

Boosting Your Career - and Pay- Is a Laughing Matter

Seriously. Humor is a strategic part of leadership. Derived from the word *umor* or “fluid,” humor is grease that oils the corporate wheels and helps us get things done – at work and in life.

While humor is a key facet of leadership, it is also one of the least talked about in corporations today. Intuitively, we know that we like, and like being around, people that make us laugh. Politicians that exude humor and charisma often win our votes, for example. Funny, witty people seem happier, more confident and approachable. And people want to follow leaders they like. We also know that appropriate humor delivers some critical benefits: makes work more enjoyable, diffuses conflict, motivates people, and creates bonds.

But how important is humor to your paycheck? Very, according to research. While we have long known about the physiological and psychological effects of humor, recent studies corroborate what some of us already knew – humor is good for the career and pocket book!

In September 2003, the Harvard Business Review (HBR) reported that executives with a sense of humor climb the ladder more quickly and earn more money – including capturing bigger performance bonuses. In that study, those that were rated “outstanding” by superiors used humor about twice as often as those executives rated “average.” Humor was also highly correlated with competency and adaptability – characteristics that separate the star performers from the pack. Humor also communicates understanding, influence and self-confidence – all highly important elements of leadership.

In that same HBR study, researchers found that humor in job interviews also helped the candidates to be viewed more favorably. According to a study by executive recruiters Robert Half International, humor is a skill that companies are looking for in top talent. Nearly nine out of ten recruiters in that study indicated that humor is so important to success that candidates that lacked a sense of humor would not be successful in recruiters’ corporate cultures. A study done by Hodge Cronin and Associates reported that 98% of 737 corporate CEOs interviewed said they prefer to hire someone with a sense of humor to someone without one.

Why? Humor is related to emotional intelligence, or EI, a measure of a person’s ability to deal with people by sensing needs, emotions and motivations. As we move up the corporate ladder, increasingly the catalyst behind promotions becomes our ability to deal with people, stress, and change. Technical competency becomes less important, while EI is a better indicator of managerial success and people skills competency.

Southwest’s famous CEO Herb Kelleher said: “hire for attitude first, then teach technical skill.” According to Kelleher, humor is one of the skills Southwest explicitly hires for, cultivates and promotes. That strategy has paid off, making Southwest one of the industry’s most friendly - and profitable - airlines.

Humor signals to others that we are open and approachable, even vulnerable, and willing to admit our mistakes. Among the hallmarks of great leaders is the use of humor to keep the channel of communication open even during conflict. Leaders that can laugh at themselves and use humor to deal with people and manage change even under difficult circumstances earn our trust and respect.

Leaders that exhibit a sense of humor take negative news more easily and thus are more attuned to what is really going on with people. Subordinates won’t tell their managers the truth if those bosses exhibit extreme negative reactions, including “shooting the messenger.”

So, how do we apply humor? The best uses of humor occur in every day small group interactions and can be used proactively to manage, lead and motivate.

The key to successful humor, however, is being very aware of how you use it and the power it has to send messages, intended or not. Appropriate humor can be used strategically. But just like with negative humor, managers must first be aware of the effect that humor can have – it can motivate or demoralize, create bonds or destroy them, inspire or deflate. The most successful humor is not forced. Trying to be funny creates undue pressure, expectations and sub-optimal results.

So what does work? Being yourself: spontaneous humor that is appropriate and sensitive to others.

Ultimately, humor is about people and connecting. It is a powerful leadership and communications tool and those who learn to successfully incorporate this into their skills repertoire will reap the personal, professional, and monetary rewards.

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