year [1995] of 77 million dollars” (Greenwood, 1996, ¶ 7).

In April 2000, Ben & Jerry’s Homemade, Inc., and Unilever “agreed to a unique and ground-breaking combination in which Ben & Jerry’s [joined] forces with Unilever to create an even more dynamic, socially positive ice cream business with global reach” (Laabs, 1996, ¶ 1). After the agreement was reached, Richard Goldstein, president of Unilever Foods in North America, said that much of Ben & Jerry’s success is based on its human-related culture, and it is Unilever’s hope and expectation that Ben & Jerry’s will continue to engage in this culture (Laabs, 1996). In 1992, *Workforce Magazine*, the largest magazine in circulation for human resources (HR) professionals, gave Ben & Jerry’s Homemade, Inc., its 1992 Optimas Award in “the Quality of Life category for creating the supportive environment for employees, which, in turn, helps support the company’s fiscal vitality” (Laabs, 1996, ¶ 7).

For both Southwest Airlines and Ben & Jerry’s, humor is an intrinsic part of the company culture. However, while there is anecdotal evidence that attributes humor to each company’s success, there is no quantitative research on the correlation of humor in the workplace and attrition rates, individual performance metrics, productivity rates, sick days used, etc. Furthermore, research does not exist on the results of companies incorporating humor as a core value or cultural characteristic. While many companies—from *Fortune* 500 leaders IBM and UPS to accounting firm Deloitte & Touche—have been featured frequently in articles about using humor consultants, there is no research evaluating the reasons for hiring humor consultants or whether these companies implemented humor policies once the consultants left.

Even so, James Wall, global human resources partner for Deloitte & Touche, LLP, cites anecdotal findings.

We have used humor consultants periodically. While we haven’t done any formal research on the subject, we are BIG believers that life is too short, and you work too many hours, not to have fun while you’re doing it. So part of our culture is about enjoying each other, being passionate about what you do, and having fun while you do it! All of this helps us serve our clients better, exceed their expectations, and grow faster than any of our competitors. (J. Wall, personal communication, November 8, 2002)

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James Copeland, Jr., Deloitte & Touche CEO, credits Wall, who was named the 2002 Human Resources Executive of the Year, with “[infusing] our entire organization with an enthusiastic, entrepreneurial attitude” (“Deloitte & Touche’s,” 2002, ¶ 3).

Through his work, the culture of our firm has become decidedly more collaborative, supportive, and inclusive—an environment in which all of our people can achieve their full potential. This change in culture has significantly reduced turnover, costs associated with turnover, and helped to optimize continuity of service to clients. (“Deloitte & Touche’s,” 2002, ¶ 3)

## Recommendations

For those executives wanting to make humor part of their companies’ cultural visions, doing so will require more than inviting a humor consultant to the occasional meeting. If the techniques and suggestions offered by humor consultants don’t filter past top executives and managers, however, then humor cannot become a corporate strategy for improving employee performance. If humor is worth integrating in order to achieve measurable results, it must be infused pervasively and not relegated to a mere agenda item.

Companies considering infusing humor into their cultures should first establish a set of metrics to gauge the validity of this decision, such as the following. They should, first, clearly identify their reasons for selecting a humor strategy over others. Then they should establish performance metrics that will measure the change in employee behaviors over time. This evaluation data might come from regularly distributed questionnaires and periodic town meetings, as well as from data on hiring, retention, absenteeism, and customer satisfaction surveys.

The founders of Southwest Airlines and Ben & Jerry’s developed their businesses with humor as a core value, but there are very few other companies that have used humor from conception. However, that does not mean that humor cannot become a value in an organization.

For some companies, humor consultants may provide the impetus to realizing the humor-based benefits that Southwest and Ben & Jerry’s have seen for the last twenty years.

Ruth Hamilton, executive director of the Carolina Health and Humor Association, suggests some cost-effective methods for promoting humor, such as “Friday Fun-days,” where employees can wear ugly ties or dress to a theme similar to Ben & Jerry’s Elvis Day. She continues by saying, “Employers need to recognize the sense of humor as a great asset in an employee and give special notice to those employees who are upbeat, good natured, and funny” (R. Hamilton, personal communication, November 14, 2002).

Tim Gard, a professional humor consultant and creator of Comic Visions, a Denver-based consultancy organization, strives to “identify situational stress factors [in the workplace] and find humor solutions” (T. Gard, personal communication, November 18, 2002). He explained his “humor plan,” which he leaves with businesses after he speaks to employees and managers. First, he suggests that the company or department trying to infuse humor hold a meeting to discuss the idea with employees. There should be a set of guidelines developed to outline what is acceptable humor. Gard’s concept of the “absence of malice” should also be addressed, which allows people to openly express their feelings when they have been offended by a joke or comment. Finally, all humor should add to the business, not take away from the company’s goals (T. Gard, personal communication, November 18, 2002).

Encouraging humor in the workplace may be a cost-effective means of minimizing the effects of stress and increasing productivity. If a company wants to establish a culture similar to the cultures of Southwest Airlines and Ben & Jerry’s, all it needs is a commitment to humor as a core value and a humor strategy to increase employee performance. Gordon W. Allport once said, “The neurotic who learns to laugh at himself may be on the way to self-management; perhaps to cure” (as cited in Frankl, 1959, p. 148).

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## **Biography**

Lauren Garrett Breeze is a 2004 graduate of the St. Edward's University Master of Business Administration program with a concentration in Business Management. She received a BS in Marine Transportation and Third Mate's Unlimited Tonnage Merchant Mariner's License from Texas A&M University at Galveston. She has served as Third Mate on product tankers and as a port captain for an international containership company. She currently lives in Austin, where she is a volunteer business consultant and full-time mom.

Adrienne Mattea Dawson graduated from the Master of Business Administration program in 2004 with a dual concentration in Marketing and Business Management. She received a BA in English and Geology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1999 and has previously published literary criticism, poetry, and scientific research.

Adrienne and Lauren were guest presenters on quality and branding perceptions in the Czech Republic at the 10th annual W. Edwards Deming Research Seminar at Fordham University.

Susanna B. Khazhinsky also is a 2004 graduate, with a Master of Business Administration concentrated in Finance and Business Management. She earned a BS in Finance from Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics, and Computer Science. Susanna worked for five years as an assistant accountant at Signal, Ltd., Moscow, Russia, where she gained experience in accounting, preparation of financial statements, and projecting pro-forma financial statements. She has a multicultural background and is fluent in Russian and French.