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Creativity Through Humor and Playfulness; All in a Day's Work

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*Creativity through Humor and Playfulness;
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by

Eugene L. Pohancsek Jr.

An Abstract of a Project
in
Creative Studies

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science

December 2010

Buffalo State College
State University of New York
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ABSTRACT OF PROJECT

*Creativity through Humor and Playfulness;
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This project focuses on the fundamental aspects of creativity and its relationship to humor in the workplace. Since employees spend about one-third of their waking hours at work it has been shown that humor and play can be beneficial in the work environment. In the first section entitled *Discovering*, my philosophical views unfold as it relates to creativity. This foundation is crucial in understanding how the person can positively influence their creative environment. This philosophical review moves into the sections entitled *Recognizing* and *Humor Style*. These sections review current trends and research around humor in the workplace. In the concluding chapters, *Application* and *Observation*, discussion revolves around how the area of interest is put into action. My personal workplace is filled with humor and playfulness and this is beneficial to my colleagues, superiors and me.

Candidate

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Project Advisor

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Discovering

Creativity, humor and work are terms and concepts that are commonly kept separate and do not share the same platform. These terms tend to be opposing concepts yet once one discovers how these concepts are intertwined the possibilities are endless. Arthur Koestler (1964), a Hungarian-born novelist, is quoted as saying that “true creativity often starts where language ends” (p. 177). This statement summarizes and captures my deeper understanding of the nature of creativity. This inspection will uncover another world, and another framework around which I believe the world of creativity operates and how I discovered this relationship to humor and playfulness in the workplace.

Having an undergraduate degree in Philosophy I have learned a lot about the “self”. Working toward my master’s degree in creativity I have learned plenty about creativity. I see a very natural relationship between philosophy and creativity. Philosophy was, and always will be, of interest to me and I was not surprised to learn that it was able to share the stage with a topic like creativity. Philosophy, as well as the study of Creativity, is multifaceted and applicable to our life’s journey. Marksberry (1963) stated “creativity is the dynamic of all life” (p. 5).

Creative people exhibit many traits and characteristics that set them apart. In the article entitled *Recent Findings and Developments in Creative Studies (1966)*, author Taher Razik identifies seven qualities of a creative person:

- 1-Originality in a variety of ways
- 2-Independence / Autonomy
- 3-Sense of Humor
- 4-Shows interest and curiosity in many things
- 5-Showing sensitivity to problems, situations and qualities of experience
- 6-Deep sense of purpose and goal; capacity to concentrate on task
- 7-Flexibility and spontaneous (pp. 160-165, 201.)

Taher Razik's list is in no particular order. All of the qualities are all parts of a whole, and comprise of the essential essence of the creative person. These components can be discussed individually or in combination with each other. The qualities in Razik's list allow for further investigation and setting a foundation for my area of research; creativity, humor and the workplace.

The creative person has a particular view of self and the world around them. In philosophy being self-aware is a common theme. The self-aware individual can look at the most common occurrence, experience and utilize a deeper sense of self to fully engage. Walking through the grass on a crisp fall day is an example of one such experience. Having awareness of the crunching leaves beneath foot is an awareness that is not experienced by everyone. Most will walk across the grass as a means to get to their destination, without regard of their surroundings. Others will take the experience and come away with a deeper understanding connecting with self-awareness.

It is interesting to view this example as children would; they relish in the opportunity to crunch the leaves under foot. Their experience is well beyond just walking through the grass. All senses are engaged and at attention in the experience. This is extremely childlike in nature but yet profound - originality in its essential form.

While focusing on the childlike experience, one cannot avoid discussing humor. Children love to play and are immersed in humor. Razik (1966) describes creative children, using and allowing humor to emerge, rated higher creatively than children with high IQ's. Intelligence is not the sole indicator for creative ability. However, humor allows for separation from the worldly and if the worldly environment is work, it is no surprise why humor and work can share this platform.

Humor is “any communicative instance which is perceived as humorous” (Martineau, 1972). Humor can be an end in itself and may have no practical interest in its object. Whether discussing Greek Tragedies, devastating natural disasters or even solemn occasions, humor can be a participant as it has no interest in its object. This is no more evident than while attending a wake or a funeral. Occasions, like funerals and wakes, are often times filled with humor but are not directly linked to the sadness or grief of that moment. It is separate, it is other. Humor plays a key role in the experience of the creative person and the workplace is also a venue to allow this trait a platform. While using humor as an outlet a person further demonstrates philosophically that they are aware.

