

Lead With Laughter: How Humor Can Positively Transform A Work Enviroment

Dr. Rob Fazio

Dr. Rob Fazio, [OnPoint Advising](#), has over 20 years of experience advising on power, influence, and motivation with elite and emerging talent

Our minds are very good at finding ways to worry at work. Think about it.

Actually, don't think about it, because that's part of the problem. We think about it too much.

In [*Psychology Today*](#), Mark Leary, Ph.D., explains how over thousands of years, we have shifted from focusing on the present to obsessing about the future. We think so much about "what if" that we don't realize the negative toll of letting our worries wander.

That's why we need to replace our worry with humor. That's right. Enjoying work — or taking it a step further, *laughing* at work — has a positive impact on you and the people around you.

I first became interested in the impact of worry and stress in the workplace when my father had a quadruple bypass at the age of 45. Despite his best efforts, I saw how the stress of his job and having a bad boss impacted his life. Perhaps that's what led to my passion for helping people realize they have the power to worry less and enjoy more.

The Business Case For Laughing

We know from [Gallup](#) that when people focus on their strengths, engagement increases. What's even more impactful is the relationship Fabio Sala noted in [*Harvard Business Review*](#) between executives who used humor in the workplace and the bonuses they received. The “funnier” an executive was, the higher the bonus. I'd say that's an incentive to not only allow humor in the workplace but to create a climate where enjoyment and humor are encouraged.

There are clear benefits of humor in the workplace: less burnout, higher probability of learning, more collaboration, faster recovery from stressful situations and an increase in overall work effectiveness. As a leader, my guess is that you would take the opportunity to increase the probability of any of these benefits.

One reason humor is so beneficial is because you can't experience two emotions at once. If you are laughing or feeling enjoyment, you can't be feeling pressured or stressed. It's like a mini vacation. That mini vacation resets our emotional battery, and we all know how important it is to keep our batteries charged.

How To Use Humor At Work

Now that we understand why humor is important, let's move onto how you can integrate it into your workplace. [Researchers](#) have learned that humor can help people recover from stressful situations. While there is no lack of stressful or political situations at work, there is a lack of solutions to stress.

Build recreational areas into your workspace and organize fun events with the purpose of leveraging humor to buffer stress and increase morale, productivity and persistence. Some examples of companies that have put this practice in place are [Zappos](#) and [Google](#).

Something you can even do as soon as today that's simple and has an impact is to start presentations by notifying your audience of your intentions. You can say something like, "Please don't mistake my use of humor as a lack of focus on achieving our objectives. I believe we can laugh and learn, and by enjoying our work together, you are more likely to be open to learning and will retain the information longer because you'll have a positive emotional experience."

Another humor strategy is to use video to give people an emotional "vacation." According to [research](#) done by psychological scientists David Cheng and Lu Wang, people who watched a funny video before completing a tedious task had "increased persistence" in performing that task. You can apply this in your own business by encouraging people to watch funny videos or showing them yourself, so long as they are appropriate.

'What If I'm Just Not Funny?'

Let me be clear: You don't have to be a comedian to have humor help you. If you are in a position of power and you aren't naturally witty, no need to panic. You can still create an environment where people are allowed to laugh.

One thing you can do is ask your people ahead of time to start team meetings with G-rated jokes or funny stories. This shows that you appreciate how humor can lead to success and provides other people with the opportunity to contribute to a positive work environment.

Sarcasm can be an effective tool, but it can also send mixed messages. Steer clear from delivering important messages via sarcasm. Given our cultural norms, many people might think that things said in jest are true statements. If something is important and you want to send a clear message that's helpful rather than hurtful, skip the humor and sarcasm. You can be clear and kind at the same time. Ensure that your intention matches your impact.

The reality is humor gives our brains a break — a break from worrying about what's next. It's also the closest connection between two people. When you're laughing, you aren't worrying or focusing on what may or may not happen. You are in the moment, and that mental moment helps you feel refreshed.

In my experience, people fear humor in the workplace because of the common belief that if you're laughing, you aren't learning or working. That's just not true. You can laugh and learn, and maybe even learn *more* because people are open. It's a balance of focusing on what needs to be done and encouraging fun.