

Managing to Be A Great (and Fun) Leader

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“Do it Well. Make it Fun.”

One of the toughest jobs I ever had was being a member of a committee charged with cutting ten percent of the workforce. Reimbursements were down and costs were up. The senior management team determined that the only option left was to eliminate staff. I quickly found that it's very easy to see “unnecessary” positions in other departments but it's very hard to get rid of your own people.

After several weeks of grueling decisions, we presented our proposed cuts to the CEO and then he scheduled a series of meetings to present the news to the staff. At the beginning of his presentation, he showed a cartoon of a man chasing his head with a butterfly net. The CEO said, “This represents the senior management team over the past few weeks.”

We sat in stunned silence.

The CEO had intended to show, with a touch of humor, how difficult this process was. Instead, he insulted everyone who had been in on the process because it made us look like we didn't know what we were doing. This is a perfect example of bad leadership and bad humor. When combined, it will sink a leader-*ship* quicker than a mutiny.

I believe that humor is one of the most powerful leadership tools available. Yet most leaders believe that, in order to be respected, they must be serious. It is certainly important to be a good leader but not so serious that you are unapproachable and detached. Someone once said, “A leader without humor is like a mower of a cemetery. He may be doing a good job but nobody underneath is paying much attention.” The following are some ways to add excellence and humor to your leadership repertoire.

Leadership Skills

Being an Excellent Leader. Early in our lives we are encouraged to “grow up” and to “act our age”. These “encouragements” lead us to believe that we must be serious to get the respect and admiration of our elders *and* peers. Unfortunately, getting respect has more to do with being excellent than serious.

An excellent leader is good at leading. An excellent leader works at being good at leading. An excellent leader takes responsibility for the values and skills with which he/she leads. Before you can add humor to your leadership toolkit, you must be good at your job. Otherwise, humor will work against you.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do what you want done because he/she wants to do it.” If you want people to

follow your lead, you must have the values and skills that inspire them. Know your business. Know your organization. Know your people. And most importantly, know what you do well and what you need to improve. Then, humor is your friend.

Understanding. When First Lady Barbara Bush was asked to speak to the graduating class of Wellesley College, a number of the graduates protested because they felt that Mrs. Bush's success was a result of her husband's position rather than her own work. Knowing the discontent she faced, the First Lady opened her presentation by saying, "Somewhere out in this audience may be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps and preside over the White House as the President's spouse. I wish *him* well."

Barbara Bush understood her audience well and then used a bit of humor to win them over. She received a standing ovation and her opponents no longer resented her participation. Great leaders understand those they lead. By connecting with compassion and a touch of humor, those in the ranks will see you as a human being worth following.

Communicating Effectively. When my daughter was born, our pediatrician was explaining the breast feeding process to my wife and me (not that I had a whole lot to do with it). He said that it usually took a day or two for the milk to come in.

My wife asked, "What if it doesn't?"

The doctor calmly replied, "Then we'll give your daughter to someone whose milk did come in."

I looked at my wife and gave her a smile and the thumbs up. This doctor was a keeper! With one humorous comment, he communicated that he understood our concern but that there was no need to be concerned. He also showed us that he was relaxed and comfortable with us. We always appreciated that and looked forward to his care of our children.

A good leader is able to communicate effectively in a way that instills confidence in those being led. Humor is a wonderfully human way to communicate that confidence.

Role Modeling. Many leaders do not realize the power of their actions. The CEO of a rather large organization was floored when a comment she made to an employee about a possible new program fed the rumor mill to the point that an all-staff meeting had to be held to explain that this was just an idea mentioned during a casual conversation and *not* a plan for the organization.

Leaders must set the example for the staff in the organization. A tense leader will have tense staff. A leader with an effective open door policy will have receptive staff. A leader with a sense of humor will encourage humor among the staff.

Show staff that you can have fun while still getting the job done. At a staff retreat, we had developed ground rules for our behavior which included things like “Be respectful”, “Don’t interrupt” and “Give others the benefit of the doubt”. In order to reinforce the ground rules, our CEO purchased a Nerf gun. Each of us took a turn being the “enforcer” of the ground rules. Every time someone broke a ground rule, they were shot! It was a great fun way to avoid the tension associated with the confrontation.

The Work Environment

A FUN Mission. When I worked in hospice care, we spent two years working on the Mission, Vision, and Values. It was an important process because it would guide the organization into the future.

As one of the values, we picked *joie de vi* which is French for “joy of life”. This phrase included fun, humor, joy, happiness, etc. and captured the essence of what we wanted our organization to be. Whereas we provided care for the dying, we valued living.

Consider incorporating some humor related value in your mission. If your organization strives to be a “fun place to work” or you encourage staff to have “fun with those we serve” or to “never lose our sense of humor”, you will find that the organization will continue to move forward with a positive attitude.

Hiring the Right People. Southwest Airlines CEO Herb Kelleher said, “We hire for attitude and then teach the skill.” Kelleher knew the importance of the right attitude for the work environment. An employee can always improve upon his/her skills while attitudes are hard to change. And an employee with a bad attitude will quickly disrupt the work environment.

When hiring new staff, most employers want to know what degrees they have, where they have worked and what skills they have. Rarely do we ask people if they have a sense of humor or how they might use humor to cope with a stressful situation. Which of the following qualifications do you think is more important in new employee?

- Graduated magna cum laude a triple major.
- Scored in the top 25% on all of their aptitude tests.
- Has excellent writing skills.
- Has a sense of humor and manages stress well.

Interestingly, research has shown that employees with a sense of humor are perceived to do a better job because they are less rigid, more flexible and less stressed out. It’s definitely something to consider in every job interview.

Making the Workplace More FUNctional. In addition to finding the right people, you must create a work environment that both embraces excellence *and* is a fun place to work. One definition of work I saw recently was, “If you’d rather be doing *anything*

else.” It’s a shame that we spend so much time at work and still view its drudgery as normal.

There are several things you can do to make the work environment more fun for your employees. Consider these ideas:

- Create humor respite centers. Allow your staff to create a place for humorous materials such as cartoon boards, bookshelves and props (Koosh balls, stress balls, yo-yos, etc.). They can visit these places when the stress gets too high.
- Party hearty. Celebrate those special events in your work lives. Celebrate employment anniversaries, professional months (for nurses, social workers, administrative assistants, etc.), accomplishments, and anytime you get through a tough situation. Make sure the celebrations include games, prizes, fun food and fellowship.
- The signs of humor. An easy way to make the workplace more fun is by putting up humorous signs. A manager put a “Mood Meter” on his door with an arrow that pointed to a picture of a river when he was calm and a volcano when he was stressed. It was a fun way to say “keep away”! Another organization used baby pictures on the staff office doors. These fun signs create a nice environment for employees.
- Reward humor. Rewarding good behavior encourages it to continue. Even if there is no budget for rewards, make sure you recognize good behavior, new employees and those who move on (assuming they’re not being fired!). Consider creative recognitions such as naming a hallway for the employee of the month, making a donation to a charity, baking brownies or even washing the person’s car. Make the reward specific and fun.

Excellence combined with humor is a powerful leadership duo because it proves the competence of the leader while bringing out his/her humanity. Once you have established the values and skills needed to be a great leader, humor can be just the added benefit to inspire and motivate those you lead.

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Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP is a former hospice social worker, middle manager, and senior manager who helps mission driven organizations tap into the power of combining excellence with humor. Ron is the author of ***Do it Well. Make it Fun., Is Your Glass Laugh Full?, and My Kneecap Seems Too Loose.*** Find out more by visiting www.RonCulberson.com.