



The Uh-Oh Squad: A Workplace Innovation

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Here is an unexpected prescription for boosting productivity at work: work less and play more. As T. George Harris and Robert Trotter, concluded in a report in the March, 1989 *Psychology Today* magazine, “You don’t have to work like a dog to get more done. Build your effectiveness on play and fantasy”. The report announced that “the new American worker (who had been) driven by work-for-money-only model had already eroded by the late 60’s.” They said that, “It seems a bit odd to suggest... but the human spirit, strangely and wondrously made, always turns out to be a surprise.” Well, that was no surprise to me nor to the dozens of professionals around the world who comprise the loosely affiliated humor-use movement.

During the Question & Answer sessions at my seminars on *Putting Humor to Work at Work*, the most frequently asked question is, “But, what can I do about my negative boss?” It amounts to a significant problem in the American workplace today. The participants frequently give testimony citing horror-story examples of negative supervisors on the job: some who never smile or laugh; many who punish employees who appear to be having 'too much fun'; and, some who only laugh at their own jokes--and insist everybody else laugh at them, too. One woman described her boss as a man whose facial expression was so grim that it made her wonder if, as a child, he might have been weaned on a sour pickle.

The Problems With Negative Supervisors

Among other things, a “negative” boss is one who shows very little sense of humor. He/she does not roll with the punches when there are problems, yells, belittles subordinates, and generally take out their frustrations on everyone within earshot. They are rigid, grim, overly serious, and react with anger and fierceness when things go wrong. They have been known to frighten employees because their tempers flare up so suddenly that they seem to be out of control. The only thing about them that is predictable is that they are unpredictable. They are fine examples of bad examples, and models of unbalanced perspectives and personalities.

They do not honor or respect the value, imperfection, vulnerability, individuality, or the spirit of the people at work. Many workers tell me, and my own experience confirms, there are plenty of these nasty bosses out in the world of work, impeding the

health, satisfaction, and productivity of their employees and their businesses. They contribute to low morale and high turnover. They are a throw-back to the early days of the industrial revolution when poorly trained, unskilled labor was plentiful and treated as disposable. The boss was king. Owners and managers created layer upon layer of the hierarchical organization. Managers were the only people rewarded for performance.

Under this kind of regime employees develop some of the worst possible work habits and attitudes: they lie and cover up errors and spoilage, they suffer more frequent stress-related illnesses, they don't figure out how to do their job better, and they adopt the attitude of 'every man for himself'. Success in a modern company--whether it is involved in sales, manufacturing, or service requires workers to have very different set of habits and skills. Success in today's global marketplace requires management to reward every employee --not only the managers-- for the contribution as well as their performance.

Old Vs. New Attitudes

1) OLD ATTITUDE: PROTECT YOURSELF EVEN IF YOU HAVE TO LIE. When a supervisor's reaction is strong, vocal and negative when things go wrong, then workers who fear that wrath will take the obvious way of avoiding the punitive attitude: they do whatever they can to avoid reporting problems. This shows up as broken equipment which is returned to the supply closet because a worker "forgot" to turn in a repair order, or passing problem documents and customers' complaints like hot potatoes from department to department. By the time the problem is discovered, it is much more time-consuming and costly to repair than if it had been reported immediately.

NEW ATTITUDE: RAPID, ACCURATE COMMUNICATIONS, nip the problem in the bud, learn from mistakes, make corrections quickly and move forward. The performance of the team, and the subsequent rewards, depends on it.

2) OLD ATTITUDE: WORRIED SICK. Those negative bosses have a way of transferring their hostility, impatience, and intolerance to their employees. It shows up in the workers as anxiety, worry, and stress. Because of the mind-body connection, it is literally possible to be worried sick about the boss's reaction, causing a worker to need one or more days of sick leave. It is almost impossible to completely make up for the lost productivity due to having to take time off from work.

