

Beyond Humor in the Workplace
Improving Employee Creativity. Engagement and Teamwork
Society of Research Administrators, International
Seattle, WA, October 19, 2009

SLIDE: TITLE

We're Dorothy Yates and Merritt Helfferich. We're going to have some fun today and talk about humor in the workplace. We'll also talk about how humor helps organizations be more effective and a better place to work. Humor can also help you in improving your life.

SLIDE: GET YOUR FLU SHOT

SLIDE: WHAT ARE THE TOPICS FOR TODAY

First here are something's to slide us into this talk.

SLIDE: A DISTRACTION

Numerous organizations have effectively brought humor into the workplace with benefits to their organization. We're talking about your part in creating and maintaining that productive workplace.

SLIDE: MUSEUM OF SCIENCE

We found out you don't have to react to every day like this:

SLIDE: MAILBOX

We believe that Humor can bring the following benefits to your organization and to your life. Humor makes:

- An environment where employees like to go to work.
- A big difference in productivity with improved problem solving.
- Improved Creativity, Innovation leading to good management.
- Dealing better with the stresses and joys of work and living.

- Lower costs and an improved organization outcome.

We also understand that key topics for any successful presentation are: **Money: Self Preservation: Love: and Recognition.** Today's talk includes most of those except for Love. Being in love with your spouse often makes one feel so good you laugh. But as a caution to be heeded, Will Durst, who said, "Its OK to laugh in the bedroom so long as you don't point"

We both have had the good fortune to work in University Research organizations where humor was an everyday accompaniment to hard work. We have also seen what happens when humor isn't there. If you can see the light side of things you can deal successfully with the serious things or almost anything. Even in Science!

SLIDE: MUSEUM OF SCIENCE

We have both lived in Alaska (Merritt still lives there) and it is essential there and anywhere else to have some humor just to survive well.

SLIDE: BAKED ALASKA

An impressive challenge for many Alaskans is bears. Humor helps us with thoughts of bears. Bears, however, are more for food than for humor.

SLIDE: BEARS

One woman explained salmon behavior in a Ketchikan creek to a companion: "The water is shallower there and warmer. That's why they jump so much. They're trying to cool off."

So enough of Alaska, back to the Humor and the Engaged Workforce. One of the things to accomplish in an effective organization is to engage the Workforce into collaborative and mutually supportive efforts leading to an Engaged Organization.

SLIDE: THE ENAGED ORGANIZATION:

SLIDE: WHAT DEFINES AN ENGAGED WORKFORCE?

THE BERMUDA CUBICLE

SLIDE: SOUTHWEST - AN ENGAGED ORGANIZATION

SLIDE: OBSERVING ORGANIZATIONS

I (Merritt) now consults on project management, public-private partnerships, do external project evaluations and help on organizational development. I've always found humor in the organizations I've worked for or contributed humor to the ones with whom I've consulted. I've also learned some things about how organizations work.

SLIDE: ORGANIZATION DIAGRAM

Oscar Wilde said, "Imagination was given to man to compensate him for what he is not, and a sense of humor was provided to console him for what he is."

So what about humor?

Laughter has not always been looked upon with favor. Europeans in the Middle Ages and the Puritans, among others, perceived laughter to be the work of the devil. People caught laughing out loud were often denounced as witches or believed possessed by Satan. The expression of humor was considered a sin in many Christian denominations... it was not until the 20th century that people would risk a smile in a photograph.

There are many ways to view the world around you and we find that turning things around and looking at them in new ways often leads to creative insights. Working in a university also opens many avenues to observe humor at work.

SLIDE: NOBEL PRIZE

We're interested in humor because we've seen the positive effects it

application can have in a workplace and worked in organizations where humor was a constant presence. It made for rewarding times and good work. I also had some rough times in Alaska as a young man.

SLIDE: TOK

A copy of "The Power of Positive Thinking", and then we thought, "What the hell good would that do?"

I later concluded that humor would (and did) help in many ways.

SOMETIMES IT GOES OVERBOARD

SLIDE: HAZARD IN JUST TALKING

SLIDE: HALLIBURTON

SLIDE: WHAT IS HUMOR?

What is Humor? It's hard to define, but there are certain elements. We observe.

