

### **Team Building Humor Strengthens a Team Identity or Spirit**

Paul McGhee, PhD, <http://www.laughterremedy.com/>

*"Teamwork is when other people do your work for you." Dogbert*

**A woman was promoted to a managerial position, giving her a position superior to that of former members of her team. Knowing that this would create conflict with team members, she called a meeting to deal with the transition. She said, "Don't think of me as your boss. Just think of me as a friend—a friend who's always right!"**

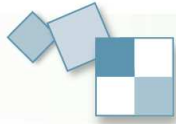
Adapted from P. McGhee, *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*.

Most companies emphasize the importance of building a team spirit or team identity at all levels of the organization. The idea is that if individual employees feel like a meaningful part of a larger whole, they are more likely to take the initiative to do whatever is necessary to achieve the goals of the team. This helps assure the success of the team, and successful teams mean a successful company. The challenge of creating dynamic and effective teams that work well together has become greater in recent years, however, as the employees composing teams have become more culturally diverse. Many companies now even have “virtual” teams—individuals who work together at a distance and rarely have direct physical contact with each other.

All managers soon learn that you can set a group of employees up to work as a team, but that doesn't mean they will *feel* like a team. With the broad range of cultural backgrounds, personalities and working styles represented on the team, conflicts and differences of opinion are bound to occur. This can trigger cycles of negativity and complaining, which generally serve to weaken morale and team spirit and reduce productivity. Managers need to be prepared for this problem and act proactively to create a management style and work environment conducive to strengthening team spirit.

Any professional racecar driver will tell you that the race can be won or lost in the pits. Each member of the pit crew must coordinate their work with the efforts of others, and take the initiative to do whatever it takes to deal with unanticipated problems. Similarly, you need the full participation of everyone on your team for your company to come out ahead. This is especially the case in companies that have shifted in recent years to a more horizontal management structure.

Humor is a powerful tool in building more cohesive groups. And this is important, because cohesive groups work together better in pursuing common goals—especially in situations where there are expectations for high performance. Managers in a variety of work settings who initiate humor have been shown to be more likely to become an integral part of a socially cohesive group.<sup>1</sup> Status differences with other team members are also minimized by humor. So joking or other forms of humor clearly provide an effective way of breaking down barriers if a manager wants to do so.



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A successful team must be flexible, and must know how to reduce the tension that results from conflicting ideas about how to deal with a problem. One plan will eventually be seen as being the best solution, and some may be upset that their approach was not adopted. Humor effectively eases this tension and upset and strengthens employee bonds that are threatened by failure of one's own pet solution.

### **Teamwork means never having to take all the blame yourself.**

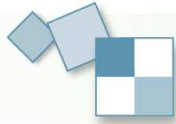
A real test of pulling together as a team comes when facing a difficult deadline or other task that requires everyone to work overtime. Paul Malone, a business administration professor, has provided a great example of this in a non-business setting. He tells of an experience he had as a trainee in a U. S. Army Ranger course—a course designed to simulate combat situations. "Our class . . . had just completed a 60-hour patrol. The patrol had gone poorly. The critiques . . . had been extremely harsh. We were all utterly exhausted and miserable, without sleep for almost three days, and caked with the mud of waste-deep swamps. Our only desire was to rest. To our collective disbelief and anguish, we received the order: 'Prepare immediately for another patrol.' Our sullen group moved slowly into the briefing area . . . [where the briefing ranger told a joke that was appropriate to the situation]. Something almost magical occurred. Slowly at first, the bedraggled group of trainees responded into what became a full minute of hilarious laughter. Suddenly, the environment changed; the Ranger became a fellow man, not a torturer; **the men who had laughed together became a team** (emphasis added by McGhee) with a revitalized common cause. For at least a while, the exhaustion and discomfort of the group were forgotten."<sup>2</sup> Employees in many types of business often have to pull together and work as much overtime as necessary to get the job done—sometimes for weeks. Humor can be used to re-motivate people and lift their spirits, helping produce a frame of mind in which people are willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done.

If you are a manager, sharing jokes or other humor with members of the team is a great way to break down barriers, but you must be sure that this joking relationship does not cause you to fail to use your authority in situations where you should. There is evidence that this erodes the respect members of the team have for you.<sup>3</sup>

It is crucial to take steps to assure that only "positive" forms of humor occur within teams. Negative forms of humor can have just the opposite of the team-strengthening effects discussed here. The best general rule is to always avoid any form of putdown humor in work settings (see article at this website on negative humor). Even though you know you're only joking, it's just a matter of time before someone is offended. And this immediately begins to disrupt smooth team performance.

### **The Problem with Team-Building Retreats**

Many companies set up annual weekend retreats or other "fun" events to boost the bonding and sense of camaraderie that generally marks effective teams. The retreat provides an opportunity for people to escape work-related pressures and just relax. Specific fun activities are planned up with the purpose of assuring that the desired bonding process will occur.



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Companies realize that this is the kind of atmosphere that best builds the kind of close relationships required to enable fellow employees to work together harmoniously toward a common goal (even on the tough days) when they get back to the office. Thus, even companies which don't normally encourage a lighter, fun atmosphere on the job do recognize the power of fun and laughter to create team spirit and strengthen a team identity.

