

# Here's How Laughter Could Boost Your Workplace Performance

**How often do you laugh at work?**

**Do you see leaders and co-workers laugh?**

**What does the sound of laughter at work mean to you?**

Decades of research and hundreds of studies have shown the wide-ranging health benefits of laughter. When we laugh, we inhale oxygen-rich air which stimulates our heart, lungs, and muscles, and our bodies release endorphins that promote a stronger immune system. Even smiling creates positive changes in the body. No matter what your role, laughter is a wonderful prescription for well-being at work. Smiles and laughter are some of the best tools in your workbag for success. Laughter is everywhere. No matter which geographic area, country or culture you work in, you are guaranteed to encounter it. Laughter through humour (when used effectively) can prevent burnout, create resilience to stress, release tension and relax people. Relaxed and happy people are more creative and open to working with each other and this boosts productivity. When you genuinely laugh with co-workers, clients or customers, there is connection and more reception to ideas. Positive sounds of laughter can trigger a response in the listener's brain, priming them to smile or laugh too and aiding connection with the other person. Shared laughter promotes relationship well-being. Relaxation that results from a bout of laughter reduces the stress response and triggers the release of endorphins that help workers to feel even more relaxed, both physically and emotionally. Those who are high in humour-related character traits are reported to leverage higher levels of positive affect in stressful situations and see a potentially stressful event as a positive challenge rather than a threat.

**A genuine smile?**

Smiling with your eyes as well as your mouth (a Duchenne smile) can help lift your mood, calm you down, and strengthen your connections with other people. Such a smile is quite persuasive and often associated with positive customer service experiences. Do you flash a fake smile at work? Perhaps you do it to get through the working day, to hide your inner unhappiness, or because you have been asked to smile more at your customers? Research suggests that it may have unexpected consequences, such as worsening your mood and causing you to withdraw from the tasks at hand. Workers were found to have worse moods when they engaged in fake smiling, known as 'surface acting', as opposed to 'deep acting' where they generated genuine smiles through positive thoughts. Smiling for the sake of smiling can lead to emotional exhaustion and withdrawal and is not great for organisations. Research has shown that, when workers smiled, through heartfelt means (by cultivating pleasant thoughts and memories), their moods improved and their productivity increased. It can do the same for you.

## **Here is an exercise to practice a genuine smile:**

A genuine smile is a specific type of positive facial expression which allows people to feel more at ease. Practice in a mirror or with a partner. First, visualise someone you deeply care for/love or recall an event or other memory that brought you deep satisfaction and joy. This will aid natural happiness and produce positive feelings in you. You will know when your smile is genuine because you will feel happy and relaxed.

Laughter and teams

Laughter has been described by Apte (1985) as occurring when “people are comfortable with one another, when they feel open and free. And the more laughter there is, the more bonding occurs within the group.”

Laughter and humour can serve as a useful measure of just how healthy and well-functioning a team or workplace is. Laughter around the office likely indicates that people are getting along, are highly motivated and work in a positive, open and supportive atmosphere. Laughter can be viewed as the sound of bonding and collaboration, great signs of a productive team. A habit of genuinely smiling more at work can force your brain to associate this positivity with your workplace, therefore increasing the satisfaction that you feel with your job. Smiles are contagious and create harmony among co-workers. A sincere smile to one co-worker can create a chain effect of kindness and warmth and convey confidence in your abilities.

## **Groups, laughter and success**

Johnson (2020) shared that: “Groups work best when they have somebody who takes on the role of class clown. These are people that have the ability to pull everyone together, bridge gaps when tensions appear and really boost morale. We can all think of the person at work who fulfils this role, who makes us laugh and makes the job more enjoyable. People like being around them.” The study of isolated groups of people in extreme environments has shown that missions have reached success because of the presence of happy, humorous traits. One example is the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, who succeeded in reaching the South Pole because the Norwegians had a jolly ‘clown’ figure on their team, who brought people together. Amundsen’s cook, Adolf Lindstrom, was described as someone who laughed and kept up morale.

Laughter, humour and leadership One way to describe a great leader is one who seeks every opportunity to communicate with others, mentor them and clarify team objectives. The ability to use humour effectively has been identified in both popular and academic literature as an important aspect of ‘good’ leadership. As a leader, if you can access genuine smiles, you can contribute to healthy communication, draw people to you and generate positivity. A smile with an upbeat outlook can help others feel more relaxed and able to be themselves, fostering a nurturing work environment that supports excellence. Studies have also found that dominant individuals such as a manager (or a tribal chiefs or the head of the family) use humour more than their subordinates. This encourages a scenario when everyone in the office laughs when the boss laughs.