NEW ATTITUDE: RELAX, THE BOSS IS ON OUR SIDE. Modern managers are skilled human relations experts. They are educated about the psychology of human nature, the importance of self-esteem, how people learn, methods of motivation, and the high costs of stress-related illnesses. The multi-layered hierarchy has given way to a flattened organization chart. The 'boss' provides support, inspiration and leadership; the best ones adopt the role of servant-leader. In fact, the 'boss' may actually be one of 'us', rotating leadership in a self-directed work team. The company takes an active role in the 'wellness' of employees. Happy employee --having fun occasionally-- are healthy employees --on the job and productive, not at home on sick leave.

3) OLD ATTITUDE: DO AS I SAY (NO NEW LEARNING). The way our brains work, it is easiest for us to absorb and retain new information when we are in a positive frame of mind. The lesson is wasted when an angry supervisor berates an employee and then tries to teach him or her how to do the job properly. The negativity of the boss is transferred to the worker and part of the worker's brain will not function to absorb and learn the new information. Then the next time the problem arises - and there

will certainly be a next time - the worker is no better prepared to solve it than he was the first time.

NEW ATTITUDES: MISTAKES ARE TREATED AS OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN AND GROW. We've replaced the guillotine with the training seminar. The entire organization is viewed as a living organism that must learn, change, grow, and adapt, or die. There are career paths for everyone who wants one. Training and education keep the organization and the employees more productive than ranting and raving at them. All companies try to make people into better employees, but the best companies make employees into better people.

4) OLD ATTITUDE: LOWER MORALE AND NO TEAMWORK. Any time that the leadership or management of an organization is perceived by the employees as having 'negative' attitudes (e.g., they don't listen, don't care, are pushy, egotistical, know-it-all; stingy about giving recognition) the workers are less motivated to produce. When employees are fearful or resentful, work gets sloppy, the error rate increases, turnover increases, communication breaks down, and sabotage occurs.

THE NEW ATTITUDE: "Firings will continue until morale improves" has become a tired, old joke and, if actually implemented, it would be an economic disaster. The smartest and most successful companies go to great lengths to keep morale at the highest levels. One of the most often cited examples is the phenomenally successful Southwest Airlines which, while encouraging employees to have fun, has propelled itself to the rank Number One in the airline industry. Boardroom, Inc., Greenwich, Connecticut, a publisher of personal development materials, went from \$25 million to \$100 million annually, in just four years, when it invented a fun way to reward employees for consistently contributing to improvements. And, in one study of stock price performance, the researchers referred to such companies as the 'high morale universe'.

An Innovation For New Attitude Organizations

While brainstorming ways employees could counter stress-filled old-attitude environments, I invented *The Uh-Oh Squad*, a terrific way to support an organization or a work group that wants to develop new attitudes.

"Uh-Oh" situations happen every day. We all have them. You know you are in an "Uh-Oh" situation because you get a certain feeling in the pit of your stomach and a voice in your head says, "Uh-Oh". These are signals of impending stress. If you don't do something constructive, your brain chemistry will change (the *fight-or-flight* response) causing you to lose your usual clear thinking, worry will set in, followed by reduced effectiveness and, possibly, illness. You can now counteract all this by forming an *Uh-Oh Squad* in your department at work. Here is how you do it.

The official equipment of the *Uh-Oh Squad* is a red, sponge-rubber clown nose. You will want to obtain these and issue them as personal equipment for each member of the squad. They keep it at-the-ready in a desk drawer or locker. Whenever anyone working in your department finds themselves in an "Uh-Oh" situation, they issue the "Uh-Oh Alert" by calling out loud and clear, "*I need the Uh-Oh Squad!!!*" Everyone within earshot stops whatever they are doing, gets their equipment (clown noses) and gathers around the person who issued the alert. They all put on their equipment, stand

around the person and the problem and, together, chant four times, “Uh-Oh! Uh-Oh! Uh-Oh! Uh-Oh!” with great mock bewilderment. All of this takes about 30 seconds.

