

Lighten Up: Laughter in the Workplace Can Pay Off

It's been a challenging time, but, perhaps more than ever, laughter is often the best medicine. And now scientific research shows that you shouldn't leave humor behind when you get to work. In fact, as Sean Fleming reports on the World Economic Forum website, two Stanford University professors have found that laughter on the job makes us better employees. They came to their conclusions based on a study of 1.4 million people in 166 countries.

Among other things, they found that people everywhere begin to laugh less around the age of 23. This "collective loss of our sense of humor," the researchers say, is a serious problem afflicting people and organizations worldwide.

Many people believe that humor has no place amid serious work. They fear that using it will hurt their credibility and lead to them not being taken seriously. According to the researchers, though, the opposite is true—humor at work can increase people's respect for you. Large-scale studies find the vast majority of leaders prefer employees with a sense of humor and think they do better work.

Humor builds bonds, unlocks confidence, and sparks creativity. Laughter also reduces stress hormones, while boosting endorphins and the immune system. Humor can play an especially critical role in maintaining cohesion when people work remotely — as many more are doing these days. Working at home can otherwise cause feelings of disconnectedness and isolation.

Notably, the researchers say that you can add more humor without being funny yourself. The key, they say, is to be open to humor. "It's not about being a comedian," one said. "It's about joy over jokes."



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6 Steps to Improve Your Prospects with Active Listening

Hello? Are you listening? Good—because, while they might not receive a lot of attention, listening skills are among those prized by employers. So, if you want to get ahead in your job, you should learn how to practice "active listening," what Monster.com contributor Daniel Bortz describes as "absorbing, comprehending, responding, and retaining what is being said."

Bortz says active listening is a secret weapon for building professional relationships and improving productivity. He lays out several tips for sharpening your listening skills.

1. Look for nonverbal cues. It's not just about words, Bortz says. You also need to pay attention to body language and nonverbal cues.

Positive nonverbal signs include direct eye contact, relaxed facial muscles, friendly smiles, open arms, and relaxed hands. On the flip side, take heed of negative signs such as rapid eye movement, cold or glazed-over expressions, a raised eyebrow indicating doubt, tight facial muscles, stiff smiles, closed hands, crossed arms, or fidgeting.

2. Watch your signaling. Conversely, you also need to think about your own body language. To indicate that you're tuned in, Bortz says, you should face the speaker and maintain eye contact 60-70 percent of the time (any more can make the speaker uncomfortable). Smile, lean in, and nod your head at appropriate times. Don't fold your arms.

3. Don't interrupt. Silence is undervalued. As Bortz points out, no one likes to be interrupted. Don't try to finish the speaker's sentences or jump in to interject an idea. That can be easier said than done, so Bortz suggests giving yourself a physical reminder by closing your mouth tight until it's your turn to speak.

4. Seek clarification. If something is unclear, don't hesitate to confirm your understanding. You could, for example, summarize your impression after saying, "I just want to be sure I heard everything correctly." Or apologize and ask the person to repeat. Don't take a negative approach, such as "I don't follow you" or "Can you repeat that? You're talking too fast."

5. Ask questions. Similarly, Bortz says you shouldn't be shy about asking questions in general—it shows you're paying attention to what the speaker is saying. Your goal should be to ask questions that will take the discussion to a deeper level. For example, when your manager gives you constructive criticism, you can say, "Thank you for the feedback. Can you tell me a little more about how you're going to measure my performance going forward?"

6. Limit distractions. To stay focused on the person speaking, you should put away your phone or at least put it in airplane mode; glancing at your notifications undermines the respect that is a hallmark of active listening. Try to have conversations in quiet, private spaces, and let others know you're temporarily unavailable (for example, with a "do not disturb" sign on your door). If you just can't be fully present for a conversation because you're too busy, tell the person trying to engage you that you're swamped and schedule a time to chat in the near future.

What's the Best Way to Say "Thank You"?

The simple act of expressing appreciation, writes Mack Gelber on Monster.com, can be "surprisingly complicated." The appropriate method depends on multiple factors, including what you're thanking the person for and how well you know him or her. Gelber outlines four options for thanking someone.

The Email: Gelber says a short email is all you usually need in most professional settings—a one- or two-sentence message when you don't personally know the recipient but follow-up of some kind is necessary. Even if your meeting, for example, didn't produce the result you'd hoped (such as a promotion), send a quick email mailing thanking the person for their time to make a good impression for the future.

The Handwritten Note: If someone did recommend you for a promotion or took similar action on your behalf, Gelber suggests "classing up" your thank-you with a handwritten note on nice stationery. He cites an etiquette expert who advises a handwritten note even for standard follow-up, after the quick email. It helps you stand out and gets your name in front of the recipient twice.

The Gift: Gelber describes a gift as "the upper echelon" of appreciation, one that requires some real thought. Gifts are appropriate for people who directly contribute to something that benefits you. Don't go overboard, though—think wine, flowers, or a gift card to a favorite restaurant or store.

The Dinner: A meal demonstrates you're willing to spend some of your own time to show your appreciation. But keep the venue appropriate to the magnitude of the favor you're recognizing. A four-star restaurant is probably over the top for some advice. Gelber advises reserving meal thank-yous for people you know personally who helped you in a tangible, meaningful way.



Help for Hanging in There This Winter

February often is a tough month, with winter dragging on and little relief in sight. The lingering COVID-19 threat may make this February particularly discouraging. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers some advice on coping with stress and building resilience during the pandemic, including the following:

- Communicate with your coworkers, supervisors, and employees about job stress while maintaining social distancing.
- Ask about how to access mental health resources in your workplace.
- Increase your sense of control by developing a consistent daily routine when possible, ideally one similar to your schedule before the pandemic. If you work from home, set a regular time to end your work for the day, if possible.
- Keep a regular sleep schedule.
- Spend time outdoors, either being physically active or relaxing.
- Know the facts about COVID-19. Be informed about how to protect yourself and others.
- Remind yourself that everyone is in an unusual situation with limited resources.
- Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media.
- Connect with others. Talk with people you trust about your concerns, how you are feeling, or how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting you.
- Check on others. Helping others improves your sense of control, belonging, and self-esteem. Look for safe ways to offer social support to others, especially if they are showing signs of stress, such as depression and anxiety.

13 Fun Facts About Presidents and Presidents Day

Presidents Day is Feb. 15th this year. While it's easy to think of it as just a day off, the holiday has an interesting history. Here are some things you might not know, courtesy of the National Park Foundation:

1. Presidents Day is celebrated on the third Monday in February, thanks to the 1968 Uniform Monday Holiday Act that helped create more three-day weekends for workers.
2. It was established in 1885 in honor of President George Washington's birthday.
3. Washington's birthday was actually on Feb. 22, 1732.
4. Washington's birthplace is a national monument and is located in Colonial Beach, Va.
5. The holiday is still officially called Washington's Birthday by the federal government.
6. The government debated renaming the holiday to Presidents Day to include President Abraham Lincoln's birthday, but the proposal failed.
7. Lincoln's birthday was actually on Feb. 12, 1809.
8. Lincoln's birthplace is a national historical park located in Hodgenville, Ky.
9. President Theodore Roosevelt has the most national parks named in his honor.
10. Lincoln is a close runner-up for that title.
11. Adams National Historical Park was the birthplace of two presidents: John Adams and John Quincy Adams
12. The most recent presidential birthplace added to the National Park System is that of Bill Clinton.
13. There are 35 parks named after American presidents and one park that celebrates four of them (but it's named after Charles Rushmore, a New York attorney).