

Relax and Laugh: How Humor Can Strengthen Your Supply Team

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Abstract. Work can be fun or drudgery. This presentation provides a three-step process with definitions and examples to introduce and develop humor as a tool to weld the supply management team, its associates and its supply chains into a productive team creating value while enjoying a humorous work-life.

Introduction. Many authorities assert that humor in the workplace is a good thing. Equally important, these same authorities argue that humor can be successfully introduced to organizations. This workshop will cover the two-types of humor and how to apply humor correctly in the workplace along with the good leadership tools needed to make humor work in your supply chain. I will present an easy three-step process to change you, your associates, your supply chain and the total set of relationships that bind you all together into a productive team creating value. We will learn to lighten up, and enjoy both life and work. More important, we can build productivity, create empowerment and build better supply chain relationships with humor. This presentation describes both the typical workplace and what life could be with humor, including examples of how to be and how not to be. Participants will receive a self-assessment tool and a reference list of usable examples to change themselves and colleagues.

Humor. In terms of our use of the word humor, the Webster dictionary defines humor as one or more of these concepts—1) a quality or sense that appeals to the absurdity or incongruence of a situation, 2) the mental ability to see the absurdity or incongruence of the situation, and 3) the mental faculty to appreciate and express absurdity or incongruence of the situation. Humor is a matter of how we see things and our perspective as we look. Supply managers and the supply team are indeed blessed by our strategic viewpoint—we see both the strategic and tactical from right in the middle of things. We can see engineers, accountants, quality, inspections, suppliers, customers, senior managers as well as the line and staff. We can see them all—warts and all. We are part of that system and our humor can help make it better.

Many authorities assert humor in the workplace is a good thing. I support that argument as valid and I urge everyone to take steps to ensure that our workplaces and our supply chains enjoy more humor in our activities. For example Gostick and Christopher assert that levity (humor) contributes to improving communication, making work more fun and creative, trust and respect, retention, productivity, health, and even long-term success is supported. Most authorities agree that we can do this in three steps, 1) self analysis, 2) convincing yourself, and 3) building your skills and abilities at humor. Before we study these steps, I want to warn you that there are two-types of humor—one to use and develop and one to avoid at all costs.

*If everyone laughs and your joke isn't funny,
you must be the boss.*

Types of Humor—Good and Bad. Most references for building humor in the workplace divide the concept in some form of good or bad. Blumenfeld and Alpern say humor can be "stress producing—bad" or "stress reducing—good." Good humor is generally a blessing and will help people around you. It is usually referred to as humor that helps or builds people. It will help you make the workplace or any place more fun. The second type of humor causes stress in people and it certainly has the potential to cause trouble in the workplace. This type of humor puts people down, reflects on race, gender, ethnic background, etc. It hurts people and when people are hurt the humor is one sided. The reduction of stress should be our objective in most humor programs. Here are some examples of stress producing humor that will hurt people.

- Humor that is insensitive to what causes others real pain such as references to religion, age, politics, gender, education, family situations, etc.
- Humor that pokes fun at people's shortcomings, such as education or appearance.
- Humor that offends with inappropriate sexual references or profanity.
- Humor that uses stereotypes to denigrate a person or group such as racial slurs.
- Humor that creates a cruel, abusive or offensive atmosphere, or pointed personal references to an individual in a subordinate position that cannot be countered.
- Humor that divides the work team by put downs such as professional slams.
- Humor that reflects anger about a situation such as mistakes.
- Humor that destroys self-confidence such as references to skills and abilities.

Much of our everyday humor falls into these categories. If you evaluate the stories or comments that you know against these categories you will be amazed at how much bad stuff you know and how much tongue biting you must practice to avoid telling a story or making a remark which might produce stress for some person. These kinds of stories or remarks cause personal conflicts and even lawsuits. Remember our goal is to have fun in the supply chain and its operations, enhance and build the team rather than to create problems.