Why the *Uh-Oh Squad* Works

The *Uh-Oh Squad* works because it invites laughter in an environment of support and understanding. The jovial responsiveness of the squad, the red noses, the group effort, and the ensuing laughter all combine to remind you to keep your perspective in balance, take a deep breath, feel the support of the group, solve the problem, stay healthy, and keep on being productive. In the face of mistakes and setbacks, the laughter and camaraderie will help you to pull together rather than fall apart. What you actually create is a combination of psychological 'anchors' or reminders, which help people remember to use relaxation techniques, group support, and plus laughter to maintain health and a positive working environment.

Dr. Madan Kataria, a Bombay physician prescribes a yogic practice he calls laughter therapy as "one of the finest anti-stress measures ideally suited for today's stress-ridden life." Dr. Kataria's method --laughter without jokes-- combines elements of breathing exercises similar Pranayam in Yoga with exercises called Kapalhati in which there is rhythmic movement of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles, all taking place in a large group setting. In laughter therapy, he says, there are instant results, such as an immediate feeling of freshness. "Many people have found that they don't get irritated over small things after starting this therapy."

Which kind of activities should you promote in your company: those that cause employees to worry, fret, and falsify reports, or those that leave the employees feeling refreshed, less likely to get upset by the small stuff, less stressed, and have a better outlook on life?

This is how Gloria Steinem, in "Revolution From Within: A Book of Self-Esteem," Little, Brown and Company, 1993, summarized some of the healthful effects of laughter:

"Students of physical illness have learned that laughter can be literally health-giving. Even limited experiments in which one group of patients watched a laughter-inspiring film and another group did not have shown that the immune systems of the first group became measurably stronger for a period of hours afterward. Laughing also calls up endorphins, the body's natural shields against pain, with none of the side effects that artificial painkillers bring with them (for instance, suppression of protective cells that impede the growth of tumors). Norman Cousins, who was a modern-day prophet of laughter, discovered its beneficial effects during a long and life-threatening illness. A few minutes of laughter gave him a few hours of pain-free sleep without medications and strengthened his body's ability to fight beyond medical predictions. He lived fifteen years after that illness: more than long enough to write about his experience, persuade many hospitals to include humor, films and literal "living rooms" in their medical programs, and to see his controversial theories confirmed. In 1989, the staid *Journal of the American Medical Association*

published this conclusion from a Swedish study: 'A humor therapy program can improve the quality of life for patients...Laughter has an immediate symptom-relieving effect.'

Over the years I have received a great deal of encouraging feedback about the effectiveness of *Uh-Oh Squads*. It has been listed in Dave Hemsath and Leslie Yerkes popular book, "301 Ways to Have Fun at Work," (Berrett-Koehler Publishers) and we get calls from all over the country from people who order equipment and start an *Uh-Oh Squad* where they work.

Organizational psychologist and consultant David Abramis, Ph.D., California State University at Long Beach, presents research findings about job satisfaction, work, and play. In one of his studies, 341 men and women were asked, "What would make your job more fun?" A number of people said, "Get rid of my supervisor." Of course, you can't always get rid of your supervisor, but you can still have fun, maintain productivity on the job, and foster new attitudes with innovations such as the "Uh-Oh Squad." And, in those cases where employees are not in a position to don clown noses or chant "Uh-Oh," worker report that merely saying the word "Uh-Oh" brings peals of laughter and everyone is reminded to lighten up.

The Uh-Oh Squad has turned out to be a near-perfect method for maintaining a positive working environment in the face of the minor irritations that crop up dozens of times every day. This particular way of mixing work and laughter has proven effective in hundreds of situations in dozens of businesses, schools, and hospitals. Since 1989, I have distributed thousands of packages of *Uh-Oh Squad* equipment to workers all across North America. It is my mission to improve the lives of workers everywhere by creating positive working environments. If that means using such off-beat activities as *The Uh-Oh Squad*, then all I say is, "Uh-Oh!"

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