

Is humour in the workplace the solution to your problems

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The thought of the workplace conjures many different emotions within employees and has led them to give it names that resemble how it makes them feel. Some feel it is a place of career growth, whilst others feel it is a place where dreams go to die. Others feel it is a place of slavery, whilst others view it as a place of endless opportunities. Some feel it is a place where they are kept busy, whilst others think like William Faulkner, who is often given the credit for saying, “A bus station is where a bus stops. A train station is where a train stops. On my desk, I have a work station...”. However, it is rare to find employees that think of the workplace as a place of laughter and humour, unless of course, they are in the comedy business.

According to the Cambridge dictionary, humour is defined as, “the ability to find things funny, the way in which people see that some things are funny, or the quality of being funny.” Humour in the workplace is viewed by many as inappropriate and taboo, whilst others are adamant that it is evidence that not much work is actually being done. However, if done correctly, humour does not conform to such assertions. Actually, it may even be the solution to some of life’s problems. Do people looking to climb the work ladder have more options at their disposal than the traditional exceptional performance, working longer hours or being a “yes man”? What about people struggling to cope with the workloads and stresses associated with their work? Is there an alternative coping mechanism which is not costly and is scientifically proven.

A Harvard Business Review report by Fabio Sala, titled, “Laughing All the Way to the Bank” showed evidence that it actually pays to be funny and to have a sense of humor. Sala conducted two experiments, one on incumbent executives and another on candidates interviewing for executive positions. In the first experiment, incumbent executives who had been rated by senior executives as either being outstanding or average performers were interviewed whilst independent raters took note of the quantity and quality of humour. The executives who had been acknowledged as being outstanding performers were found to use twice as much humour as the average performers. From a statistical point of view, there was a positive correlation found to exist between the humour used by the executives during the interview and the bonuses they received. In the second experiment, which was similar to the first, the group being tested were candidates for executive positions still in the hiring process.

After a year, the candidates who were then described as outstanding performers were those who had used more humour than their average performing counterparts during the hiring process. Their bonuses were also positively correlated with their use of humour, a year earlier. This study shows that it does, in fact, pay to be funny. Not only that, but Vartebedian’s 1998 work showed that employees that employed humour often actually received more opportunities than those that did not. Thus, in addition to increasing an employee’s earnings, humour is able to provide opportunities to climb the work ladder to the top. In fact, a survey by Robert Half revealed that survey, 91% of participating executives proposed a sense of humour as being a necessity for the advancement of a person’s career. Other studies such as

David Stauffer's Harvard Management report titled "Let the Good Times Roll Building a Fun Culture" and Mike Kerr's "Humor at Work: Putting Mimes to Good Use" found that when used correctly humour can cause people to want to listen to what the humourous person has to say and furthermore make people feel inclined to accept information that would have otherwise been unacceptable to them. It follows that humour is effective in taking the sting out of unpleasant and awkward situations. Jill Knox went further and presented humour as an essential part in building peace and mediating between different parties as it bridges cultural gaps and other differences that may exist, thereby promoting a sense of trust and community. As such, leaders that use humour are viewed as empathetic as well as, able to lead. Humour influences the way people view others.

Without demonstrating their capability, a person using humour is viewed as being competent and in control. According to the Robert Half survey, 84% of the participants were of the opinion that people with a good sense of humour are capable of doing a better job than others. An Arnie Cann study supported this and showed that people using humour are often viewed as being more credible, as well as, more competent. Humour also improves the performance of the individual using humour, as well as, that of people around them. In the Journal of Managerial Psychology, Jessica Mesmer-Magnus found that things like reduced absenteeism, employee engagement and satisfaction, as well as, improved performance were all correlated with the supervisor's use of humour. Other studies have asserted that decision-making, problem-solving, creative-thinking can all be improved through the use of humour and according to Saba Ghayas, through watching comedy films.

In general, humour has far-reaching benefits, which are not limited to those mentioned in this body of writing. Humour even has a positive effect on a person's health, with studies like Amy Toffelmire's "Ha! Laughing is Good for You!", showing that humour plays an important role in relaxing muscles, decreasing blood pressure and even strengthening our immune system. Mary Bennett in a 2003 Alternative Therapies volume showed that laughter actually blocks stress hormone from being produced and produces hormones like beta-endorphin instead, thereby strengthening the immune system. Thus, it is indeed true that laughter is the best medicine. And the best part is that it is totally free. If used correctly. Nyasha Mukechi is a Consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt.) Ltd a management and human resources consulting firm. Phone +263 4 481946-48/481950 or cell number +263 773274381 or email: nyasham@ipcconsultants.com or visit our website at www.ipcconsultants.com

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