

The Most Valuable Employees Tame Tensions

Heather Boerner, for Yahoo! Hot Jobs,

Furloughs, layoffs, burdened bosses, and stressed coworkers: Tension can stifle your office and kill productivity. But if you can defuse that tension, you may also be making yourself a valuable employee, even if you're not the manager.

"Being the office tension manager can be a wonderful reputation to have," says corporate trainer Marlene Caroselli. "Every time you resolve a conflict you really enhance your own skills."

Consider these four types of tension tamers:

The Charmer

"They know the exact moment to insert humor that breaks the tension at work," says Kathi Elster, coauthor of "Working With You Is Killing Me."

The charmer doesn't crack one-liners or riff on the boss's toupee, though. Instead, she:

- **Focuses on policies, not people.** "It could be a lot of fun to make fun of a mean boss, but it doesn't cut tension because it has a dark edge and and it could get you into trouble," said Elster's coauthor Katherine Crowley.
- **Tests the office humor quotient.** "We work with a high-tech company where all the staff have piercings and tattoos," said Crowley. "Their tension-cutting jokes are going to be very different than the jokes at a bank."
- **Renames it.** Reframe furloughs as "funloughs" and say it lightly, with confidence that everything will work out.

The Big Thinker

"Very few things are life-or-death, unless you're working in an emergency room," says Crowley.

The big thinker puts workplace tension in perspective, cutting it by reminding people that what's happening now is temporary -- even if it is the recession.

"We all know people's moods change, and tension isn't always accurate," says Elster. "The boss might be in a bad mood -- that's it."

The Coffee Buddy

Like all tension tamers, the coffee buddy has good timing. When office stress hits its peak, he knows the hothead to take out of the office.

"This is someone who knows when to open a window and let fresh air in," said Crowley.

"Calming tension can be very basic. It's about unfreezing the moment and changing the energy."

The Optimist

"People are not nearly as positive as they think they are, and they don't show nearly as much appreciation as they think they do," says clinical psychologist Aubrey Daniels, a workplace behavior expert and author of "Bringing Out the Best in People." "If you are not told overtly and clearly that you are appreciated, you assume the opposite."

So if you're working in an office boiling with dread about layoffs, furloughs, or company's health, start by altering your own mood.

The optimist defuses tension by:

- **Applying the four-to-one rule.** Say four positive things for every one negative comment.
- **Expressing gratitude.** If a coworker helped you and didn't have to, tell her clearly that you know she didn't have to go out of her way for you and you appreciate it.
- **Asking about success.** If someone does something particularly well, ask them how they did it. Your coworker will relive his accomplishment and feel great about his work.