Razik (1966) also lists sensitivity to problems, situations and qualities of their experience. The person who is most aware also exhibits qualities of awe, wonder and hope. These traits also stand in the forefront of qualities. The notion of stepping outside them is an attribute associated with the creative thinking person. Imagination and sensitivity allow for the creative person to thrive in an environment in which others cannot fully function. Touching upon these traits also demonstrates the true nature of self that sets creative people apart.

Vincent Tomas (1964) asks the question “what does it mean for an artist to be creative?” (p. 2). He quickly acknowledges that this is a philosophical question. In regard to art and creativity, if one really wants to know what makes a certain artwork creative, or awe inspiring, what we are really looking for is the true nature of the artistic creation. This nature is the underlying, deeply seeded understanding of self that prevails in creativity and art is notwithstanding.

The senses of awe, awareness, enlightenment or even the term satori are terms that try to describe the findings, answers or results within the arena of creativity. In the modern day terms, it may also be described as an “a ha” moment. “This experience is the result of a new connection of elements residing within our perceptual field” (Torrence, p. 116). Often these elements are unseen and certainly not the first thoughts on one's mind. It is the deeper introspection of self that allows for the ideas to take root. These ideas often arrive swiftly to those who consider themselves independent thinkers - those who are philosophically aware.

Razik (1966) also lists the quality of “independent thinker”. The cliché of being an independent thinker, in today's society, is a quality that is highly sought after. People in the workplace commonly hear this jargon and is often overused. Figuring things out on their own and not being a conformist drives the intrinsically creative person. Many independent thinking individuals do not like to hear the “when and what” of how work is to be performed. If the goal is clearly stated, the creative individual takes liberty to explore avenues that are oftentimes uncommon. They have the courage to delve the unknown and humor and playfulness may be a part of this exploration.

In Weisberg's (1993) book it is stated that creative individuals need to “be free from rules (flexibility), in their need for recognition by their peers, and by the possession of strong aesthetic feelings about their work” (p. 73). The need to produce things that are simple, elegant or beautiful further identifies the ability to look beyond the obvious. This is where creativity becomes evident. Creative people are more self sufficient and autonomous than others. They desire to be free from authority. They prefer to have authority take a backseat as authority can be a hindrance to the progress of the

independent, creative, thinker. After all, authority typically equates to the rules and regulations; all too limiting for the creative thinker.

Having interest and curiosity in many things, and the courage to explore the unknown allows creative thinkers to accomplish tasks and goals in nontraditional means. Mason Cooley (1927) is quoted as stating "Why not? Is a slogan for an interesting life." This so called interesting life is due to an innate ability to attack ideas, problems and concerns in positive ways. Creative people look beyond the established boundaries and are not limited. One could say they are free range thinkers! Once this free thinking is carried into the workplace a new dynamic can be produced.

Givens (1962) points out that "the creative individual is an unpredictable, disorderly, multi-minded gambler with an irrepressible gall" (p. 299). Closer inspection convinces us that this type of person is a versatile, courageous person who dares to be an individual. Givens also notes that "creative people also view themselves as a process rather than a product, always being a fluid process and not fixed and static. They see many ways of interpreting the same situation: are very accepting of the fact that people arrive at different answers that are equally correct" (p. 295).

A vivid imagination and responding well to activities that require new approaches are further traits that the creative and aware person possesses. They are constantly in search of new meanings and how things work. The curiosity and risk taking traits of these people allow their movement to the forefront of dealing with creativity, humor, playfulness and the workplace. Flexibility, spontaneity and the willingness to try a new approach and accept the irrational or unpopular ideas often make sense to creative

people. The ability to look beyond possible judgment allows for more output and results from creative individuals.

The voice of judgment is an obstacle that typically shows up, and negatively impacts the creative process. There is apprehension in being judged and people in the workplace fear negative judgment as this may equate to the loss of employment. Loss of employment in our current economy could mean a loss of many other things in our lives. Why would a gainfully employed individual push the limits, at the workplace, to infuse humor and playfulness if it meant risking their employment? This is the wrong question to ask. The real question is why someone would be negatively judged for bringing humor and playfulness to the workplace?

One reason people make such hasty judgments is due to life experiences adding to the mental stockpile of labels and opinions. In Anthony DeMello's book *Awareness*, he quotes a Zen master as saying "Don't seek Truth; just drop your opinions" (p. 34). Dropping opinions is easier said than done. The individuals that are the most aware can live in an environment where labels and opinion are non-factors in their lives. Our mere existence as living beings exposes us, on a daily basis, to the labels in our society. We are constantly viewed as our professions, our diseases, our successes. All of these items can come and go, but the self always remains.