- Everyone Born with Capacity
- Shaped by Environment
- Not pranks or Jokes or clowning

There is also a key relationship We have found.

SLIDE: KEY RELATIONSHIP

Humor deals with issues of everyday life, work, love and death. Often, trying to look ahead to the future and what to do when faced with decisions, humor helps deal with natural confusion.

SLIDE: ROAD SIGNS

But again what is humor? There are general theories.

SLIDE: THEORIES OF HUMOR

- Incongruity
- Relief
- Superiority
- Community = Empathy

Let's look at these and give examples;

SLIDE: THEORY: INCONGRUITY

“Whatever women do they must do twice as ill as men do to be thought half as good. Luckily, this is not difficult.” Charlotte Whitton (1896-1975)

The response to a contest to write a rhyme with a romantic first line and a negative second line.

“Roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet, and so are you.
But the roses are wilting, the violets are dead, the sugar bowl's empty and
so is your head.”

- Surprise

SLIDE: PYRAMIDS

SLIDE: PONY

SLIDE: MOOSE

SLIDE: LASSIE

- Irony
- Word Play & Puns

SLIDE OXYMORON

Engineering definition : 2000 pounds of Chinese soup: Won ton

- Witticisms

SLIDE: YELLOW OCHRE

- Slapstick
- Practical Jokes

SLIDE: THEORY: RELIEF

- Morbid Jokes

SLIDE: CAT

-

SLIDE: FRESH MEAT

- Black Humor

SLIDE: I TOLD YOU I WAS SICK

SLIDE: ZUCCHINI

SLIDE; EXERCISE

- Hope

Bill Strickland, The Quotable Cyclist says, "Even some of the true tragedies.... over time come to include some light moments or aside that somehow adds rather than subtracts poignancy and reverence. I think it's a kind of protective reflex – like a blink after a long stare. I think that it's hope. I think that it's a kind of unspoken promise."

SLIDE: THEORY: SUPERIORITY

ALL OF THIS TYPE can backfire and cause pain !!!

- Aggressive
- At Other's Expense

SLIDE: ACCOUNTANT

SLIDE: MOSES IN THE DESERT

- Sarcasm
- Slapstick
- Practical Jokes
- Satire

SLIDE: IDIOT

SLIDE: THEORY: COMMUNITY

One other aspect of community is empathy. The use of humor can help you connect with all types of people if you can imagine and relate to their condition.

One researcher said, "One of the healthiest laughs is the laugh of recognition. Real affection is awarded to the comic who catches us with our private thoughts hanging out or responding absurdly to the daily evils of modern life. That laugh tells out private selves We are not so alone, not so stupid as we think. Craziesshared is not so crazy."

- Mutually Outrageous Insults
- Exaggerated Language
- Industry Humor

SLIDE: BOOKEEPER

- Cultural Jokes – Family – Common elements

SLIDE: MIDLIFE CRISIS

SLIDE: WHAT'S FUNNY FOR SOME

But as you all know, what's funny for some is not funny for others.

SLIDE: FIRST CLASS

SLIDE: WHAT'S HUMOR GOOD FOR?

Humor is a useful **antidote to pain and sorrow**.

A playful attitude with ideas is fundamental to creative thinking.

SLIDE: RACHMANINOV

SLIDE: LATTE

Humor can increase teamwork, mutual support, stress reduction, good health, effectiveness, and much more.

Help yourself get to a condition where you like to go to work and want to stay there. We are also talking about creativity today. A playful attitude with ideas is fundamental to creative thinking.

Getting a new approach or an idea often happens when someone is just playing around and not taking them selves too seriously...When you are playing your defenses are down and anything goes.

During play, there is little concern with the rules, practicality or fear of being wrong – you get to reinvent reality. Out of these games come new ideas.

These new ideas may let you solve problems and improve your organization's efforts. They can also be rewarding personally. But this kind of play may lead to new work. "Play is what We do for a living, work comes in organizing the results of the play."

An important form of play is humor. Laughter puts you at ease and you think about things in a new way. Humor stretches your thinking. It

establishes an environment in which people can and will be creative.

