

Humor is No Laughing Matter for Silicon Valley Companies – *The Ability to Lighten Up is Good Business*

One of the top concerns I hear from people all over the Valley is that work has lost its fun and creativity. True, despite a local economy that shows (anemic) signs of improvement, work life remains challenging. My question to them is, “so what are YOU personally willing to do to change it?” Yes, you.

People need humor to cope with stress, low morale, to engage more creatively, and deal with change. Fun is also crucial to the sustainability of an engaged workforce and to job loyalty (just ask members of Generations Y and X). Companies need to act now or lose people when the economy turns. Still, why wait for management to encourage something so vital to your health? Anyone can use humor and reap the benefits. Even a little can help. So let’s exercise that fun muscle. A little scary, yes, but it will hurt you more by avoiding it.

First, companies and employees must change the ways they think about humor. Humor isn’t just about parties, t-shirts and jokes; it is about an attitude of fun, play, and discovery and it can be a vital and compelling force behind innovation. It is also a deliberate choice companies can make. Humor is about positive choices every day, and no, that jelly donut does NOT count!

While corporate values are typically handed down as reflections and modeled behavior of executives’ personal beliefs, humor should be a fun responsibility –not a chore - of every worker. Employees control their own attitudes, so a grassroots approach is important because humor is infectious. Fun should not feel like work or a burdensome management objective. It should be uplifting and inspiring. Hint: that’s why they call it “fun.”

How can this happen? By injecting creative play, games, awards and more humor into our personal interactions, our meetings, our innovations, and our attitudes. The opportunities are limitless and any organization can do these things easily, conveniently and economically- now. The first place to start is to recognize that happy, creative employees are more engaged. It’s not rocket science – but it is so easily forgotten.

Employees that have fun and feel creative are more productive. Just ask Pixar’s Dean of Pixar University, Randy Nelson, who oversees Pixar’s cross-functional learning programs. Pixar’s employees take all kinds of classes designed to expand their horizons in filmmaking, dancing, writing, improv, and Tai Chi among others. “This breaks down barriers, and allows employees to get to know each other as people,” says Nelson. Additionally, these sessions make it safe to fail.” As a result, he says, they encourage a greater sense of team and better communication.

Fail? Oh no! Yes, humor is about openness and willingness to take risks. By that definition, my stock portfolio is pretty darn funny right about now.

But there is a point: humor improves collaboration. “All of these result in better storytelling, working together and, ultimately, to better filmmaking,” says Nelson. “We can tell how good a movie will be by how much fun the crew is having.” The secret to Pixar’s success, says Nelson, is a playful culture that values and promotes humor.

A company that can laugh at itself, though it takes its work seriously, is a great example of a healthy culture. According to company communications manager Heidi Burgett, Yahoo regularly provides management parody skits and company-wide spoof emails among other ways to keep spontaneous fun alive. Another important action the company takes says Burgett, is hiring fun people to ensure and reinforce its fun culture. The result is a work hard, play hard environment.

Fun people like to hire other fun people, and the result is both a top-down and bottoms-up approach to bringing humor into the very fabric of an organization's soul.

The San Jose Convention and Visitor's Bureau, for example, lists humor as the second of its ten corporate values. It regularly has both spontaneous and planned events like contests, brainstorming games, and teambuilding to encourage fun and creativity, and employee recognition awards for almost anything you can imagine.

I am not suggesting corporate mandated fun-time co-opted by the culture police. Some of these activities *must* be spontaneous and unsponsored by management. Fun that motivates produces results, so be flexible about what constitutes "fun" for your group and keep it organic rather than structured. Not sure what employees find fun? Ask. You might be surprised by the answers: in fact, most people do NOT enjoy company picnics. That one doesn't really surprise you, does it?

Companies must help inspire a lighter touch through parties, events and awards, but the long-term answers lie in aligning the culture to value and promote creative play. While employees are part of the equation, organizations must promote a healthy, fun and challenging work environment.

Here are a few ideas on how companies can make a difference:

- Embrace the value of creativity as a process, not just as an outcome. Edison failed to create a working light bulb his first 9,999 tries, but he recognized the value of the *process* as a precursor to success. Make creative play a regular part of innovation – and reward it.
- Introduce games or contests into meetings that integrate fun, humor and creativity.
- Allow your team a number of unrestricted hours per week to be creative however they choose (i.e., learning a new skill). Then watch that investment in trust yield huge returns.
- Translate values into hiring practices. Hire people with a sense of humor who will uphold key values as Yahoo does, especially if fun is critical to your brand identity. Think about who you want representing your brand. People that don't have fun at work can't communicate fun to your customers. Amazing how that works!
- Create corporate incentives for play, and make it OK to fail. Only then will employees take innovative risks. "Fun" isn't just a mug quotation. If it is, attempts to build humor will lack credibility and invite ridicule (Think "Dilbert"). If this sounds familiar, your company has managed to put the "f" and "u" in 'fun.' You get the point and it's not good.
- Promote cooperation rather than competition. Align pay and/or recognition to new ideas generated and vetted regardless of where they originate.
- Be generous with praise to encourage creativity – it's free.

Ultimately, humor must be the shared vision of employees and executives. By doing these things, humor – and fun - can become vital parts of a productive and fulfilling corporate culture. What are you waiting for? Go out and make fun happen!

Kathy Klotz-Guest MA, MBA combines 13+ years' of strategic marketing with a background in sketch comedy to help clients create powerful print and verbal communications that get results!

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