Philosophically, this self is also known as the "I" or the essential "I". It is unmoved, and unaffected. DeMello (1990) is quoted as saying, "You've got to drop your illusions. Life is easy, life is delightful. It's only hard on your illusions, your ambitions, your greed, and your cravings. Do you know where these things come from? From having identified with all kinds of labels!" (p73).

As stated earlier, all the traits needed to be a successful creative person can be practiced, taught and refined. Only those that are aware can truly appreciate the ease at which this process plays out. The creative person is a complex being, and hard to define or compartmentalize. Looking at creativity from a philosophical perspective has shown that creativity involves more than words, phrases or processes. For the most privileged people, those that are most aware, it is a way of life.

The aware individual possesses something different. It is an intangible factor. It is an internal autopilot that operates allowing this type of individual to be creative, solve problems, and enjoy humor and playfulness without obstacles. Making mistakes and always allowing for the opportunity to make mistakes, makes this individual unique and functional. Mistakes are no longer a blemish or a negative flaw to the creative personality. They are ready and willing to accept making many mistakes to accomplish the goal. This is yet another trait of the mental environment that the aware person feels most at home.

Feeling at home is a trait of my personal workplace. It is filled with creativity, humor and playfulness. Colleagues reference the fact that I am "so creative" and "different". My response to those people echoes the insights of Givens (1962) who indicated that all human beings have the capability to be creative but simply lack the insight to recognize it.

Recognizing

Employees spend about one-third of their waking hours at work, and don't necessarily leave the job behind when they leave the work site (Conrad, 1988).

Reflecting on Razik's (1966) list of qualities of creative individuals one cannot ignore the opportunity to tap into the captive audience of co-workers and utilize creativity in the workplace. Why not infuse humor or play into our work life? Can the work environment allow for such accommodations? With two children at home my world is filled with fun, play, humor and acting out with my daughters. It was easy to recognize that infusing humor and playfulness into the workplace is an apparent and natural opportunity.

In my current role at work I am a Financial Aid Administrator. I am not a manager, nor am I a boss. However, I do play an important role within our office of eighteen individuals. I am a main advising resource for the staff. I do engage in running meetings and addressing the office on a various array of subject matter and I have an excellent opportunity to impact, address and attend to real life work situations.

In a 1999 study entitled *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Bottom Line* (Avolio, B. & Howell, J. & Sosik, J.,1999) it is documented that when individuals are exposed to fun or humor, while in the work environment, they are more productive. They also accomplish more in less time. This study reveals humor may even have a positive impact on a company's bottom line. Researchers at Pennsylvania State University (PSU) and Silly Slammers* both confirm what employees have been saying for years: laughter is essential to a healthy and productive workplace.

*Silly Slammers are palm-sized talking bean bags, each with their own look and attitude. When thrown around, they each repeat their own unique phrase. For instance, Cool Clyde, a hip yellow Slammer in shades, says, "Cool!" while the klutz, Botch, says, "Oh no!" In addition to three lines of general Slammer characters, the company also markets several themed lines, including a group of office workers and a summer sports group.

A sense of humor is a communication tool that can bring about group cohesion and ultimately a well performing environment in the workplace. John J. Sosik a management professor at PSU's graduate school and co-author of the study writes that humor's effects have largely been untested (Avolio, B. & Howell, J. & Sosik, J., 1999). His study gives us some evidence on these effects that, in the past, were just anecdotal or hunches.

Avolio's et al. (1999) results indicate that humor or playfulness that the leader, or boss, exhibits had a positive impact on group performance. The study finds that managers who had adopted a management style that has shown to promote the highest levels of employee and overall organizational performance - use humor most often. His study also describes how humor contrasts two seemingly opposite concepts. As a result, employees are able to visualize concepts they might not have otherwise considered, thus creating new ideas and potentially an improved bottom line. In short, this suggests that a leader's use of humor helps shape a creative and efficacious work force.

Attempting to shape such a work environment is not easy. After all, we are inundated with suggestions and soundbytes that work is a necessary evil and cannot be avoided. Therefore, the overall view of work, or working, is often depicted in negative frame of mind. The typical mantra is having a good time cannot equate to earning a wage. Since grown-ups account for a large segment of the workforce it is appropriate to differentiate that some work to live and others live to work.

In 1985, the movie The Breakfast Club was released and it soon became an all-time classic. The movie's plot involves five students who have weekend detention. There's a jock, a princess, a misfit, a nerd, and a basket case. They do not have much in

common, except for having to give up their day, sit in the school library, and write an essay for the principal. The character named Allison Reynolds, the social outcast in the film, makes a very powerful insight. She mentions, on several occasions, that “when you grow up, your heart dies” (Hughes, 1985).