Controlling the laughter of a group can become a way of exercising power by controlling its emotional climate. Laughter, like much human behaviour, is said to have evolved to change the behaviour of others. For example, in an embarrassing or threatening situation, laughter may serve as a calming gesture or a way to deflect anger. If the threatening person joins the laughter, the risk of dispute may lessen. The effective use of workplace humour to generate new ideas and stimulate intellectual progress is strongly associated with what has been labelled 'transformational' leadership. Transformational leadership describes leaders who are said to model integrity and fairness, establish clear goals, encourage, provide support and recognition, and inspire people to buy into and deliver the set vision. Transformational leaders who utilise humour are more effective in winning trust and commitment from their followers.

With leaders who set clear expectations related to goals and rewards, humour increases their effectiveness. But not every leadership style is suited to humour, especially when aggressive humour is employed. In organisations, excessively aggressive humour could involve ridiculing others, and mild aggressive humour in the workplace includes using sarcasm and teasing to convey disapproving information to followers (e.g., saying 'X, you seem so busy' to sarcastically convey a message that X is not putting in enough effort). Aggressive humour is a form of unfavourable and even hostile behaviour. For example, sarcasm, even humorous sarcasm, is often associated with increased interpersonal conflict in a workgroup because it conveys disapproval, contempt and scorn. When a leader has a strong sense of humour but tends to use it in an aggressive manner, it leads to more deviant behaviour and creates a feeling of exclusion. For the targets of aggressive humour, the results are often negative impacts on their private and professional lives, such as those related to performance, attendance, safety and health.

### **Self-efficacy and laughter**

Self-efficacy is your belief in your capability to succeed and manage prospective situations, and it affects your performance in the workplace. It is an important topic, as self-efficacy can have an impact on everything from mental well-being and behaviour to motivation and more. Your belief in your own abilities plays a role in how you think, how you act and how you feel about your place at work and beyond. Bandura (1997) shares how self-efficacy determines what goals you choose to pursue, how you go about accomplishing them and how you reflect upon your own performance. The good news is that self-efficacy is a skill that you can improve upon, even in a fun way... using laughter.

A study by Beckman et al. (2007) described how employees were engaged in a guided programme of non-humour-dependent laughter. It was found that the workers demonstrated a significant increase in several aspects of self-efficacy, including self-regulation, optimism, positive emotions and social identification, and they maintained these gains at a later follow-up. Laughter has been found to improve self-efficacy AND lower the level of stress hormones in workers from different cultures, including Danish, American and Indian employees. "Purposeful laughter is a realistic, sustainable, and generalizable intervention that enhances employees' morale, resilience, and personal efficacy beliefs." said Beckman et al (2007).

## **Creativity can be enhanced by laughter and humour**

“A playful, light-hearted, and humorous environment is especially helpful when ideas are incubating and newly hatched, the phase when they are most vulnerable to being snuffed out or even expressed because of being judged or self-censored.” – Sims (2011).

“Laughter can help people solve problems that demand creative solutions, by making it easier to think more broadly and associate ideas/relationships more freely.” – Goleman (1995)

Dopamine (one of the four major chemicals in the brain that influence our happiness) released by a smile is involved in learning, processing and decision-making, allowing for heightened creativity.

Humour can help people be more creative in problem-solving. Laughter helps colleagues relax around each other and this creates a playful environment that cultivates curiosity and enhances creativity. I have noticed that laughter and humour give people permission to express their own unique creative voices more easily. They provide a chance to see things from a new perspective and this aids divergent thinking. Divergent thinking (also called Creative or Horizontal Thinking) is a method used to generate creative ideas by exploring many possible solutions and is a spontaneous, free-flowing, nonlinear thinking process. Jokes and other types of humour use language or items incorrectly or show them from different angles in order to raise laughter – essentially a divergent thinking exercise. When you're thinking divergently, you're looking at things from new perspectives and finding new uses for common ideas and objects. Divergent thinking can rewrite rules and question everything. Humour uses and encourages this kind of thought.

### **Laughter and learning**

Laughter stimulates many regions of the brain and, together with humour, this releases tension and leads to more creativity, which benefits teaching and learning. The inclusion of humour assists the promotion of understanding, holds the attention of students, creates a positive attitude to the subject matter and reduces anxiety. Humour, provided it is not used to excess, can increase attention and interest and helps to illustrate and reinforce what is being taught. It activates the brain's dopamine reward system, stimulating goal-oriented motivation and long-term memory. Carlson (2011) describes humour as being able to “improve retention in students of all ages.”