The problem with weekend retreats is precisely the fact that it is a retreat from the usual work atmosphere and approach to relating to fellow employees. Once they get back in the office, they know that they must leave their sense of humor and the idea of making work fun at the door. Employees are expected to keep the team spirit generated by the retreat alive the rest of the year—but abandon the kinds of behaviors that generated that feeling on the retreat. The predictable outcome is that the emotional connection between employees is quickly lost as they once again get caught up in the daily pressures and heavy work load that automatically go with their job.

When a company realizes that employees who bring a lighter attitude toward their work 1) want to do their jobs well, 2) do not use humor and fun on the job as an excuse for goofing off, 3) generally use good judgment about when any kind of humor or laughter is appropriate, 4) can retain a high level of professionalism and competence while keeping their sense of humor, and 5) become more skilled at sustaining a frame of mind conducive to peak performance and quality service, the resistance to allowing humor and a sense of fun on the job out of the retreat site and into the office generally disappears.

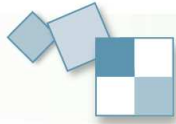
Companies like Southwest Airlines and Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream are the best known models for putting fun to work, but a growing number of successful companies are bringing a lighter attitude to the workplace every year. These companies have no trouble keeping team spirit alive throughout the year.

Even managers at IBM have experimented with the idea of making work fun. In 1996, the manager of a new IBM sales unit (consisting of 75 sales people) created an orchestra out of a bunch of musically inept sales personnel and had a 15-minute "concert" each morning in the office. The concerts always generated a lot of laughs, and each salesperson hit a gong when they made their first sale of the day. They also moved a racehorse bearing their picture out of a starting cage. According to the originator of this idea, "I needed to bring a very diverse set of people together around a common goal . . . I had to make it fun." Her unit's sales rose 30% that year.<sup>4</sup> This approach gave the manager a company-wide reputation as a real motivator of employees.

### **How Humor Creates Winning Teams**

#### 1) Removal of Barriers that Separate Management from Other Employees

There are certain barriers that naturally exist between managers and non-management members of the team—the most important of which is power and authority. When managers show that they can laugh with everyone else in the group, and—especially—can poke fun at themselves, the barriers come down, and the manager is viewed as a "regular person," like everyone else on the



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team. This is essential to open communication between bosses and their subordinates (see below).

Research has shown that when the manager initiates jokes and is also occasionally the target of jokes, s/he tends to be viewed as a friend, rather than a boss.<sup>5</sup> This friendship, in turn, opens up comfortable and honest communication. The individuals conducting this research argue that the increased group cohesiveness that results from shared humor does result in increased team productivity, but only when performance norms are high. Since performance norms have continued to rise over the past decade, virtually all employees are now confronted with such high performance norms.

### 2) Emotional Bonding

As noted above, shared laughter and the spirit of fun generates a bonding process in which people feel closer together—especially when laughing in the midst of adversity. This emotional glue enables team members to stick together on the tough days, when members of the team need each other to complete a project and assure quality customer service.

### 3) Open Communication

A common complaint in many organizations is a lack of good communication with management. A lighter atmosphere, and a manager who shares humor with the team, is a powerful tool in opening up the channels of communication. It frees team members up to communicate openly, without fear of reprisal. This is especially important when an employee knows that his/her opinion differs from that of management.

### 4) Trust

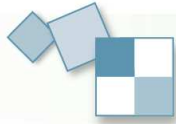
One of the by-products shared laughter and good open communication is a growing sense of trust. This is also, of course, partly a result of the emotional bonding that occurs through shared positive humor. When comfortable and open communication is lacking, it breeds a sense of distrust, and there is no way that a team can function effectively when this occurs. Without trust, communications can quickly become defensive or distorted, setting up future misunderstandings.

### 5) Improved Morale

When teams have fun on the job and share laughter, they enjoy their work more; and people who like their jobs work more effectively together. This is an especially important benefit of humor on the job, since employee morale has been dropping in many companies in recent years.

### 6) Reduced Job Stress

Other articles at this website document humor's power in helping employees manage job stress. By reducing daily stress levels, humor and a lighter attitude help sustain the focused mental state required to do one's work effectively when under pressure; it allows you to get a lot done and get it done quickly. It gives employees the emotional flexibility required to bend without breaking. Also, as anyone who's ever worked on a team knows, even when it's only a few team members who are experiencing stress, their emotional state can quickly spread to other team members, interfering with the entire team's performance. The greater the percentage of team members who receive the stress-reducing effect of humor, the greater the team's chances of success on a project.



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### 7) Increased Creativity.

Another article at this website shows that humor is a natural stimulus for creativity. It opens up new ways of viewing things and stimulates innovative ideas for solutions to difficult problems. This effect is especially important in team settings, where the ideas of one person can serve to trigger novel ideas for resolving problems in someone else.

As noted above, a lighter atmosphere reduces fear of rejection of one's ideas, making team members more willing to take risks in proposing unusual ideas. Also when your own ideas are not adopted, a sense of humor helps "let go" of the upset we all occasionally feel when someone else's ideas are judged more valuable than our own. This frees you up to work more effectively with the ideas the team puts up on the table.

So you have every reason to Lighten Up! Teams that Laugh, work!

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