The Breakfast Club was, in itself, a humorous film but the statement referring to growing up and losing your heart philosophically strikes a chord with this area of inquiry. Being a grown up can easily equate with a person who is gainfully employed. After all, the commonly known inference is that once individuals grow up they typically seek gainful employment and work for a living. Children can, and do, often assist with corroborating this fact.

Ask any pre-teen adolescent to give a reason why they don't want to grow up and you are likely to hear that it is because they will have to go to work. Work is commonly the antithesis of play and, as I discussed earlier, all children love to play. I would argue that adults also love to play, but their hearts may have died and the outward expression of playfulness is heavily muted. I maintain that humor and playfulness can permeate the culture of mainstream employment and the benefits can be plentiful.

When one hears the name Geoffrey the Giraffe mentioned what one thing typically comes to mind? It should be a toy store and many Americans should be familiar with the Toys 'R' Us jingle. Since it was first released on the airwaves in 1982 it has permeated our culture. This musical example and its lyrics exemplify why adults rarely operate in the realm of play or humor. After all, having fun is for the young at heart not as a working adult. The song is as follows:

“I don't want to grow up, I'm a Toys' R Us kid. There's a million toys at Toys 'R Us that I can play with! From bikes, to trains, to video games, It's the biggest toy store there is! Gee whiz! I don't want to grow, cuz baby if I did, I wouldn't be a Toys 'R Us kid!”

(Kaplan-Thaler, 1982)

Children love to play and they are immersed in humor. Laughter at any moment can take over a child's experience. Humor offers a view beyond the established boundaries and is not limited! This is a very appropriate fit for the work environment. The children's view of life and the world comes without any baggage attached. Adults have lifetimes of experience and baggage to skew their attitudes and feelings. The notion of "no pain no gain" is embedded in the minds and hearts of many individuals. This belief certainly follows such people into the workplace and through other life events.

The label of a profession leads us back to the discussion of being a grown up and losing the heart or the soul. As mentioned earlier, many adults work for a living; employment is, some would say, a necessity. When the workplace incorporates positive forms of humor without disrupting the main goal of the business, rewards will follow. It can be a place to enjoy. Once humor is introduced into the work environment it reaps the benefits.

The methods to incorporate the humor are very numerous and wide in range. A simple joke, a riddle, a magic trick, silly dress clothes or any other medium can suffice. If the humor is positive, all people involved will be rewarded. Humor, therefore, is how I envision allowing our 'hearts' to live; not to die.

Humor Style

Conrad et al. (1988) mentioned that workers spend about one-third of their waking hours at work, and don't necessarily leave the job behind when they leave the work site. Why not infuse these waking hours with humor or play? Will the workplace culture accept such humor and play? Can the work environment allow for such accommodations? It can be done, and the work of Crawford (1994), Sosik et al. (1999) and others have documented it to be very effective.

Crawford (1994) states that humor creates a positive cognitive or affective response from listeners and this affective response can occur within the work environment. I propose that workplace humor can positively exist and the workplace can benefit from humor. Humor is multifaceted and, I propose, falls into several categories as related to workplace humor; Self-Defeating humor, Self-Enhancing humor and Affiliative humor.

Those who utilize *self-defeating* humor ridicule themselves in an attempt to amuse and seek acceptance from others (Martin, 2003). People who use a moderate amount of this humor style in the workplace tend to reduce their status level or rank to appear more approachable. This style of humor can be seen as patronizing if it is done in a less than appropriate fashion. After all, a reason the individual would be utilizing this type of humor is to join the ranks of the most visible, to an external agent, the workers. Upper management is not typically seen as being in the trenches and they may be more inclined to use the self-defeating humor as an outlet around the workplace to attempt to connect with their subordinates.

Those who exhibit the style of *self-enhancing* humor have a humorous view of life and are not overly moved by external sources. This humor style is typically a coping mechanism for dealing with stress, which can help in the maintenance of a positive perspective. Self-enhancing humor is positively related to self-esteem and constructive emotions. There is a lack of need for other people to entertain. If something peculiar or annoying happens, self-enhancing humor allows for the capability of laughing at life on one's own terms. Individuals who utilize self-enhancing humor do not take life too seriously.

When this type of humor is used in workplaces, the individual's intention is to enhance their image in relation to others in the group or the workplace. Self-enhancing humor can come across as phony if it's portrayed in a boisterous or disruptive fashion. People can also run the risk of being viewed as un-believable if the self-enhancing humor is demonstrated in a negative fashion.

