

Solutions

FAMILY SERVICES  EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

NEWSLETTER

Issue 37

Humour in the Workplace

As many of us already know, work is no laughing matter. Or is it?

While it has been frowned upon in the past, humour at work is now being recognized for the benefits it brings to individual workers and their organizations. As the old saying goes, laughter really is the best medicine, and that goes for everything from the common cold to the bottom line.

And while some worry that all that joking around will make their employees less productive, others are laughing all the way to the bank!

Benefits for Workers

The biggest enemy to today's employees is workplace stress. Stress can make you sick, depressed, irritable and unproductive. Luckily the cure is cheap and effective: laughter!

1. Laughter releases endorphins that reduce stress, create a sense of wellbeing and make you feel more alert.
2. Humour can help you think and be more creative. When you are stuck on a problem, a good laugh can rid you of negative feelings and allow you to return to it with a fresh positive outlook.
3. Laughter oxygenates your blood, which increases your energy levels, relaxes your muscles, and strengthens your immune system.
4. People with a good sense of humour are better communicators and team players.

5. Laughing burns calories (100 laughs equals 10 minutes of jogging!)
6. Humour builds self-confidence, makes you less afraid to make mistakes and helps you bounce back from negative events.

Benefits for Organizations

Happy workers are productive workers. Humour and laughter can lighten the mood of your workplace and make it truly a fun place to be. This in turn, makes you, your colleagues and even your managers more enthusiastic about their jobs and much more productive.

Laughter and humour can also improve communication at work. A well-placed joke can help you get your point across at a meeting, and soften criticisms of colleagues and superiors. Humour can also help when dealing with difficult customers or admitting your own mistakes. When used respectfully, humour shows people your "human" side and makes it easier for others to approach you for ideas and advice.

Whether sharing jokes in the lunchroom or putting a pink flamingo next to the cash register to get a smile from your clients, humour and laughter build stronger relationships at work. When people laugh together a natural bond is created. Workers who enjoy each other's company become positive team players. They have more trust and confidence in one another, and take a more creative and co-operative approach to problem-solving.

** Permission to photocopy with credit given to Jennifer McCarthy, Family Service Canada Consultant.*

Humour in the Workplace (*continued*)

Humour also helps lighten up tense situations at work. During times of high stress, humour can be a welcome release. It allows everyone to take a step back, relax and return to their work with a fresh and positive outlook. When tensions between individuals run high, laughter can diffuse the situation, and provide a much-needed cooling off period before continuing a difficult discussion.

In general, workplaces that encourage laughter have happier, healthier and more productive workers and, as a result, they see an increase in profits and results.

What is Appropriate?

While humour can be a great tool for improving productivity and relationships, inappropriate jokes and comments will do just the opposite. When using humour at work, it is important to remember that what you and your friends may find funny could be insulting and offensive to others.

Here are a few guidelines:

- Humour should always make other people feel good (happy, relaxed, accepted).
- Humour should poke fun at situations, but not people.
- Humour should never be about a person's appearance, religion, ethnic background, or sexuality.
- Humour has very little to do with practical jokes. (They usually make people feel bad, and separate from the "group.")
- Humour should not be used to mask complaints about your workplace, or insults directed at your boss or colleagues.

One of the best ways to use humour at work is to have the confidence to laugh at yourself. This relaxes the people around you, and does not risk offending anyone. Finding the humour in everyday situations is also a good idea. People can easily relate to these types of jokes and they won't make anyone feel bad. (It has also made comedian Jerry Seinfeld a millionaire!)

How to Get Started

If you are someone who's never attempted any kind of humour before, or if you are not sure how your superiors will react, it is a good idea to start small. Create a "humour board" in the lunchroom where everyone can post up tasteful cartoons, jokes or goofy photos of themselves and their colleagues. Bring in a rubber chicken and "lend" it to stressed-out colleagues. Or make a "humour box" where everyone can put suggestions for silly activities during the week. Then pick one suggestion each month and put it into action.

Props are a great way to get laughs and not offend anyone. They may seem childish, but rubber chickens, Groucho glasses and silly hats are all safe ways to lighten the mood and get people smiling. One manager kept a gorilla mask in his desk and would wear it around the office when he felt his workers needed a laugh.

Finally, if you are feeling unsure about a joke or idea, discuss it with a levelheaded friend or family member before you carry it out. They may be able to help you work out what is appropriate and what isn't. A discussion with your boss about the benefits of laughter and how to make your work a more lighthearted place is also a good idea.

When used appropriately, humour is a great addition to any workplace. In fact, workers with good senses of humour are more likely to be promoted and even keep their jobs during tough times. So put on your biggest pair of clown shoes and start laughing!

References:

Managing to Have Fun by Michael Kerr. Online at: <http://www.members.shaw.ca/canadahumour/workplace.html>

Promote Humour in the Workplace by Barbara Bartlein. Online at: <http://www.networkingtoday.on.ca/articles/humour.htm>

Humour, Laughter and Workplace Wellness. Articles by David Granier. Online at: <http://www.granier.com/articles.htm>

Family Services offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call:

1-800-668-9920