



Humor Helps Produce an Emotionally Intelligent Workplace

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The last decade has seen a tremendous growth of interest in what is generally referred to as emotional intelligence (EI). Corporations now spend a great deal of money in efforts to boost their managers' EI in the belief that this will sharply improve job performance and quality of service. A growing number of educators are also convinced that improving children's EI will improve performance in school.

What is Emotional Intelligence?

The leading experts in this new field of research have been unable to agree upon a definition. The most academically rigorous definition of EI comes from the work of Jack Mayer and Peter Salovey, who argue that EI consists of four components: 1) the perception and identification/appraisal of emotions, 2) emotional facilitation of thought, 3) emotional understanding, and 4) the management of emotions—in oneself and others. This 4th component is considered by them to be the highest level of EI.

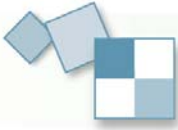
Another leading expert on EI, Bar-On, defines it in terms of non-cognitive skills that influence one's ability to cope with the stress of everyday life. These include intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, general mood and adaptability, and stress management skills. Daniel Goleman, author of two popular books on EI, has argued that EI includes five distinct skill areas: 1) knowing one's emotions, 2) managing emotions (including the ability to soothe oneself and shake off rampant irritability, anxiety or gloom), 3) motivating oneself, 4) recognizing emotions in others, and 5) handling relationships (including skill in managing others' emotions and interacting smoothly with others).

How Does Humor Contribute to Emotional Intelligence?

Amazingly, none of the researchers or popularizers of EI has given any attention to the role that humor skills play in the general domain of emotional intelligence—in spite of the tremendous amount of research and popular attention given to humor in recent years. Virtually all experts in the field of EI note that emotional skills play a crucial role in helping individuals cope (with relationships, job stress and life stress in general). This is probably the area of greatest contribution of humor to EI. However, humor also makes a tremendous contribution in managing one's emotions, motivating oneself and facilitating thought and problem-solving.

Management of Emotions

Humor has been shown to be a powerful tool in helping to manage such disruptive negative emotions as anger and anxiety/tension. Humor can also elevate one's mood from the depths of the daily sources of (non-clinical) depression we all occasionally suffer from. And corporate manager can attest to the negative impact these emotions can have on productivity and quality of service—and quality of care in healthcare settings. Humor is especially effective in substituting a positive emotion for a negative one—one of the most advanced EI skills, in Mayer and Salovey's view. This is especially important on the job, where chronic complaining and negative emotion can quickly undermine morale and reduce productivity. An effective manager can use humor or



innovative approaches to making work fun to prevent a spiral of negative emotion from disrupting employee effectiveness.

Helping others improve their mood is an equally important component of emotional intelligence. Especially in work settings, there is tremendous value in noticing that a colleague is in such a negative frame of mind that it is interfering with his/her effectiveness on the job. Effective use of humor on the spur of the moment can rescue the colleague and substitute a more positive frame on mind in its place. If this kind of practice is adopted on a company-wide scale, it can be expected to provide a tremendous boost to both employee morale and productivity.

Motivating Oneself and Others

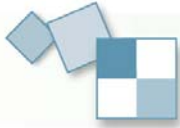
The ability to manage emotions in oneself and others is crucial to motivation. It is very difficult to sustain one's own daily motivation to excel at one's job or provide quality service when one is stewing in the juices of anger, anxiety or depression. A shared laugh or a personal humorous insight creates an attitudinal shift in a positive direction. This shift is energizing and elevates one's spirits. It generates the conviction, "I can do this!"

Getting other people motivated requires both getting them excited about the task at hand and getting them to buy into the basic concepts presented to them. There are many paths to achieving this buy-in, but one effective path is to simply make work fun. Many companies fail to take advantage of intrinsic sources of motivation in doing one's job. Most employees want meaningful work, and they want to enjoy their jobs. Making work fun goes a long way in bringing enjoyment to one's job day after day. And utilizing one's sense of humor is one of the most powerful tools available to us to assure that work is fun—at least some of the time.

Facilitation of Thought and Problem Solving

There are two key ways—both crucial for businesses—in which humor facilitates thought and problem solving: the direct facilitation of creative thinking and provision of an emotional state more conducive to effective problem solving. There has been research since the 1950s documenting a close relationship between humor and creativity. People score higher on creativity tests after being exposed to humor or a fun task. Participation by high school students in a humor skills training course has also been shown to boost creativity test scores. Parallels in the kinds of thinking involved in humor and creativity have been noted for decades (e.g., Arthur Koestler's *The Act of Creation*, 1964). Both involve divergent thinking, as opposed to convergent thinking. That is, both require thinking "outside the box" in order to solve the problem or get the joke. Thus, occasional sharing of humor on the job (when the circumstances are appropriate) helps sustain a readiness for innovative thinking. This is crucial in most corporations today, since the ways of doing business are constantly changing, and the daily problems faced by employees are different from those faced in the past. The old solutions just don't work any more, so it is essential for companies to have employees throughout the organization who are capable of innovative thinking. Humor and fun help nurture an environment that supports creative problem solving.

There is also some evidence that simply elevating one's mood is enough to boost problem solving skills. Humor, as we have seen is very effective at doing this. It sustains a frame of mind



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conducive to more effective problem solving. Most people are not as effective in dealing with complex issues when caught up in their own upsets, anxieties or sources of depression of the moment. In short, negative emotion disrupts focused thinking related to a problem or issue. Humor facilitates effective problem solving, and job performance generally, by minimizing distracting negative emotional states, and substituting more positive ones in their place. Emotions have the power to change our cognitions, pulling them in a more positive direction when we are happy and in a more negative direction when we are sad, angry or anxious. Quite simply, our perspective for viewing and making judgments about the world shifts as a function of our prevailing emotional state at the moment.

Coping with Stress

Most people cope less effectively when caught up in their own anger, anxiety or depression. Humor facilitates coping by reducing these negative emotions, and substituting a frame of mind in which the individual can more effectively deal with the problem causing the stress. It provides a tool for taking control (perceived lack of control is generally central to stress) over one's daily mood, which—in turn—increases a sense of control over the cause of stress. There is a large research literature which documents humor effectiveness as a coping tool.

So there is every reason to encourage your employees to Lighten Up! Companies that laugh, last.