

Corporate Humor Should be Fun and Games

by Kathy Klotz-Guest

To keep employees happy and productive, companies need to broaden the mainstream view of humor to include creative play. Humor is an inseparable part of the creative process. It is no wonder children laugh on average 600 times per day compared to less than 50 for the average adult - children are unrestricted in the creative process and they laugh at everything! It is time for The Valley to recapture this same creative spirit and to re-ignite the passions of its workforce.

Much has been said about the benefits of humor in the workplace and few would dispute it. We all agree we need more humor, right? Yet, few companies practice the precepts of humor by building it into their culture as a shared value. “What?” you might say. As author E.B. White once said we value and aspire to the ideal of humor, but in business we are suspicious of anything that appears less than serious. But humor has a very crucial role in business.

If you ask executives about humor in the workplace, many will say “yes, we have a great sense of humor around here.” That may be, but why are so many people unhappy at their jobs? Clearly, humor involves more than just water cooler banter and email jokes. Executives at many companies are doing little to evolve their cultures to embrace humor as a corporate value despite the fact that morale across the Valley needs serious cosmetic surgery! Those who feel most constrained creatively also feel robbed of both humor and passion on the job. Ask yourself if the company you work for embraces a culture of fun and creativity every day. Chances are humor is relegated to a few jokes here and there and at occasional sanctioned company events. Sound sad? It is. Many also claim that humor will come back with the economy (“Tech Downturn Brings a Slump in Humor, Too” Oct. 31, San Jose Mercury News); but humor is needed now.

One problem is that humor is defined too narrowly. Yes, humor is about jokes, fun events and competitive jibes, but this is only part of what humor should be. Consequently, employees and bosses often do not see the connection between humor and their productivity and well-being. Without awareness of this critical relationship, employees and corporate culture cannot change. Let’s redefine humor: humor is the ability to play. When playing, people experience “flow time” – that uninterrupted time where productivity is at its peak and time goes by effortlessly.

Play allows the brain to think without restrictions, to imagine outside of the box. People need corporate encouraged playtime and innovation depends on it. Remember as kids, we brainstormed all kinds of ideas for costumes, imaginary friends, games, etc., without restrictive limits? As adults we censor our play selves. Humor is openness to the world of delight and possibilities. Through play, we become receptive to the creative energies that allow us to have fun, to laugh, to be spontaneous and to experience productive flow-time.

No, I am not calling for a return to the excesses of the dotcom heyday. But the pendulum has now swung austerely to the other extreme where fun is viewed as unnecessary in the professional business environment.

However, there are several things that bosses and employees can do to regenerate their play muscle and reinvigorate their productive, creative energies. And while these methods require little time, effort and money to implement, some require a change in the corporate mindset.

First, companies must embrace the value of creativity as a process – not as an outcome. Edison failed to create a working light bulb in his first 9,999 tries. When asked about his “failures,” he responded, “I get to go back and play some more.” Edison recognized the value of the creative process itself as the precursor to innovation. If the focus is on the outcome, the lesson and resulting creative growth are missed. The very act of engagement trains us how to think creatively.

Second, play and creativity should be integral to the productive culture. Introduce more brain-storming games into meetings, for example. Cultural values are handed top-down. If the boss doesn’t believe in the value of play as a creative process, there is little chance the concept will make it down the food chain. People need to see that their bosses not only sanction the behavior, but also actively encourage it by creating support for it. If not, playtime becomes nothing more than fodder for ‘management speak.’

Third, align incentives to support the activity. One way to do this is through measured management objectives. No one wants to test a theory based on mug quotations – it’s like walking a tightrope without a net. Build incentives into the process and people will take calculated and important risks toward innovation.

Finally, encourage play by promoting group cooperation rather than inter-group competition. Aligning pay to new product ideas generated and vetted regardless of where they originate is one way to accomplish this. Managers must make productive playtime a consistent part of thought leadership and strategic planning. This institutionalizes the value of the creative process in innovation.

By doing these things, play and humor can become vital parts of the corporate culture.

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