Good humor that relieves stress is different. It is still about people and their situations, but it relieves stress by creating a supportive atmosphere. Indeed, it is even more fun to write about. Some examples are:

- Humor that reduces tension by making fun of universal human frustrations or faults such as references to work, success, envy, greed, time, understanding, etc.
- Humor that helps people relax and laugh about something is good for the group
- Humor that creates a supportive atmosphere of fun and caring for each other.
- Humor that pokes fun at yourself—something that you did or forgot to do
- Humor that includes every one in the fun and builds the level of participation
- Humor that unites the team by building rapport in the group
- Humor that builds the positive aspects of good human relations

It is easy to see that these examples of good humor are more likely to bring fewer personal conflicts and fewer lawsuits than the first list. Humor that reduces stress is a blessing to the workplace and it will be a blessing to your organization and its supply management operations.

*He never makes the same mistake twice, but it
seems that he has made them all once.*

As we introduce humor into the workplace every one should be prepared to bite his or her tongue and keep humor that is stressful from the team. Robert Eaton, former CEO of Chrysler, asserted that our responsibility as leaders in the late 90's and on into the new century is to build people and make better teams. He calls that empowerment. Empowered people can laugh and solve problems because they have better teams. Better teams make better businesses and better businesses will be more fun to work in because better businesses will be winners. Similarly, better teams make better supply operations, and better supply operations are winners. We all want to be winners.

Now that we know what to do and not to do in terms of good and bad humor, lets look at the steps to building humor in your organization.

Three Steps to Build Humor. We said earlier that we could build humor in three steps. The three steps are 1) self analysis, 2) convincing yourself, and 3) building your skills and abilities at humor. Although the steps are nearly self-explanatory, lets explore them briefly.

In step one, self-analysis, we need to step back and take a deep look at our organizational processes and ourselves. Do we take ourselves too seriously? Are our meetings enjoyable? Do we spend lots of time bad mouthing something or others? Are we pleasant? Do we work at team building? Do we seem to be always uptight, angry or upset by things, the situation or about somebody? Here is a list of humorless attitudes that we can identify and change.

- Work is a terrible burden that we all face.
- We only work to earn money for leisure time.
- Most work is boring.
- People clearly should not have fun at work.
- Old line bosses see workers as a necessary evil.
- Old work ethics never included fun or humor.
- Managers have to be tough, isolated and xenophobic.
- Fear of looking foolish.
- Always find someone to be responsible and be the scapegoat.

In step two, convincing ourselves, we must make the decision to change and enjoy life. For many of us this is not an easy process. As everyone knows change is not easy to accomplish. None of us like change and many actually resist change. Change is even tougher to bring about when you are the subject. Change to more humor, like other changes, must be brought about by positive leadership. Humorous materials are available and we can learn to lighten up.

Step three, like all other skills, being humorous requires education, development and practice. We have to learn how to be more informal and lighten up. Fortunately, there is a growing field of literature, programs and web materials to help in this effort. (See the reference list) A web search will provide literally thousands of usable sources. Better yet, much of it is free.

Now given these three easy steps, here are ten techniques that will lead to organizational change and help reinforce the teams as you seek to bring about more positive humor in the organization and its supply chains.

- Let everybody own his or her job and you own yours

- Work as interdisciplinary and cross organization teams rather than as individuals
- Talk honestly and openly with other leaders and your associates
- Share responsibility—indeed delegate to others
- Trust other leaders, team leaders and others
- Work to find out how supply operations can be better planned and completed
- Lighten up and laugh with all your colleagues
- Build a disciplined sense of humor and enjoy being alive
- Smile, greet people, make eye contact, touch people, let your face tell people that you are happy
- Make humor inclusive—work deliberately to get everyone involved

The literature concerning humor in the workplace includes managerial audits that we can use to conduct organizational analyses to determine how leaders and associates are doing in regards to humor. The audits will identify problem areas and pinpoint corrective actions needed for improvement. Typically, we don't need high-priced consultants, coaches, or even mentors to introduce humor to our workplaces. We just need to lighten up and see the absurdities in the situation around us. See the absurdity in this brief but true story and the short remark that brought this important U.S. Army meeting back to reality.

