

A Leadership Minute

ON HUMOR

“Humor is a rubber sword—it allows you to make a point without drawing blood.”

Mary Hirsch



- ❖ The average child laughs 200 times per day
- ❖ The average adult laughs about 15 times per day
- ❖ Laughter reduces stress
- ❖ Laughter lowers blood pressure
- ❖ Laughter increases pain-reducing endorphins
- ❖ Sharing laughter builds trust
- ❖ Humor increases a team's creativity
- ❖ Humor improves a team's morale
- ❖ Humor increases a team's ability to cope
- ❖ Humor makes other people want to listen to you
- ❖ Humor prevents a "hardening of the attitudes"

All I Hear is Laughing... They Can't be Working!

Sales are way down and customer complaints are way up. You just gave your team an assignment to go figure this mess out. *Pronto.*

And now, you pass by the team room and all you hear is laughter. The whole lot of them is just yukking it up. What gives...don't they know how important this is?

Seriously, that laughter means they're working.

Working together effectively as a team is really hard. We learn all about how to be an engineer or a salesperson or an accountant, or whatever we are in school or on the job. But we don't get much training about how to be an effective member of a team. Fortunately, even without training, many great teams find the tools they need to achieve extraordinary high levels of performance.

One of their secrets is humor. And it's no laughing matter.

Humor is part of what we call **team dynamics**—sort of the personality of a team. But unlike many of the other important characteristics of teams (candor, trust, communications and problem-solving), humor is the bedrock of *high performing* teams.

We know this because researchers actually measure humor in workplace teams. A tool was developed in the early 1990s to measure the stage—or level of effectiveness—a team finds itself in based upon several aspects of behavior. For nearly the last 25 years, the tool has been used to measure many manifestations of effective team behavior, like whether a team has a well-developed *process* by which they make decisions, or whether one can detect the use of *trust statements* in their discussions or how frequently do they use *open-ended questions* with each other. But by far, the critical element in team dynamics and certainly the easiest to measure is humor.

And it's so much more than just funny.

So, what's all that wisecracking, guffawing and giggling about?

In 2012, Management professors **Robert** and **Wilbanks** found that simply hearing laughter makes us laugh. It's contagious, can spread throughout a work team and allow us to:

- ❖ Breach protocol and explore what we otherwise would not
 - ❖ Move forward rather than retreat
 - ❖ Build positive reserves for increased future productivity
 - ❖ Deepen our affection for teammates
 - ❖ Increase commitment to the team
 - ❖ Build team cohesion and norms
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High performing team members commonly deliver serious, even *critical* messages to each other couched in humor. In these teams, humor is often used as a shield so that difficult questions can be floated as trial balloons, before they are tackled head-on. One member will signal the desire to open an issue by making a joke about or around the topic. And other team members will signal back—again by using humor. They may show that they are ready to deal with the issue or perhaps, that the timing is bad. The originating member may opt to try again later. Or, other members may signal when it's time to discuss the issue, again with a humorous opener. The humor foil provides a safe space in which difficult issues can be surfaced and non-traditional opinions can be expressed without injury to team performance - or to the individual.

High performing teams also use humor to express trial options and solutions. This helps them build collaborative foundations for problem solving and decision-making.

As well, they use humor to generate absurd or bizarre ideas when they are stuck. This creative technique is a superb mechanism for looking at tough problems from other angles—and inching a team just outside its comfort zone long enough to spark creativity. An examination of the bizarre can allow a team to find the realistic and levelheaded solution. If they can stop laughing long enough!

And most high performing teams routinely relieve stress with humor. It's more effective than tossing back beers and way more responsible.

“A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done.” If *Dwight D. Eisenhower* could find the value in humor through a world war and a presidency, you can encourage your team to incorporate a little in their work, too.

The overall effect will be laughter. Lots of laughter.

And lots of work.



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