Dorothy Parker, the poet and author, was a marvelous observer of the world and often came up with icon breaking, unusual, funny and creative responses to situations. Here are a couple of quotes;

At a large party, "One more drink and I'll be under the host"
To reporters: " We don't care what is written about me so long as it isn't true"

SLIDE: RISK

We warn you that there are RISKS, however, First of all there are the jokes based on superiority which can be very hurtful.

Then, As Pablo Picasso observed, "Every act of creativity is, first of all, an act of destruction." This means destruction of the old ways of thinking or acting at least!

In organizations creativity often involves some level of RULE BREAKING and here are the RISKS. It is hard to effect change without breaking rules. Every advance in science, design, education, politics has occurred when someone challenged the rules and tried another approach. We hasten to say We don't recommend that you run around just breaking rules for the fun of it, far from it.

If you did, first, someone would fire you, second, following some rules is essential to make your organization function, but just coloring within the lines all the time often can be a mental block and it will not help you to get the job done better.

We make rules to make things work better, time passes, things change, the original reasons for the rules may no longer exist, but because the rules are in place We follow them.

Humor forces you to combine things and ideas that are not usually associated with one another and to form new connections. This is the core

of creativity and also of problem solving. Here is an example of the kind of thinking which breaks the rules:

"What do John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh have in common? – They both share the same middle name."

Humor is the quality of taking life lightly. Being lighthearted isn't an option, but rather a necessity. Using humor doesn't mean you can't be professional or grown-up. It means only that you've learned to successfully create balance in your life.

Maintaining balance, reducing stress, staying on the light side can return your organization to "Being of Service" to your clients. Research evidence concludes that the most productive people are those who know themselves, know the demands of the situation, and adapt strategies to meet those needs.

Some organizations set up a guide or principal for employees. For examples, the Master Card company, Southwest Airlines and Ben & Jerry's ice cream do this.

In any organizations there are problems. The organization must determine what's the challenge they are facing and how must they adapt to it?

How are you going to rise to those challenges and get a group to work productively on the issues. And you need to do this with humor.

Humor is a quality of perception that enables us to experience joy even when faced with adversity.

SLIDE: SIX TOP USES OF HUMOR DURING TIMES OF CHANGE

1: To Have Fun

SLIDE: BOOKKEEPER

Structured vs. Encouraged Fun vs. Spontaneous Humor

2: To Improve Communications

SLIDE: PAPER AIRPLANE

3: To Enhance Motivation & Morale

SLIDE: KNOCK KNOCK JOKE

4: To Build Relationships

5: To Help Solve Problems

6: To Manage Stress

7: Deal with Grief

We'll talk about stress a bit later

SLIDE: SURVEYS-STATISTICS

- Humor is valuable in business
Southwest Airlines, Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream, Sun Microsystems, Master Card and many other organizations embrace humor as a means to better productivity, morale and creativity.
- Humor in an organization is an indicator of success
- Employees with a sense of humor do better work
- Motivation and productivity is higher
- Less absenteeism, less turnover

Why is creativity so elusive? There are parallels between creativity and humor. Both of which involve making unforeseen connections in the mind. As We listen to a good joke We allow ourselves to be taken in. If We could see the punch line coming, the joke would not work. The creative moment "works" like a good joke. Both humor and creativity require relinquishing control and entering a momentary state of helplessness. Creativity and humor are surprises that spring from the shadow of ignorance.

SLIDE: PERFORMANCE DRUGS

SLIDE: BENEFITS FOR HEALTH

- Activates muscles – Ten minutes of rowing...
- Increases the heart rate and blood circulation
- Strengthens the immune system
- Allows a greater oxygen intake
- Releases endorphins in the brain
- Reduces levels of hormones that create stress
- Reduces surgical recuperation time

According to a University of Michigan study children laugh 150 times a day which has the same physical effect as 15 minutes of riding a stationary bike. Adults laugh 15 times a day. Get with it. Loosen up.

SLIDE: COMMON COLD CURE

SLIDE: EXERCISE

One important aspect of health and what to do about it: Stress is the workplace issue. Definition of stress:

SLIDE: WHAT IS STRESS Choke the daylights out of some Jerk

So how do We get rid of stress?

SLIDE: VALVES TO RELEVE STRESS

Valve 1: **Attitude** Stress is not an event but a reaction based on our perception of the event. Perceptions can be changed although events cannot. We are free to alter our thinking.