Individuals that use *affiliative humor* typically joke around with co-workers and are attractive to others as the focus is to enhancing social communication. These are the "water cooler" type situations. Affiliative humor can include funny stories unrelated to the workplace, inside jokes and even a good-natured practical joke. Individuals who exhibit affiliative humor are liked by others and are usually perceived as non-threatening (Vaillant, 1977). Utilization of this non-threatening style of affirming humor can reduce interpersonal tensions in the workplace. It can also aid in relationship building (Martin et al., 2003). Affiliative humor is like the real world version of the internet. It's a social interaction that facilitates and assists in creating a positive work environment. When affiliative humor is used in the workplace, the intention is to bring people together.

Playfulness and humor can be important components of workplace culture (Clouse & Spurgeon 1995) by creating a positive environment in which ideas are shared openly and interpersonal relationships can flourish. Both empirical (Avolio et al., 1999) and anecdotal evidence (Caudron, 1992) documents that humor can be associated with better-quality performance. For example, Southwest Airlines is well known for its culture, witty employees and workplace wellness as well as its consistent growth (Quick, 1992).

It is reasonable to conclude that humor is an element that management should try to integrate into their culture (Newstrom, 2002). Humor is a valuable tool to communicate values, behavioral norms and standards. Humorous stories outline desirable and undesirable behavior by highlighting key actions that are reflective of desired values, standards and norms (Meyer, 1997). Humorous stories, when the subject is laughed at or ridiculed for engaging in improper behavior, indicates that such conduct is not to be repeated. A key factor in humorous stories or comments is that values, standards and norms can be molded appropriately without any negative effects on the audience being addressed.

Good-natured teasing, humorous comments or simple break room banter are also effective at molding behavior of new personnel and strengthening norms by drawing attention to improper conduct (Holdaway, 1988). Recent research indicates that supportive humor, akin to self-enhancing and affiliative humor were used by factory workers to make routine tasks interesting and to solidify close relationships (Holmes & Marra, 2002a).

Additionally, research discovered that workplaces employ different types and amounts of humor. This is very similar to style and level that is discussed in creativity circles. This suggests that humor is not only part of a workplace culture, but it is also a feature that makes each workplace culture unique. Self-enhancing and affiliative humor promotes relationships and enhances the ability to cope with difficulties or problems. It is logical to conclude that these two humor styles should be the ideal styles chosen by leaders, managers or founders within the workplace. By utilizing these styles of humor, individuals will be positively influenced to connect in team oriented behavior and behavior that enhances the overall workplace.

Application

I recently completed an all day human resources workshop on the DiSC® profile (a style preference instrument). I was not surprised to learn that my preferred style fell into the "I" quadrant of the DiSC® model. People with high "I" scores influence others through talking, activity and tend to enjoy humor and playfulness. Individuals with high "I" preference are described as convincing, magnetic, political, enthusiastic, warm, demonstrative, trusting, and optimistic. I enjoy, and find benefits, utilizing affiliative and self enhancing humor in my work environment. It is the application of humor and playfulness that provides workplace benefits.

There is strong evidence that humor reduces dysfunctional stress (Yovetich et al., 1990). When making a joke about a stressful situation, one develops a sense of dominance and control over it (Henman, 2001). This result is incompatible with stress and anxiety (Smith et al., 1971). In other words, joking about a stressful events such as layoffs, reduced salary or loss of benefits makes it less threatening. Humor can reduce stress in the military by mocking the risk of death in marching songs and jokes.

Humor makes people feel that they are not afraid; without fear they feel a greater sense of control which is the antithesis of feeling stress (Dixon, 1980). This has been illustrated many times in movies when characters, such as James Bond, face a fatal outcome joke about their failure. Affiliative humor may be applied within a group to ease tension resulting from stressful events because it creates a collective tone so that stressors are shared and managed by everyone in the group, organization or workplace. Therefore,

affiliative humor creates a “we are in this together” mentality, which is constructive when responding to stress and stressful situations. (Martineau, 1972).

Self-enhancing humor can also be particularly beneficial in reducing stress. In one study, individuals who scored high in humor experienced less stress, responded with positive emotions, and had a more positive self-concept (Martin et al., 2003). In a related study, people with a high sense of humor were likely to reframe stressful situations so that they were perceived as manageable (Abel, 2002). Utilizing humor in both studies is fitting with the coping function that self-enhancing humor provides. Both affiliative and self-enhancing humor can reduce stress in organizations.

Managers, supervisors or bosses do not need to turn into stand-up comedians to allow humor a place at the table. They simply need to be aware and understand that humor can be utilized and it is not all fun and games. Affiliative and self-enhancing humor are the most commonly recommended, and appreciated, styles. Aggressive humor is discouraged because it has the potential to prevent positive outcomes and likely lead to negative ramifications in the workplace.

