

Investor's Business Daily

April 10, 2008 Thursday
NATIONAL EDITION

NEVER STOP LEARNING Lighten Up By Laughing

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SECTION: LEADERS & SUCCESS; IBD'S 10 SECRETS TO SUCCESS; Pg. A03

LENGTH: 491 words

4 Go ahead and laugh. Seriously. It's good for business. Fun workplaces have more loyal employees and customers, say Adrian Gostick and Scott Christopher, authors of "The **Levity Effect**: Why It Pays to Lighten Up." They also point to research that shows execs with a sense of humor climb the corporate ladder fast and earn top money.

"If you're demanding, you can drive people for a short period," Gostick told IBD. "But if you're fun, you have them for the long haul."

Karyn Buxman, a humor therapist who has consulted with many businesses, says firms must create an entertaining workplace.

"Starbucks spends more on health-related issues (such as stress) than on coffee," she said. "Humor is one of the cheapest and healthiest coping mechanisms."

Learn from other companies reaping the rewards of humor:

** Set the tone. Gostick says leaders in even the most serious industries, such as medical and engineering, can loosen up. "Allow humor and fun to happen. Don't sit there with your jaw clenched while people are making merry."

** Create habit. Use humor daily, Buxman says. "Memos can be written in the style of Letterman's Top 10 lists, for example. I put one humorous thing, like a famous quote, in every e-mail I send out."

** Spend little. Fun doesn't have to cost much. Boeing tests missile-tracking systems with toy rockets in their parking lot full of cheering crowds. Whole Foods encourages workers to doodle on its break room chalkboard. And KPMG invites employees to upload fun vacation photos for the chance to win prizes.

** Be sporty. Web sites such as holiday insights.com offer wacky ideas for celebration, Buxman adds. April 10, for example, is Golfer's Day. Why not set up a mini-golf course in the office during lunch?

** Make it matter. Popping up with an ice cream social to give everyone a break sounds nice. But imagine the eye-rolling when people figure they'll need to stay late to catch up on work.

Solution: Tie celebrations to work, Gostick says. Coffee and cookies for everyone at a 3 o'clock product launch is meaningful and enjoyable.

** Set standards. Humor is risky, Buxman admits. Consider the bond you have with the person you're sharing humor with. The better your relationship, the less risky your humor will be. If in doubt, keep humor clean and self-effacing.

Keep in mind that plenty of people might see and hear your humor, even if you don't intend it.

"Notice if your door's ajar," Buxman said. "Remember that e-mail can be forwarded with your name in the memo field."

** Hire happy. All of the above tips are easier to learn if you don't hire the grim reapers of the world. Screen out folks who are overly serious, Gostick says.

Ask simple questions at job interviews, such as:

"When was last time you used levity in the workplace to diffuse a tough situation?"

"How did you bring lightness or create a fun activity to enhance morale or increase productivity?"

"Look who has a smile in their voice and eyes," Gostick said.