W.C. Fields said, 'Start every day with a smile and get it over with.'

Valve 2: **Physical Release.** Physical exercise to relieve the physiological effects of stress. Go run, bicycle, and ski, go walking.

SLIDE: VIOLENCE AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL

Valve 3: **Mental Discipline.** Many researchers have begun to provide the data to prove and explain the benefits of the relaxation response – the side effect of meditation.

'If a cluttered desk is the sign of a cluttered mind, what is the significance of a clean desk?' Lawrence Peter

Valve 4: **Humor.** During the depression in 30's there was the largest explosion of comedy and humor this country had seen. Audiences demanded an escape from economic despair. Today its frustration, panic, and confusion brought on by an unrelenting storm of change. Humor is an ansIr.

SLIDE: HUMOR IS A SURVIVAL TOOL

- Thrive in periods of change
- Remain creative under pressure
- Work more effectively
- Play more enthusiastically
- Stay healthier
- Excel in confronting crisis
- Balance the tensions while focusing on the job

People want to work at a place Ire they have fun. Humor affects both sides of the balance sheet. It increases the positive reactions of customers who want to do business with pleasant people. It also tends to decrease the cost of labor because people want to be at work. Companies seek people with a sense of humor because they tends to be more resilient and can cope with stress and solve problems.

SLIDE: MR. BEER

Surveys say People are more afraid of public speaking than of nuclear war.

- Normal fear of foolishness is also the #1 barrier to lightening up.
- Embarrassment is a big deal.
- See us as wise, not foolish; graceful, not clumsy; winners, not losers.

- Dread having people observe our humiliation.

Where did We get this aversion and fear of fun???

SLIDE: WHY SOME PEOPLE DON'T SEEM TO GET IT

It is not because they are humorless...or getting old

SLIDE: NOT GETTING OLD

SLIDE: AARP

- An Administrator's job is to act as the mediator between groups
- Explain the tasks to be done
- Do planning for the future
- Control the level of tension in the institution and avoid chaos
- Act as a representative of the organization to its publics

In some organizations some managers and administrators may believe that anything that is really important requires reverence in proportion to its importance which, in turn, requires seriousness. If so, seriousness is the stuff of dignity and leadership. For them one just doesn't laugh at important things.

SLIDE: HUMOR KILLING PHILOSOPHY

Culture which believes our problems can be beaten if we **just get tough enough, work a little harder, and get really serious.**

However, learning to laugh a little more, to take ourselves a bit less seriously more productive & survive in an increasingly stressful world.

John Cleese, "If you're attacking a machine gun emplacement, its no time for jokes, pies in the face, or dropping your trousers to amuse the enemy; its time to get tough and get the job done. "But when the job is done, you had better find something to laugh about, or spend some time relaxing and having fun. Otherwise, you'll be attacking that machine gun emplacement for the rest of your life."

You don't have to be this way.

People saying, "let's look at this realistically" usually means let's think about the worse aspect of this place, person, thing, or situation. Treat yourself to viewing the positive aspects of change and challenging the conditions.

SLIDE: HUMOR: HOW DO YOU GET IT?

Will Rogers said, "You've got to be an optimist to be a Democrat, and you've got to be a humorist to stay one." You've also got to be a humorist to survive Ill as a human being.

SLIDE:GETTING GOOD HUMOR

Why do we choose to take everything so seriously that we often beat ourselves up or are terrified of what people will think?

1. It's instinctive
2. We want control = Director of the Universe complex

SLIDE: I'LL GET IT

To get humor one has to deal with these issues and get new skills.

SLIDE: THREE HUMOR SKILLS

1) The First Humor Skill: Escape From The Center Of The Universe

Issue 3: Nothing Is Ever Your Fault.

Issue 2: Everything Is Always Your Fault.

Issue 1: Any Combination Of 2 And 3 Above.

SLIDE: I'LL HANDLE IT

2) The Second Humor Skill: Take Yourself Lightly And Your Work Or Problem

Seriously:

Many people still believe that, if you are having fun, it can't be work, because why else would they call it work?