Consideration is presented to understand the relationship between humor styles and potential workplace outcomes. Supervisors, managers and bosses can tailor humorous messages so that they are likely to produce positive results. For example, if a leader utilizes affiliative humor to become closer to the team and is successful, humor has facilitated achieving this executive goal. This example is reflective of a match between humor style of the initiator and audience, which is ultimately positive humor.

However, the antithesis can also be a real possibility. If the leader alienates the group, one can assume that there is detachment between the humor that was utilized and

the audience. This can be characterized as a negative outcome. It is also possible for misinterpretation by someone in the humor exchange, leading to inaccurate outcome evaluation. Furthermore, one person can perceive humor as positive (e.g., a leader successfully using humor to gain power) while other people perceive the same humor as negative and followers could perceive the leader as arrogant.

Constant feedback and evaluation from any humorous outcome should be incorporated in future attempts and evaluation of the group. To realize the benefits of humor, workplaces can take calculable efforts to create and maintain a fun, productive, culture that reaps benefits. This overall culture will also lay the foundation for identifying people who match the humor style preference of a particular team, organization or workplace. When it comes to human resources and hiring this knowledge will go a long way to assist with getting the right people. When the right people are hired that fit the already established culture this will result in consistent positive humor within the organization. The already referenced Southwest Airlines culture is somewhat a standard bearer.

Jokes and funny stories can be delivered most successfully by individuals who have appropriate delivery skills, but humor is not restricted to such people. Organizational humor can take many forms, some of which require little comedic talent. A well-crafted office space can create the benefits that humor brings without actual verbal contact. Comic strips like Dilbert or video segments from funny movies can also be utilized. Such forms of humor are used by individuals to “break the ice” at meetings and daily activities. If the goal is to reduce power distance between hierarchical levels, managers and supervisors could participate in preplanned practical jokes. For example, a

boss could pose as a water balloon target to raise money for a predetermined charity.

Lastly, humor is valuable in its own right. It provides pleasure in what can sometimes be a rather boring situation. With some careful thought and preparation, anyone can be successful at using humor appropriately in workplace settings.

Observations

Humor is an important component of my personal workplace as well as the overall culture of my office. My office space creates a positive environment that allows for ideas and relationships to thrive. Although my experiences and the individual feedback of my colleagues have been only anecdotal in nature, the results of my observations are the ultimate base form of empirical data.

There is a common theme as it pertains to the comments from coworkers about my office space. Colleagues have noted that they enjoy waiting in my office because they feel comfortable browsing around and playing with the office gadgets. Folks point out that there is always something new in the office that they have not seen before. This makes for a quick retreat from the everyday grind of the workday. I have also heard that my office is a warm and inviting environment.

Colleagues have described that my office environment is a unique space. Without my presence at a recent office meeting, staff were asked to share thoughts about my office. Some of the thoughts were that my office space is simply an outward version of my personality and is different and interesting. Further thoughts revealed that my office environment makes it easy for staff to come and talk to me about anything; work or personal matters. The easy going environment reflects on my personality and what is contained in my office makes people feel at ease.

The overall humor which is present in verbal and non-verbal forms in the office is generally welcomed by all. Affiliative humor abounds and it allows our office members to be a closely knit team. It has been mentioned that my personality and work space makes coming to work fun. The overall playfulness in the work place allows for a less

stressful job and allows the time to go by faster in the workday. I do have the only office with toys/gadgets, humor and candy. Staff tends to like the fact that they have something to temporarily entertain themselves while they wait for me to finish whatever I might be completing.

Many described my office as whimsical in nature and allow people a chance to escape. The surroundings of the office allow staff an inside look into my personality. It allows people to connect on a different level. Many folks find something in the office that relates to them on some level and this creates a deeper connection. As Avolio's et al. (1999) results indicate, humor can have a positive impact on group performance. Infusing some affiliative humor in my workplace has shown, anecdotally, to promote overall levels of organizational performance.

My office contains various pictures and objects that have a humorous and playful tone. For instance, Figure 1.0 below depicts several signs that hang in the rear of my office. As soon as a visitor walks by, or when they enter the room, these signs are typically the first items that come into view. They are directly behind me and welcome any visitor who comes along.



Figure 1.0. Signs

Besides the signs on the back wall I also have other items that hang around the office. Figure 1.1 is an image of a small shelf that contains various items. These include a statue that reflects a comical juxtaposition of Auguste Rodin's Thinker, Neil Diamond figurine and an aluminum question mark. The framed piece on the wall is a shadow box that contains various photographs of coloring crayons and an untitled poem that reads "We could learn a lot from crayons; some are sharp, some are pretty, some are dull, while others bright, some have weird names, but they all have learned to live together in the same box."



