

## **Business**

### **On my mind: Leading the Laughter**

**by Jeri Mae Rowley**

This year, for the first time in history, Harvard Business School listed “A Sense of Humor” as the number one desirable trait for leaders. Serious business seems to be taking laughter seriously.

This focus on laughter in the workplace may be inspired by the profitability of companies like Southwest Airlines. Famous for its trademark culture of fun and laughter, the airline is laughing all the way to the bank. With enthusiastic, productive workers and a lean scheduling system, Southwest Airline is currently valued at \$10.8 billion. That’s more than all the other major U.S. carriers combined.

Southwest’s leadership works hard to maintain the airline’s high morale and customer service through careful recruitment, training, and continuous fun for employees. Last year the airline received 20,000 resumes for the 6,000 positions it filled. One customer service agent trainee took a 50% pay cut to move from another airline that spent eight hours training him, then threw him into the job. Southwest provides several days of orientation and training that includes funny skits about government rules and playing skill-building games with other employees.

William Fry, professor emeritus in psychiatry at Stanford University Medical School, has been exploring the physiological effects of humor since 1953. Laughter, he’s found, boosts cardiovascular fitness by lowering blood pressure and heart rate after briefly raising them. And, as Southwest can attest, laughter in the workplace can mean healthier and more productive employees.

Healthy people laugh 100 to 400 times a day. (That’s 25 times an hour, 2,800 times a week, 146,000 times a year!) Actually, a healthy one hundred laughs would only take 8 ½ minutes a day. Norman Cousins, in his book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, describes how watching *Candid Camera* and *Marx Brothers* movies and reading humorous books helped him laugh his way through a life threatening disease—twice!

Laughter can even be aerobic. Studies show that big, belly laughs improve blood circulation and improve the flow of oxygen to the brain. Spasms of laughter actually stretch your muscles over their skeletal frame. Laughter also causes the body to secrete endorphins—hormones that are chemically akin to morphine and act as natural painkillers--in the bloodstream.

Because only 5% of people can tell a joke well, it’s fortunate that the sense of humor needed in leadership is “situational humor.” Situational humor is the kind that arises spontaneously when you relax, don’t take yourself too seriously, and can readily



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see the humor in the situation. Humor consultant, C.W. Metcalf of Colorado, says that the biggest laughter block, and a major cause of stress, is the fear of foolishness. To help participants overcome their fear of foolishness, he leads participants in the “howl.”

To howl: think of something that made you happy, hold the thought in your head, let it slide down into the pit of your stomach and let out the loudest “howl of joy” you can. (You might want to try this at home first.)

Quitting time is on most people’s happy list—remember Fred Flintstone’s “Yabba-dabba-doo!?” Metcalf suggests instituting a special, personal ritual that signals to you that work is over and the after-work fun is beginning. One of his alumni puts unfinished work in a locked drawer, hangs the key on a hook and yells “Stay!” Another group of executive women alums stick on red clown noses for the ride home. They have a pact to wear the clown noses from their office door to their own front door.

On the job, Jim Pelley, of Laughter Works Seminars, offers a few fun suggestions:

- Require chronic complainers in the office to sing their complaints, out loud, *a Capella*.
- Keep an office first aid kit that includes comedy tapes, rubber fish for the water cooler, clown noses, cartoon books, sirens, and balls.

Professor Fry reminds us that everyone has a somewhat different sense of humor. “It’s important to find out what your sense of humor is. Observe yourself and see what makes you laugh. After you accomplish that, make a humor library.”

For years, I have kept a file full of cartoons, articles and pictures in my file cabinet. I label the file “Caught My Eye.” Every once in a while, I give myself a little humor break and leaf through the file. Now, with e-mail, I have a computer file entitled “Ha, Ha” for e-mails that made me laugh.

Now, here’s my holiday gift to you—a little “Ho, Ho, Ho.” Go to the web site [www.laughlab.co.uk](http://www.laughlab.co.uk). These folks hosted an international joke contest last year and have posted their top jokes. I’m sharing their web site with you so you can laugh your way through their finalists. (My personal favorite was number two on their list.)

Now, I’ll wish you all “happy holidays,” and you know I *really mean* “**happy!**” Make a resolution this year to lead your organization into health and prosperity by having fun at work. Then laugh all the way to the bank.

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Jeri Mae Rowley, M.S. Human Resource Management, is a popular speaker, trainer and facilitator. By weaving together her unique humor and storytelling skills, Jeri Mae helps individuals and organizations improve leadership, communications, and customer service. Participants in her programs often comment: “She’s not boring!”

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