The work places where humor is evident are more creative, less stress-filled, better places to work. Humor relies on problems. If people laugh hard they probably have a lot of problems. They solve those problems with humor.

What does Humor do for us?

- Humor reveals the naked truth about ourselves, which we would not accept in other contexts.
- It dissolves the walls of the ego rather than intensifying them. "Humor and meditation accomplish some of the same aims. Both help to let everything float away - They show you that you are not the center of the universe.
- Humor dissolves barriers between ourselves and others.
- **Victor Borge said, "A smile is the shortest distance between two people."**
- Not only do humor and laughter reduce the barriers that separate us from each other, they also help eliminate the obstructions between ourselves and the absolute - God, Goddess, Allah, Tau, universe.
- Humor and laughter help us see that these barriers were never there to begin with.

Edward de Bono said, "The willingness to play with ideas, to risk foolishness without fear, that are the hallmarks of creative thinking." Change the context. Look from a brand new perspective. And here's a brand new perspective...

SLIDE: POPEYE

Think about the ridiculousness of much of life.

"Think of the spare buttons sewed on the front of shirts. They must have a much stronger thread on these buttons than on the rest of the shirt. Have you ever seen those buttons come off?"

"Nature's warmest coat material grows on a creature that flies south for the winter!"

"Have you notices that there are actually page numbers on dictionary pages....The words are already alphabetically arranged. What's next? An index?"

3) The Third Humor Skill: Remember Misery And Pain Are Free, But Joy Has A Price. (You have to work at it)

We have the choice and means to feel good. Humor is one way to divert the seriousness of the world and avoid beating ourselves

We dread that others will think that We are absurd – ridiculous, incongruent, or unreasonable.

Remember: No one can make you feel bad without your permission, said Eleanor Roosevelt.

SLIDE: HOW TO USE IT STRATEGICALLY:

You can use humor to:

- Mediate an excessive worker's behaviors

"You're not your self today? Why are you telling me?"

- Deal with unusual situations

SLIDE: CHAINSAW

- Change organizational norms

SLIDE: LIGHTEN UP

- Project the culture of organization to others
- Create normative behavior

SLIDE: STATEN ISLAND

- Increase productivity
- Reduce Stress

"How come they age cheese for 18 months if you can't keep it in the refrigerator for two weeks?"

- Increase Joy

SLIDE: JOY - ARRIVING AND LEAVING

You need to begin to **think in creative and different ways** about work and the problems you face. This involves the unexpected, the unanticipated and the uncommon. This often arises from playful activity and humor.

SLIDE: HUMOR STRATEGIES

SLIDE: HOLD A MEETING

SLIDE: OUTSIDE THE BOX

A number of successful organizations not only encourage humor in the workplace they work to achieve it. Master Card, SouthWest Airlines and Ben & Jerry's, among others, create a corporate culture of humor and creativity. It can happen in your organization as well with your subversive initiative.

"Creativity is the innate potential to come to new possibilities. It is the ability to be original and uncommon in thinking and doing." Charlie Girsch

"We saw an 18 wheeler the other day that had printed on it, The Salvation Army. Who gave them that?"

Why is creativity so elusive? There are parallels between creativity and humor,

both of which involve making unforeseen connections in the mind. As we listen to a good joke, we allow ourselves to be taken in. If we could see the punch line coming, the joke would not work. The creative moment “works” like a good joke. Both humor and creativity require relinquishing control and entering a momentary state of helplessness. Creativity and humor are surprises that spring from the shadow of ignorance.

Out of the box thinking involves the difference between leaders vs. administrators. You can be this leader in your organization. Leaders are not necessarily the administrators or the people with power. Gandhi in India = no administrative power, but changed a nation. You need to be a Gandhi in our organization.

That is you need to be willing to take the risks of being a leader. You need to introduce humor and encourage the acceptance of humor. It’s easy, just like taking Gandhi from a baby.

- Be surreptitious and cautious in your approach
- Look at your organization to see where you can insert some humor
- Work together on it.

Somewhere there is an unknown destination for you and your organization. There aren't any guarantees of where a path might go. As kids, you may remember, we all took those paths with joy, excitement and called them shortcuts. We even ventured off the paths from time to time. Now as adults, we seem to fear risking taking the unknown or new path. This becomes a habit and sometimes it is good. But, it tends to keep us from enjoying the excitement of traveling the unknown and finding new ways to go.