## **Workplace laughter yoga**

Laughter yoga is a great workplace well-being initiative. Google and the BBC are just a couple of companies that have organised laughter sessions, leaving participants feeling happier and more relaxed. Opportunities to laugh together at work can promote positive interactions, especially before having difficult or conflict-prone conversations. Shared laughter could be incorporated into staff meetings to make people feel more on the same page and aid productivity. Laughter yoga is based on laughing with (not at) other people, and is done without joke-telling. Both of these principles are useful to refer to when trying to practise 'safe humour' in the workplace – humour that builds rather than divides relationships. The practice consists of group activities designed to lengthen laughter, with zero bendy body positions and zero jokes. The "yoga" element refers to the healthy breathwork that takes place with lengthened laughter. Sessions can be run seated or with movement. Prolonged laughter leads to more oxygen uptake, which improves efficiency, mental focus and concentration. It can also improve your self-efficacy for increased performance. Furthermore, laughter yoga connects you with colleagues in a non-competitive environment and improves relationships by providing opportunities for team bonding and team building. Laughter yoga is a fun way to generate optimism and positivity to cope with challenging times.

## **Laughter with Lawyers**

Teresa J. Payne, Solicitor and Managing Partner at Parfitt Cresswell shared her experience of workplace laughter yoga:

"If there was one very simple technique you could use to create contentment and happiness; to improve your mental health and lower stress levels; to enhance your performance and career, and to build stronger teams that connect with each other and work collaboratively to achieve common goals and increase productivity – how much would you pay to get your hands on it? Now, if someone says that you can have all of the above just by understanding the power of a smile and laughing, would you believe them? Well, when I first met Sam Rehan and she spoke about laughter yoga I wasn't sure what to think. Laughter was not something that I had associated with achievement or success and it was something that belonged in one's personal life that occasionally saw the light of day. I certainly wasn't consciously aware of how powerful a resource it is. The truth is, that it is one of the hidden keys that helps us to connect with ourselves and other people and enables us to form strong bonds with each other. We have witnessed and experienced the power of laughter within two of our organisations. The first was at one of our Connections2b Business Lunch Clubs where a group of around 40 people came together – many of whom were attending for the first time – and after a session of laughter yoga the commonality shared by the group during the session remained with them and they were able to network with confidence and as friends, rather than strangers meeting for the first time. We were so impressed with the impact and success laughter yoga had at the networking group that we wanted to test it to see whether it would have the same powerful impact within our law firm when we brought two teams of 35 junior and senior lawyers together for the first time. The introductory meeting was important as we had recently acquired another law firm and we were keen for the new team to feel part of our organisation and that this was their new 'work home'. Sam Rehan delivered her workplace laughter yoga session to an initially apprehensive group of lawyers where laughter was not part of their daily work routine.

What we witnessed and experienced as Sam guided us through the exercises was a tangible sense of us all opening up from being rather reserved and feeling a little self-conscious to embracing and owning our commonality of laughter. The invisible barriers that had been in place at the start of the meeting were lowered (and in many cases removed altogether) allowing relationships to develop and the foundation of the new larger team was formed. In the workplace, building great teams is essential to the success of a business and laughter helped us take a big leap forward in creating this new team. This book shines a light on the well-kept secret of the role laughter plays in our lives – from the benefit of a smile to the impact laughter has on team building and productivity in a business environment. Sam shows the practical benefits and steps to take to achieve more laughter in our lives and also explains the science behind why it works – from the impact laughter has on our breathing, to the chemicals released in our brain which regulate our mood and emotions. Understanding and implementing this powerful, freely available resource will help you create the happiness and success you seek in your personal and business life. It's a foundational pillar that supports and enhances the relationship you have with yourself and others which leads to us having the life and business we desire.”

Read more about the wide-ranging benefits of laughter in Sam's book *Laugh More: Soar in Your Health, Career and Relationships*. Available in print and audio. Sam is a corporate wellness trainer and professional Laughter Facilitator, with a background in science. She gently prolongs laughter in others as part of her well-being workplace sessions. With her years of experience, she is able to set the right mood and facilitate laughter sessions to be suitable for everyone.

Sam energises employees and executives, leading to happier, healthier, more creative and productive organisations. She invites laughter without forcing it! Get in touch at [hello@samrehan.com](mailto:hello@samrehan.com) to find out more.

“If you can laugh together, you can work together.” – Robert Orben