Figure 1.1. Shelf

Working in an office that handles incoming phone calls and email from parents, students and departments regarding everything from financial aid, student accounts and registration can be a stressful environment. As Martineau (1972) discussed, affiliative

humor can be applied within a group to ease tension. Affiliative humor can assist in reducing stress as it creates a collective experience so that stressors are shared by everyone in the group, organization or workplace. The poem in Figure 1.1 reflects this shared mentality and that we are all in this office together working toward a higher goal.

Staff expressed that my office allows for visitors to think about something other than the “business” when they are in the office. There are occasions when staff needs to wait as I am in the middle of a phone call or other process. Staff likened the overall experience to waiting in line at Disney. At Disney, TV monitors display short film clips, commercials or visual introductions to the ride that folks are waiting for. This ensures the people waiting in line remain entertained. The same experience can be found in my office. It provides a similar variety of internal customer service among the staff. There’s always something to read or ponder about and is another way to escape the reality of the business and services that we provide.

Another theme that permeates my workspace is easy access to candy, gum and other edible treats. They act as food for the soul. At the front of my desk one will find gum, suckers, mints and other items that are often frequented by guests (Figure 1.2). A few pieces of candy or gum can make all the difference to an individual working in an office environment like ours. There are several varieties of putty, magnets, pipe cleaners and toys that can also occupy a visitors time while we discuss work matters or deal with other various situations. Simply adding these items have made my workspace a highly regarded office within the department.



Figure 1.3. Candy Machine

In addition to fun and amusing items I also have several personal and meaningful pieces in my office. To the average visitor the images or messages would have no apparent significance. There is a framed photo/collage on my office wall that depicts the front doors of homes, buildings and schools (Figure 1.4). This was a gift from my mother and it represents all the doors that I have passed through in my life. There is a photograph of the front door of my childhood home, grammar school, high school, first home I purchased and so on. Although this is a very private and consequential piece it is also enjoyed by others.



Figure 1.4. Seating Area

Colleagues have commented that they appreciate all of the stories that accompany the items in the office. They have mentioned that the stories are often more interesting than the items themselves. One staff member is particularly moved by the photo of the door of my grammar school. She also attended the school and it reminds her of her childhood. Allowing individuals the opportunity to strike a chord with their childhood memories is typically a positive experience. Sharing my stories and engaging in conversations accompanies so many aspects of my workspace and also adds to, and builds, the positive office culture that exists in the department.

The photo in Figure 1.4 depicts the area directly in front of my desk. It is merely four feet from my desk and resembles a waiting room. There are two chairs and a small table with various magazines. Additional items sit upon my refrigerator; not to mention a foolish picture of the gorilla that is on the front of the refrigerator. This office arrangement is like no other within my organization at work. Considering my environment of higher education there are many offices that reflect a more classic look and feel. These offices may have framed awards on the wall, family photos and a desk containing only the essentials. If it is not related to work, it would not exist in those workspaces. I find this to be a discouraging trend considering I have already established that work and play can coexist.

Working in higher education I am keenly aware that my office space is one that may be looked upon with doubt. Upper management routinely visits my office space and they often comment and question my motivation for decorating in such a different way. Most individuals in the organization are aware of my personality and I am always supported in my designing endeavors. Gaining support and acceptance are necessary in an organizational structure especially one in higher education.

You would be hard pressed to find another office on campus that would contain a hand crafted clay head of a Neanderthal man, a framed Michael Jackson record or a miniature Stonehenge (Figure 1.5).



Figure 1.5. Clay Sculpture

Add to the mix a stress ball shaped brain and a plush University at Buffalo toy as a complement to another area within my office. Conrad et al. (1988) mentioned that workers spend about one-third of their waking hours at work, and don't necessarily leave the job behind when they leave the work site. I have chosen to infuse these waking hours with humor and play and this is widely accepted by my colleagues.

Crawford (1994) covers the fact that humor can create a positive cognitive response from others. The play and humor exhibited in my workplace positively exists and the departmental workplace benefits. Humor can reduce stress (Yovetich et al., 1990) and my workplace is typically a stress free environment. My colleagues and I are often joking around and playing in a positive fashion. When making a joke about a stressful situation, one develops a sense of dominance and control over it (Henman, 2001) and my department is often dealing with stressful situations.

Our ability to overcome these situations is often grounded in fun and humor and the department tends to take things in stride. Most recently the New York State budget passed and the results were quite dire. State funding levels were being slashed and there was talk of potential layoffs and loss of benefits. Even in this extremely stressful time we continued to joking about the events and it made the reality less threatening. Similarly, humor reduces stress in the military by mocking the risk of death in military marching songs and jokes.

