

The Benefits of Laughing in the Workplace

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I have one colleague who loves to laugh, and when I mean laugh, I mean laughing out loud. He is one jovial spirit and the day never passes without him bursting out into laughter over a joke he is seeing on his phone or over a humorous discussion taking place in our open-plan office. For a new person or someone who does not know him, his laughter can be perceived as being distracting and loud and for those who are now used to him, we now know its part of his personality. According to studies conducted by Wharton, MIT, and London Business School, laughter brings with it a host of business benefits.

Allison Beard states, “Laughter relieves stress and boredom, boosts engagement and well-being and spurs not only creativity and collaboration but also analytic precision and productivity.” Harvard Business School professor Alison Wood Brooks has also found that cracking jokes at work can make people seem more competent. Laughing has been seen to have its benefits on employees. According to Mayo Clinic, “When you start to laugh, it doesn’t just lighten your load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body,” Laughter enhances one’s intake of “oxygen-rich air,” increasing your brain’s release of endorphins. It also stimulates circulation and aid muscle relaxation, both of which can help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress, especially in the workplace. The Mayo Clinic goes on to indicate that “A rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response, and it can increase your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling.”

The freedom to laugh is not only good but also necessary in the workplace. A group of researchers even found that after watching a comedy clip, employees were 10% more productive than their counterparts. Seeing the benefits that low-stress levels have on employee productivity, a bit of laughter could surely do the trick. In most organizations, laughter is not heard much and seen as a distraction in the workplace. According to a study conducted by Gallup in the US, people laugh significantly less on weekdays than they do on weekends. Work is seen to be such a sober endeavor. Others feel that humor is subjective: what one may find as funny and hilarious another person may feel the opposite. According to authors of the following books *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny* and *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, they believe that there’s a formula for what makes all people laugh, and they work extremely hard, in very different ways, to prove their cases.

Some popular companies encourage humour, for example, Yahoo and IBM have crazy names like Kajagoogoo for their meeting rooms, Hulu hosts taco-eating contests and Airzooka tournaments, etc. Andrew Tarvin (a humor engineer) lists the following as some of the benefits of humor in the workplace:

1. **Humor improves productivity**—“In one study of more than 2,500 employees, 81 percent said they believe a fun working environment would make them more productive.” (*Humor in the Workplace: Anecdotal Evidence Suggests Connection to Employee Performance, Lauren Breeze. Perspectives in Business, St Edwards University, 2004*)

2. **Humor reduces stress-** “People with a sense of humor report less stress and anxiety than those with a low sense of humor, despite experiencing the same number of problems at work.” (*Humor, stress, and coping strategies*. By Millicent H. Abel. HUMOR. 2002, Vol 15; Part 4)
3. **Humor prevents burnout-** “Humor has also been identified as a communication tool that, when used effectively, can prevent burnout and create resilience to stress.” (“*On the association between humor and burnout*”, Laura Talbot. *International Journal of Humor Research*, 2009)
4. **Humor boosts overall brainpower-** “A dose of humor releases the chemical serotonin in your brain, which improves focus, increases objectivity and improves overall brainpower.” (“*A Dash of Humor Ups Performance and Creativity at Work*”, Robyn McMaster. *Brain-Based Biz*, September 2008)
5. **Humor improves decision-making-** “Positive moods prompt more flexible decision-making and wider search behavior and greater analytic precision.” (“*Secrets of America’s Happiest Companies*”, Lydia Dishman. *FastCompany*, January 2013 4)
6. **Humor enhances one’s ability to solve problems-** “Studies have shown that simply watching comedy films can improve creative problem-solving skills.” (“*Sense of humor as a predictor of creativity level in University undergraduates*”, Saba Ghayas, *Journal of Behavioural Sciences*. 2013.)
7. **Humor gets people to listen-** “Consistent use of appropriate humor makes people want to read and hear what you say.” (“*Let the Good Times Roll Building a Fun Culture*”, David Stauffer. *Harvard Management Update No. U9910B*.)
8. **Humor improves memory retention-** “Instructional messages that gain students’ attention and help them make sense of course content (clarity behaviors) enhance students’ ability to process the content resulting in greater retention and learning.”
9. **Humor encourages collaboration-** “A growing body of research shows that when you share a laugh with someone, you’re mirroring not only one another’s body language but also the hormonal and neuronal activity, prompting a mutual investment in each other’s well-being.” (“*Why Humor Makes You More Creative*”, Drake Baer. *FastCompany*, May 2013.)
10. **Humor enhances perceived leadership skills-** “People who use humor, particularly in stressful or seemingly one-down positions, are viewed as being on top of things, being in charge and in control, whether they are in fact or not.” (“*Getting Serious About Workplace Humor*”, Martha Craumer. *Harvard Business School, C0207D*.)
11. **Humor increases the ability to cope-** “By finding humor in stressful or potentially threatening situations, people can replace negative with positive affect, thereby giving them an increased ability to cope with negative states of affairs.” (“*Humor Theories and the Physiological Benefits of Laughter*”, Julia Wilkins. *Holistic Nursing Practice*, December 2009.)

Some organizations spend a lot of money on activities such as happy hour, team building activities, etc., in order to engage and relax employees, whilst laughter could possibly be a cheaper alternative. According to a 2009 study, people are more likely to be better at problem-solving if they are in a better mood. Researchers compared their performance after watching a funny video, after seeing an anxiety-inducing clip. Predictably, they “solved more problems with insights” after getting in a laugh or two. When management encourages humor in the workplace you are helping employees relax and creating a “playful culture” that allows for better idea sharing among employees. As entrepreneur Peter Sims wrote in his 2011 book *Little Bets*, “A playful, lighthearted, and humorous environment is especially helpful

when ideas are incubating and newly hatched, the phase when they are most vulnerable to being snuffed out or even expressed because of being judged or self-censored.”

Too much humor or laughter also has its downsides, for example, leaders who tease staff members or tell dirty jokes can pave the way for other employees to behave badly. And Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter notes that numerical minorities in professional situations, such as a woman with a group of men, may feel pressured to laugh at jokes that demean the minority. “The price of that kind of acceptance is decreased respect for everyone in” the minority category, she says. But within the bounds of decency, laughter, on the whole, is a good thing, and the benefits far outweigh the risks. One will obviously need to be mindful of their volume when laughing and the type of jokes they share so to avoid distracting or offending their colleagues.

As Harvard Medical School professor Carl Marci notes, “Laughter is a social signal among humans. It’s like a punctuation mark.” So amidst a stress day, a bit of laughter could help bring a bit of relief and cheer.

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