

Fun and the Bottom Line: Using Humor to Retain Employees

By [Susan M. Heathfield](#), About.com Guide

Introduction by Susan Heathfield

I've featured David Granirer at the About HR site in the past because he combines wit with useful information in an approachable writing style. As I visit workplaces these days, I see a lot of up-tight people who are worried about their futures and their opportunities.

In these uncertain times, David is right, often the one thing we do control is our reaction to the work situation in which we find ourselves.

I'm a serious proponent of empowerment, as any of you who have read this site for any time know. Consequently, choose to be a cheerleader at work. Choose to have a say and make a difference. Choose to contribute your best talents and skills. Your workplace will be better for your contribution and that will be a good thing for both you and your organization. David Granirer tells you more.

Article by David Granirer*

Humor for Retaining Employees

Picture this: a team of welfare workers on the front-lines of a poor neighborhood, serving difficult, high-needs clients. And if that's not tough enough, each has a caseload of about 300 and works for an organization undergoing massive funding cuts, downsizing, and policy changes.

But every day after coffee, it's the same. The supervisor and two workers appear in the reception area. "What song do you wanna hear? Do you wanna hear Jazz? Rock? Folk?" Then, "playing" accordion folders and staple removers as finger cymbals, they launch into the world's worst rendition of "Across The Universe" by John Lennon, to the hysterical laughter of their colleagues.

"It's our way of keeping up morale," says a team member. "We're so overwhelmed, so stressed, so burned out. This is how we keep our sanity."

As more and more organizations reengineer, merge, restructure, downsize, rightsize, and even capsize, employees confront uncertainty on an almost daily basis. The rules keep changing in terms of what they're supposed to do, how they're supposed to do it, who they do it for, and whether they get to do it at all.

And since most have little or no control over the making of these rules, the result is often a sense of powerlessness that translates into increased stress, decreased wellness, demoralization, absenteeism, and lower productivity, all of which affect rates of retaining employees. And we all know that people are an organization's number one asset, and losing them costs money.

So the big question for both individuals and organizations is: how do you keep up spirits, continue to work effectively, and maintain health and sanity in a crazy-making situation? The team of welfare workers described chooses to laugh.

They could also choose despair, cynicism, bitterness, or negativity, but instead team members choose laughter. As one worker states, "We could either cry, or we could laugh, but you can only cry for so long. We'd had enough of crying, and it was time to do something else."

So, how do you help employees, who have little or no control over external events, survive a crazy-making situation? Organizations need to encourage employees to take control over the one aspect of the situation they do control - how they choose to respond to it.

And on those days where workers feel overwhelmed, overworked, and have no idea what's going to happen next, the only rational, life-affirming response is to go find some colleagues, and break out the clown noses, kazoos, and Groucho glasses.

Why Laughter?

Why is laughter such a positive choice? We all know that it makes us feel good, but in today's bottom-line oriented workplace, the term "feel good" is too nebulous to have much impact on how people go about structuring their job interactions and professional relationships.

And most organizations are not going to promote humor as part of their culture because some "touchy feely" wellness devotee thinks that having the boss come to work dressed as a chicken will create a happy afterglow.

So any discussion of the benefits of laughter needs to be more tangible and focused on addressing positive morale, a major factor contributing to retaining valued employees. Remember though, humor is a coping mechanism to aid in retaining employees, not a cure-all for other systemic problems affecting organizations.

Boosting Morale

It's a common theme. An organization keeps cutting staff until the people left feel like they can't cope anymore. Unfortunately, the organization I'm thinking of didn't take into account what this would do to the morale of the "survivors."

Management was unwilling to listen to their concerns, and when anyone did voice them, they were labeled as disloyal. Teamwork plummeted, with employees adopting a "me first" attitude. The office atmosphere was poisonous, rife with gossip, rumors, and backstabbing.

"This feels like hell. I'd never recommend this company to anyone, and I just hope I can survive until I take early retirement," said one long-term employee.

Like the team of welfare workers, this group found themselves in a bad situation over which they had no control. Sadly though, members were not encouraged to make use of humor, the one coping mechanism they had left.

Instead, management saw it as a frivolous waste of time, a sentiment which came to be echoed by the employees. "We're living in hell. We're too busy to laugh, and besides, it won't change anything, was a common refrain among employees with whom I talked. However, they were wrong.

According to Steve Lipman, who researched the use of humor during the Holocaust, "Wit produced on the precipice of hell was not frivolity but psychological necessity. Humor is one of the greatest gifts God gave mankind to pull itself out of despair."

In today's uncertain work environment, humor isn't an option, it's a necessary way to boost morale. When employees clown around, they're not wasting valuable time, they're making use of one of the few tools available to increase and maintain their esprit de corps. Laughter may not change the external reality, but it can certainly help people survive it.

This has been proven in some pretty dire situations. Lipman cites an example of how a group of Auschwitz inmates put on vaudeville shows to provide laughter for the camp population. According to one, "We had to make jokes to save ourselves from deep depression."

Somehow these people, on the brink of death, realized that their morale and survival depended on keeping their ability to laugh alive. As a group, they took the time and energy to make it happen.

Even though nothing could be as horrible as Auschwitz, people in almost all workplaces can learn from this example. Take the time and energy to share humor. Those brave concentration camp inmates proved that humor is a choice, and no matter how much adversity people face, whether at work or in their personal lives, they can still choose laughter. In fact, the worse a situation gets, the more important it becomes to make that choice.

Making Humor Happen In Your Organization

So what can organizations do to encourage the use of humor as a coping mechanism? On a recent trip, I flew on WestJet Airlines, and found that the crew had turned the usually boring safety announcement into a stand-up comedy routine. My favorite line was, "The floor lighting will come on in the event of an emergency landing or a disco revival."

Upon inquiring, I learned that the CEO of WestJet believes that work should be fun. He sets precedents through his own behavior, and by encouraging employees to enjoy their jobs. He makes it safe for the people he employs to use humor by leading the way.

And the payoff? All WestJet employees I spoke to said how much they loved working for the company because it was so much fun. And their enjoyment was reflected in great service to the passengers. They expressed their appreciation of the humor and their intention to continue flying WestJet.

In order to help employees use humor, organizations need to provide them with the tools and to set an example. When I worked at the Vancouver Crisis Center, we started every training group with an exercise called "the rubber chicken toss." We also provided crisis counselors with baskets of toys to use as stress-busters, and made it clear that humor was encouraged as part of our organizational culture.

These relatively inexpensive interventions did nothing to change the adversity we faced, but they did create an atmosphere in which going to work was fun.

I often had crisis line workers tell me that one of the reasons they kept coming back was because of how much fun they had. And if a crisis line, where workers regularly deal with suicide can be made fun, so can any workplace.