

Humor at work Andrew Tarvin

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Have you ever been in a class that was so boring that you fell asleep and started to dream about happiness and milkshakes, only to be woken up by your professor reading slides to you? Well, I'm here to tell you that when you enter the corporate world, it doesn't get any better. But the good news is that it can. The problem with people in the corporate world is sometimes they are so focused on the bottom line that they just focus in on efficiency.

And I love efficiency. I'm an engineer. I'm obsessed with it.

In fact, I was even born three weeks early, because apparently, even in the womb, I'm ready to go right now. But the problem is that just because something is efficient doesn't mean that it's effective. Just because something saves time, it doesn't mean that it actually gets results.

And if you're thinking, why should I believe you, skinny Hugh Jackman? First of all, you don't have to remind me that I'm skinny. I've been skinny my entire life. I was born 8.3 pounds and then stayed that way until I was 15 years old.

But second, it's because I've actually been there. The summer between my junior and senior year of college, I interned at Procter & Gamble in Cincinnati. And at the end of the summer, I had to give a presentation to a review board that would ultimately decide whether or not I could get hired full-time at the company.

I slaved over a presentation that I ended up thinking was killer. Killer because it was going to bore them to death. So the night before my presentation, I decided that I needed to change everything.

And so the single most important presentation I'd ever given in my life started with this slide. I can tell you from personal experience that creating an entire presentation in Microsoft Paint is not very efficient. But it does get people to pay attention.

My presentation ended with what I think was my greatest masterpiece. An MC Escher meets Keith Haring style drawing of the review board that day. And yes, those are visually accurate stick figures of each one of the senior leaders that was going to decide my fate.

After I delivered my presentation, I went up and talked with each of the people and one of the associate directors pulled me aside and he was like, you know, you're pretty good at PowerPoint. I said, I like to think that I excel at it. He was like, was that a Microsoft Office pun? I replied, word.

Two days later, I found out I got the job. And I never really realized that most people think that humor and work are at the opposite ends of the spectrum. To reference animaniacs, people think that humor is pinky and work is the brain.

But in reality, you need to bring both of them together in order to actually try to take over the world. Because people who use humor at work are more productive, less stressed, paid more and happier. Which is something that I never learned in any one of my college classes.

Because our classes teach us the skills we need to do a job, but no one really teaches you the skills that you need to enjoy that job. And it turns out as Americans, we're not very good at it. Eighty-three percent of Americans feel stressed out at work.

Fifty-five percent of Americans are unsatisfied with their jobs. And forty-seven percent of Americans struggle to stay happy. Of course, it's even worse in Disney World, where statistically only one out of seven dwarfs are happy.

But still, one out of two people is still pretty scary. A few years after my internship, I was working at Procter & Gamble in New York City. And I was promoted from analyst to project manager.

And I still used humor in the workplace. I was a project manager, so I got to name my projects whatever I wanted. So instead of the standard Retail Sales 2.0, I named them things like Project Optimization.

I also taught improv to all of my team members so that they can improve their leadership skills and start to brainstorm and think faster on their feet. And whenever someone new would join my team, I'd have them fill out a personality assessment like Myers-Briggs, or more importantly, which Star Wars character are you? If you're wondering, I'm an INTJ R2-D2. A shock to none of you.

But after one of my weekly status meetings, one of my co-workers came up to me. It was Sarah, aka Ewok. And Sarah was like, Drew, I just want to thank you.

I had no idea what she was talking about, so of course I said, it's about time. Why are you thanking me? And she said, it's because of this project. It's been fun.

And I was like, finally, someone else who appreciates the joy of Bayesian probability and predictive analytics. She was like, what are you talking about? She's like, no, not the project itself, but the way that you managed it. Before I joined Project Optimization, I was thinking about quitting because I was so stressed out.

But then I joined your team, and it was different because we had fun. And somewhere along the way, I realized that no one told you to use humor. You just decided to.

So thank you. And I was touched. Because Ewok was right.

No one ever told me to use humor, but no one ever stopped me either. Sarah, like so many other people, never thought she could use humor at work. I always assumed that I could.

It was at that moment that I decided that I no longer wanted to be just a computer science engineer. I wanted to be a humor engineer. And if you've never heard of it before, it's because I made it up.

But just as a computer science engineer helps people be more efficient and more effective using technology, a humor engineer helps people be more efficient and more effective using humor. Because the average person sends and receives 112 emails per day and spends 80% of their time in some form of communication. Humor helps your message actually stick out and gets people to stop and pay attention.

Humor also makes your message more memorable. Simple things like mnemonics help us remember things long after we actually learn them. I haven't played an instrument in years, but I still remember that every good boy deserves fudge.

But even more, humor helps us to solve problems because it gets the brain going and warms us up. In fact, I can help you all warm up a few neurons right now with a simple joke. How would Sherlock respond if Watson asked, what's the grade before middle school? Naturally, he'd say, it's elementary, my dear Watson.

Just by making a simple joke, our brain starts making connections and in the process releases a chemical serotonin which not only increases our focus but also improves our own brain power. And if you laughed at that joke, then congratulations, you just burned half of a calorie. Which is really only 15% of a single M&M, but still.

If you laugh for 10 to 15 minutes and you burn as many calories as 5 minutes of aerobic exercise, 10 minutes of dancing, and 15 minutes of milking a cow. So if you've been out sneaking into farms to exercise, stop. Just laugh for 10 minutes instead and you do that for a year, you'll lose up to 4 pounds.

You do that for a lifetime and you'll increase resiliency, reduce tension, and relax your muscles. Not only that, once you are more productive and less stressed, you actually make more money. In fact, in a study put on by the Harvard Business Review, it found that executives who use humor are paid more and promoted faster.

And money may not buy happiness, but relationships might. Because people who have three close friends at work are 96% more likely to be satisfied with their lives. Not just satisfied with their work, but satisfied with their lives.

And how do you get close friends? Money. I'm just kidding. You use humor.

Because humor connects people. It builds trust, diffuses tension, and creates positive shared experiences that bring people closer together. And you start to realize that the people around you aren't just co-workers, students, or professors, but they're actual human beings with human lives and human emotions.

And that's the power of humor. It not only helps you, but the people around you. A few years after my conversation with Sarah the Ewok, I decided that I was going to leave P&G to start my own company.

Since then, I've worked with hundreds of organizations across the United States on how to be more effective using humor. I've also learned that only one third of people use humor at work regularly. I wanted to understand why, so I ran a study through my website and nearly 400 people responded.

The first reason people don't use humor is because they don't think their boss or co-workers would approve. When humor isn't part of your normal workday, you start to assume that it's not welcome. But 81% of employees say a fun workplace would make them more productive, and 98% of CEOs prefer job candidates with a sense of humor.

The second reason why people don't use humor is that they don't know how. Because when you think about humor and you think that it means laughter, then it can seem intimidating. But humor is different than comedy.

Humor is defined as a comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement. So while laughter is great, a smile is also good. It's not about making work funny, but making work fun.

So if you think fun, you think positive, and you think inclusive, you're on your way to being a corporate rock star. The final reason is that people say they don't have time. They don't have time.

There are 168 hours in a week. If you average seven hours of sleep per night, you spend 49 of them sleeping. That leaves 119 hours per week that you're awake.

If you work an average of 40 hours per week, that's 33.6% of your adult life spent at work. You don't have time to make one third of your adult waking life more enjoyable. The truth is that every single day you choose if you're going to be more productive and less stressed.

You choose if you're going to do the things that will get you paid more, and you choose if you're going to be happy. With one third of your life on the line, why not choose humor at work? Thank you.