- Introduce humor into your communications
- (See the hand outs)
- Get people accustomed to a constant low level of humor
- Send e-mail messages of good cheer
- Put cartoons on the bulletin board
- Send funny Cards when you are on vacation

- Hang up your muffler warranty in a frame next to your degree
- Wear a silly hat to work on Halloween
- Start contests involving humorous prizes

We want you to take these ideas and become movers and shakers....

SLIDE: WE'RE NOT MOVERS WE'RE JUST SHAKERS

Good Administrator/managers use humor to:

- Establish the chain of command
- Connect the environment (context & employees) to the source (manager)
- Encourage creative & fulfilling work by employees
- Reduce absenteeism and turnover

SLIDE: HOMILIES

Here are some interesting and useful sayings to remember and use:

- If you haven't had much education. You must use your brain.
- It might be that your whole purpose in life is to serve as a warning to others.
- It's always darkest before dawn. So if you're going to steal the neighbor's newspaper, that's the time to do it.
- The journey of a thousand miles begins with a broken fan belt and a leaky tire.
- Never mess up an apology with an excuse.
- Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups.
- If you lend someone \$20 and you never see that person again, it was probably worth it.
- Give a man a fish and he will eat it for a day. Teach him how to fish and he will sit in a boat and drink beer all day.
- Don't worry, it only seems kinky the first time.
- Good judgement comes from bad experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgement.
- Duct tape is like the force: it has a light and a dark side and holds the

universe together.

- Never miss a good chance to shut up.
- Anything worth taking seriously is worth making fun of.
- Don't be irreplaceable: If you can't be replaced you can't be promoted.
- Men are from earth. Women are from Earth. Deal with it.
- For every action there is an equal and opposite government program.
- Someone who thinks logically provides a nice contrast to the real world.
- Not one shred of evidence supports the notion that life is serious.

All this means a need to change thought patterns.

I'll start eating natural foods when people stop dying of natural causes.

WRAP UP

Laugh at yourself -- take yourself lightly while taking your work seriously.
George Burns said it best:

"You can't help getting older, but you can help getting old.
Chronologically, the clock is going to keep on ticking for all of us, but if we
take a lick of humor, We can prevent a hardening of the attitudes. If we
savor humor, humor can be a life saver."

SLIDE: OUT OF THE BOX BRAINSTORMING

SLIDE: THE FLOWERS THAT GROW IN THE SNOW

BENEFITS OF HUMOR

What You Get When You Laugh

While we are working at surviving, laughter can help us to maintain our perspective. The next time you feel like you're losing control, allow yourself a little "humor time." If you can find what's funny in a situation, your upsets might not seem as important as they once did.

Humor gives a sense of power.

There are many things in life that we have no control over and can't change. As long as We have a sense of humor, however, We can do something -- such as minimize the hold that upsets have over us. Humor has the power to turn any situation around.

Humor helps us cope.

A lot of the suffering and troubles we experience are not a result of our difficulties, but how WEview them. Gail Sheehy notes in her best seller, Pathfinders, that the ability to see humor in a situation was one of the four coping devices that "pathfinders," people who overcome life's crises, used as a protection against change and uncertainty.

Using humor in difficult times can be one of the smartest ways of coping with them, easing our worries, and getting on with life.

Humor helps establish communication and rapport.

Laughter knows no cultural boundaries. You don't have to speak the same language to laugh together. Laughter also helps break the ice when you're in a group. It is the one form of communication to which everyone can relate.

Humor relieves tension.

We all know the relief we feel when someone in a group makes a funny comment during a tense situation.

Humor dispels anger and aggression in ourselves and others.

It helps to use humor when dealing with an angry child. A study of humor in the classroom showed lower scores on aggression for students viewing a humorous videotape.

Humor increases learning and retention.

Laughing stimulates both sides of the brain. People get the message quicker and remember it longer.

Humor = Take things seriously, but add in humor. Humor allows you to think of alternatives and perhaps change the rules. Problem solving is a form of play. Putting things in new contexts and asking the unusual "what if?" questions.

Helfferich, SRA Seattle, 2009