In 1955 the US Army had just introduced new military trucks with large diesel engines into the fleet in Europe. These engines, like most diesel engines would bellow huge clouds of black smoke if accelerated correctly while changing gears. Most of the young Army drivers loved to make those engines smoke, but many old-line senior officers disliked the bellowing black smoke. In preparation for a huge parade to honor the Commanding General US Army Europe upon his retirement, unit commanders were called to a command briefing at Headquarters. The parade was to include traditional marching units, armored units and motorized units. The command briefing included what many field commanders took to be a rather long list of absurd requirements to ready the troops for the parade. But when the pompous staff officer droned, "There will be no smoking trucks!" An unknown officer from the back of the auditorium, brought the meeting back to reality, by announcing in an equally pompous voice, "Sir I will tell the trucks!" Absurdity is always with us, if we will just see it. It can be brought to reality with the right comment. That officer "made the day" for all those who had to endure that briefing. We all wanted to be him! He is still thankful that the staff officer never discovered his name.

Benefits of Having Humor At Work. Taking a humor break, scheduling time for fun, and looking at situations from the lighter side can recharge the physical and emotional energies needed to keep stress manageable. Humor allows us to momentarily set aside our troubles and responsibilities. We cannot ignore the responsibilities, but we can set them aside briefly while we renew our spirits with humor. Laughter is instantaneous and brief, yet its effects can be positive and long lasting. If it reduces stress, enhances communication and improves the quality of our lives, humor at work must be far from frivolous. Humor is accessible to us all. It adds zest to our lives and it is essentially free.

Here is a list of nine benefits that can be easily obtained from humor in the workplace.

- Improved morale and understanding
- Increasing productivity
- Increased job satisfaction
- Increased flexibility and better team perspectives

- Better problem solving behavior and cooperation
- Reduced problems with stress and associated behaviors
- Increased self-esteem for individuals and the teams
- Reduced time lost to absenteeism
- Individual and team anger is diffused to the situation

As humor is essentially free in the workplace and work teams, it strikes me that these benefits are worth the leader's time and effort to achieve. Dr. Deming's 12th point urges managers to free the workplace of barriers to joy. I suggest that bringing in some humor will remove lots of known barriers as well as unknown barriers.

Getting Humor Started in Your Workplace. After you have completed the three steps 1) self analysis, 2) convincing yourself, and 3) building your skills and abilities at humor and are convinced that you can improve you workplace with humor here is what you must do to introduce the idea to your associates.

1. Call a meeting with your associates to discuss humor in the workplace and supply chain. By discussion determine what others think about the situation. Are we too serious? Should we lighten up? Can we be better? Practice good meeting techniques and search people out. Get them to participate freely. I will wager that most leaders will find more humor than they expected.
2. After the first meeting, plan an opportunity to share your ideas with other carefully selected organizational members concerning humor in the operations. Use good leadership techniques here, and ask other leaders and associates to share in this project. This is like every other good idea; we have to roll it out with a plan.
3. Prepare an announcement to the organization concerning your ideas and after publication follow up with associates for their opinions. Get the rank and file involved.
4. If you decide to move ahead with the idea and I know that you will, plan a learning opportunity for your associates to expand our ability to use humor.
5. Follow up the first steps with reinforcing opportunities and comments to motivate your associates and teams to use humor in the organization and its supply chain operations.

By introducing humor to the workplace we can set the stage for a new type of leadership. Leadership that is less aloft, more open and certainly more involved with the people of the organization. This new leadership value system is best represented by these three concepts.

I Care!
You Matter!
This Job Should Be Fun!

Conclusions. Humor in the workplace is possible. It is essentially free. If done as positive humor, it is good for everybody, and we can all learn to be better in the process. We can do the management/leadership audit to identify our strong points and hang-ups. We can practice humor and lead our associates to change. Humor is a learnable skill and like all skills we can

all to be better at it. I urge you to bring this skill to your work place and the supply chains. Humor requires a minimum investment to earn huge payback. It is the type of investment that every stakeholder likes to see and participate in.

The organization and its supply chains will be better and more profitable. Customers will be better served and the organizations will be successful!

“Life is like a dogsled team, if you aren’t lead dog
the scenery never changes.” -Lewis Grizzard

Here is the final thought to make your day.

"Columbus did not know where he was going. When he got back, he didn't know where he had been. And he did it all on borrowed money. There's hope for all of us."-bumper sticker

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He pushes doors marked pull.