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It's a funny thing:

The relationship between humour and energy

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A few years ago I was with a group of employees who were in the midst of going through a difficult transition. I began with “How bad is it?” I asked them to do a list, an ‘awful list’. We brainstormed for a while, and eventually one man said “Oh it’s worse than that. They are probably going to bring in a virus to kill all of us.” And then the fun began. Stories of death and destruction; some total fantasy, but some totally possible. Examples of ‘it could be worse’ started to emerge. And that is when our perspective started to change.

I then had them look at what items on their personal list they had control over and where they might take action. There is nothing more energizing than taking action in difficult times. Shaking loose from the perception of helplessness is a big boost.

We then talked about ‘how’ they wanted to go about the day to day of this difficult time. We can go through this in a down mindset or we can choose to bring some energy and humour to it. The choice is ours. I can assure you that lightening even the most difficult task greatly helps with going through it, and gets us better results on many levels. It is a win/win and, yes, it is hard to do on occasion.

I have a tendency to use humour in many situations; especially when pressure or uncertainty are present. I believe it comes from working underground in a mine during the summers of my youth. We called it black humour then. I gained a lot of respect for the ‘oil’ it provided in helping move work along and keeping us safe. Humour was used to constantly remind each other of the risks and dangers.

We are sorry for the delay ladies and gentleman, but the machine that automatically crushes your luggage was broken today—so we had to do it by hand.

It was William James who suggested that “humour and common sense are the same thing traveling at different speeds; humour is just common sense dancing.” That quote has opened up a whole new understanding for me on the role of humour in high performance environments. In retrospect, I realize it is something I have known at some level for a long time; that humour and common sense are very closely connected.

HUMOUR AS ENERGIZER: A SERIES OF VIGNETTES

I have seen humour energize and dramatically alter a group’s approach to something difficult time and time again. I recently asked 35 national hockey players and staff to tell me stories about humour turning a situation around, lightening the load, and helping people regroup and move forward. Everyone had a story.

In the late 60s I was teaching swimming and life-guarding at Pine Lodge in the Ottawa Valley. There were many dishes and much to clean up after dinner. I didn’t have to do any of it but wanted to spend the evening with all the others my age. I would often join them and make a game of what we were doing. We would set timelines or make up a story about the dire need to get this done and get caught up in our ‘play’ thereby getting it done much, much quicker and having some fun...which is saying something about kitchen cleanup!

I was on a flight from New York to Toronto years ago. We were delayed first in leaving the gate, and then again on the tarmac when we had a ‘small engine issue’ (as the pilot put it). No air conditioning and a hot day made for a very grumpy group of passengers as we finally headed off to the runway very late for take off. It was at this point that the pilot came on the PA system and said, “We are sorry for the delay ladies and gentlemen, but the machine that automatically crushes your luggage was broken today—so we had to do it by hand.” His timing was perfect, drew a chuckle from almost everyone and off we flew with a smile on our faces. Probably nixed a few customer complaints in the process.

Many years ago, York University Sport Psychologist Sue Wilson told me that when first hearing of a dire issue from an athlete, she often told them: “Well the situation is hopeless... but it’s not serious.” In dealing with my throat cancer, I recalled this and reversed her expression to say that the situation was “serious, but not hopeless.”

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THINK ABOUT THE PENCIL

Why is humour so energizing? For one thing, I am told by those who know, that even a false smile causes a measurable change in blood chemistry. I believe that humour causes us to temporarily act differently thereby shifting our internal state—both emotionally and physiologically. We must remember that the mind-body connection is a two-way street in that the mind may influence and change the body but the reverse is also true. Acting and behaving differently, in this case smiling or laughing, can influence the mind and lighten our load.

In any project there is a down period, a trough that we need to get through. That is the point in any transition where energy is most needed. This is when you as a leader roll up your sleeves and bring some energy to the group. That is leadership of the highest order. It says 'I know what you are going through and how hard it is at the moment, and I am going to help you get out of it'. It is also a demonstration of the positive, pro-active mindset so important in handling heavy or unpleasant loads and moving to excellence.

'Why be normal?' is a very good question in difficult situations. Often we need to act abnormal in the face of a difficult task or challenging situation. I had a cancer patient tell me years ago that cancer taught her that in difficult circumstances normal optimism would not do. She said she had to upgrade her ability to be optimistic. For many of us focusing on creating energy and using humour is abnormal. Research tells us there is a huge upside in doing so. In 'Thinking, Fast and Slow', Nobel prize winning author Daniel Kahneman presents some fascinating research from the behavioral sciences that points out how important acting 'as if' is.

For example - hold a pencil between your teeth with the eraser pointing to your right and the point to your left. Now hold the pencil so the point is aimed straight out in front of you. You are probably unaware that one of these actions forces your face into a frown and the other a smile.

Researchers found that the simple smile-like action created by the first example effected perception. Producing a 'smile like' effect repeatedly lead people to see things in a more positive, lighter way than when they were asked to hold the pencil sticking straight out of their mouth. Even a fake smile creates the physiology of a real one.

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Think of the importance of knowing this simple fact and the myriad of applications. As a final point please note, however, that it isn't necessary to go

around with a pencil in your teeth on difficult days. You can simply choose to smile and change not only your energy level and outlook but also that of those around you!

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