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Having a laugh

Apr 15th 2008

Printed in the Economist

Why every company needs a fun strategy

AS THE economic gloom deepens, the last thing the typical boss will feel like doing right now is laughing. So it is anyone's guess what he or she will think of a new book that makes the case for humour in the workplace—and not just the gallows sort.

"The Levity Effect", by Adrian Gostick and Scott Christopher, argues for lightening things up with such earnestness that it would pass for a spoof by the writers of "The Office", a wonderful sitcom that revolves around a boss's excruciatingly awkward attempts at jocular banter with the staff. Indeed, one of the book's "142 Ways to Have Fun at Work" is to hold a "marathon of 'The Office' at the office. Gather everyone to watch the best episodes of NBC's hit show during lunch for a week".



The jargon is no joke: want to be a “levity leader”, anyone? Well, better that than a “jaw clencher” or a “brow knitter”. And you have to wonder who the target reader is when the book’s conclusion contains advice such as “start each day smiling in the mirror”, “smile at your family”, “go easy on the kids” and even, er, “smile at strangers”.

Yet, as the authors point out, all this is justified because “fun is a serious business”. There is, it turns out, a “connection between the punchline and the bottom line.” Lighten things up at work and assuredly you will be—wait for it—“laughing all the way to the bank”. No, seriously.

A remarkable amount of evidence supports the argument that levity pays: “Fun at work,” Messrs Gostick and Christopher explain, “can provide a competitive advantage, help attract and retain employees, and provide the spark to jumpstart creativity.” A fun workplace improves communication and morale, raises the level of employee trust, lowers employee turnover and increases profits.

An organisation called the Great Place to Work Institute has consistently found that companies that are classified as “great” score unusually high marks from employees on the question “Are you working in a fun environment?” Great companies scored 81% on this, compared to 62% for companies ranked “good”.

A study by Ipsos found that employees who rate their managers’ sense of humour as “above average” rate the likelihood they will still be on the job in a year’s time at almost 90%. Those who rate their managers’ humour as “average” or “below average” rate their chances of staying at only 77.5%.

The top ten fun companies include Google—perhaps inevitably, given that its Mountain View headquarters, the Googleplex, offers Googlers free food, scooters, volleyball courts, a toy dinosaur and a yellow brick road. Starbucks also ranks (though the survey was done before the coffee retailer’s recent troubles, including a lawsuit over who gets to keep the tips), as do the Container Store—a chain that sells, well, containers—and Nugget Market, a California grocery store.

Fun firms use a wide range of humour strategies. Intuit has a “fun committee” that organises events such as potluck breakfasts and jeopardy games. AstraZeneca has a “fun department” that brings “funsters” to the firm to sing, distribute toys and tell jokes.

Another firm, which lists “fun” among its core values, hands-out “Walk the Talk” awards, a set of wind-up chattering teeth presented by the chief executive accompanied by a kazoo band. KPMG, an accounting firm, holds online contests for staff (with great prizes), and gives away barbecue packs.

The authors are convinced that bosses can learn to be lighter-hearted without indulging in the fake friendliness of the boss in “The Office”. Some of their suggestions might not go down well with the human resources department, however, such as “take candid photos of employees during work and at company events. Use them during internal PowerPoint presentations to liven things up. Drop in a caption or two if you can.” As the saying goes: “1-800-LAWSUIT”.

Indeed, the deadening hand of HR (or the publisher’s lawyers) may have intervened in the section “a few red flags”, which warns against humour that involves kidding, mockery, sarcasm or anger. And the same applies to the “Time and Place Rule”: “The universally ignored law which dictates that before any workplace humour is executed, its bearer must determine, using reasonably sound judgment, if said humour is appropriate.”

The best bet may be to hire people with a sense of humour. That was the philosophy of Herb Kelleher, the legendary boss of Southwest Airlines, an airline that is actually a pleasure to fly. One of his staff delivers one of the better and curiously timely lines in the book, “We’re sorry for the delay, but our automated bag smasher is broken and we are having to break your bags by hand.”

Oddly, the authors do not include your correspondent’s top tip for maintaining workplace levity: don't ban your staff from using [YouTube](#) during office hours.