A trait, which is often thought of as negative, that accompanies work, humor and play is the possibility of making mistakes. In the opening chapter entitled Discovery discussion surrounded the topic of making mistakes and allowing for the opportunity to make mistakes. Mistakes are what make us human and individual. Mistakes are not a blemish or a negative flaw in the creative personality. There are numerous topics that permeate my organizations daily workload. Working with student accounts, billing, financial aid and registration involves a knowledgebase that is quite involved and has the potential of oversights. Obviously our employment hinges on the notion that mistakes are minimized and that proper training, knowledge and resources are in place for staff.

Figure 1.6 illustrates the front of my desk.

This view is what anyone who walks by or into the room will see. Although this small space is very busy one readily notices the two large pink pencil erasures. The erasures are labeled "For BIG Mistakes". The old adage "do as I say not as I do" does not hold true. I am open for the possibility of making mistakes and taking those experiences to grow and learn. As the first tier of support for the office I am looked at as an authority in matters relating to financial aid, billing and registration. Initially, staff inquired why I

had the erasures and wondered why I would need them since I am the advisor. This area of inquiry often leads down the road of discussion on matters relating to mistakes and how these opportunities serve as great moments in learning. Just as Razik (1966) identified qualities of the independent thinker, I also share these qualities with colleagues on an ongoing basis.



Figure 1.6. Big Mistakes

Visitors to my office also positively commented on having an opportunity to flip the page of my “Office Attitudes” flipbook. Such phrases as “Thank you for not being perky”, “Get over it”, “Don’t question authority, they don’t know either” or the one that is showing in Figure 1.6 that reads “Tough times don’t last, tough people do” allow staff to visually display their emotions without directly attributing the comment to themselves.

This simple flip book is another affiliative humor vehicle that mitigates stress and opens the door for further communication within the office. Affiliative humor reaches beyond pay grade and status within the department. This book is utilized by staff as well as supervisors and managers within the organization and meets the same expectations among all.

Conclusion

The fundamental aspects of creativity and its relationship to humor in the workplace is a well researched area of inquiry. Since employees spend about one-third of their waking hours at work it has been shown that humor and play can be beneficial in the workplace environment. Individuals looking to enrich the workplace with humor and playfulness need to Discover a philosophical view about creativity, humor and work. This foundation is crucial in understanding how an individual can positively influence the workplace environment. Recognizing what elements of humor and play are appropriate for the workplace will impact the Style and Application of the humor and play that is utilized.

Humor is multifaceted and, I propose, falls into several categories as related to workplace humor; Self-Defeating humor, Self-Enhancing humor and Affiliative humor. Self-defeating involves self-ridicule in an attempt to amuse and seek acceptance from others (Martin, 2003). Utilization of this humor style in the workplace will allow upper management to connect with those employees that are in the trenches doing the day to day tasks that keep the organization afloat. A simple gesture of a manager logging onto the phone system in a call center environment would pave the way for management to connect with their subordinates.

Self-enhancing humor involves an individual having a particular view of life that is not overly moved by external sources. Self-enhancing humor is positively related to self-esteem and constructive emotions. When something peculiar or annoying happens, self-enhancing humor allows for the capability of laughing at life on one's own terms. Individuals who utilize self-enhancing humor do not take life too seriously. An employee

telling a humorous anecdote prior to a stressful meeting would be an example of injecting self-enhancing humor into the workplace.

Affiliative humor is categorically the least non-threatening of the three humor styles (Vaillant, 1977) and utilization of affiliative humor aids in relationship building (Martin et al., 2003). Affiliative humor hinges on social interaction and this is what facilitates the positive work environment. When affiliative humor is used in the workplace, the intention is to bring people together. Enjoying the ‘fact of the day’ on my desktop calendar or sharing an amusing story with others are examples of utilizing affiliative humor.

Individuals hold various thoughts and beliefs on the benefits of humor and playfulness. However, some beliefs and thoughts relating to humor and playfulness are not well documented. These may include, decreasing symptoms of illness, increasing life span, enhancing intimacy and marriage satisfaction, preventing pain, lowering heart rate, lowering blood pressure, decreasing heart disease and boosting immune system functions. Further research is needed to clear up some of these commonly held beliefs.

Anecdotally, I have found that humor and playfulness can coexist in my workplace and one doesn't need to attend clown school in order to employ various styles of humor. Since ‘grown-ups’ fill a large segment of the workforce my hope is that when we grow up, our hearts do not die and we can embrace humor and playfulness in all aspects of our lives; allow the inner child to surface and bring deeper meaning to our lives.

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