

How Do You Make Tiger Soup?

*This fellow is wise enough to play the fool;
And to do that well craves a kind of wit:
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
The quality of persons, and the time,
And, like the haggard, check at every feather
That comes before his eye. This is a practice
As full of labour as a wise man's art...*

William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night

A sense of humor is an important trait, one that I look for whenever I hire a software engineer or when I myself look at a new company. Why? It seems intuitively obvious to me and even though William Shakespeare also thinks it is characteristic of a wise man, I had never critically examined the reasons behind my proclivity for humor. Over the past several weeks I've looked at humor, laughter, creativity, and work. Here's what I found.

There has been opposition to every innovation in the history of man, with the possible exception of the sword.

Innovation is as necessary to contemporary business as sound fiscal policies and good planning. To stimulate innovation a business must, as Dr. Paul McGhee writes in *Using Humor to Boost Creativity*, "create a work environment conducive to more creative thinking, hire more creative employees, and find ways to build up the creative abilities of employees." People with a sense of humor tend to be more creative, less rigid and more willing to consider and embrace new ideas and methods. A essential aspect of humor is incongruity or out-of-the-box thinking.. Think about things you find funny, jokes you've heard, comic situations, etc: Incongruity, illustrated by the phrase "genuine imitation", is fundamental to humor. If someone has a sense of humor, s/he is also able to look at the ordinary, to look at business as usual, and imagine a different way. Or as Nobel prize winner Albert Szent-Gyorgyi says, "Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking something different".

There is no evidence to support the notion that life is serious.

Southwest Airlines has made humor its hallmark and made fun part of its corporate culture. Whenever one flies Southwest, one can rely on the flight attendants or the flight crew making some sort of joke, singing a zany song, or telling a joke. And as a by-product of the atmosphere of fun, Southwest has documented that its employees have made suggestions for improvements which have saved millions of dollars. The result: Southwest is one of the few financially untroubled US airlines, and Southwest has literally thousands of applicants for each open position.

Advice from the Commanding Officer: Eat a live toad first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day.

A sense of humor is a characteristic of successful leaders. A study done at the United States Military Academy found that “good” leaders have a better sense of humor than “bad” leaders. Similarly a leadership manual for United States Army lists “a good sense of humor” as a valuable personal characteristic. (It is somewhat surprising to find that the military values a sense of humor.) In the article *Laughing All the Way to the Bank* published in the Harvard Business Review, Fabio Sala finds that outstanding executives use all types of humor, especially positive or neutral humor, more than average executives.

There are two ways to slide easily through life: to believe everything or to doubt everything; both ways save us from thinking.

Laughter yoga? After observing the effect of laughter and humor on patients, Dr Madan Kataria and his wife Madhuri of Mumbai have promoted the idea of laughing for no reason since 1995. Their Laughter Club International promotes “the creation of free and public Laughter Clubs that are non-political, non-denominational, non-religious, non-competitive and open to everyone” and brings “people of various countries together and promotes events that bring everlasting peace through laughter”. And where are laughter clubs most often found? In businesses around the world.

Why is 6 afraid of 7? Because 7 8 9.

Similarly John Sweeney, in his book *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter*, describes techniques used in improvisational comedy and how they have been applied at companies as diverse as Texas Instruments, Disney, American Express, and many others to stimulate the number and quality of new ideas. In it he talks about initially accepting all ideas, deferring judgment, and creating a reward system that recognizes innovation and creative risk-taking, and above all, having fun while doing it.

There is absolutely no substitute for a genuine lack of preparation.

Dr. Kataria, Mr. Sweeney, and others recognize that humor and laughter have diverse benefits including a stronger immune system, improved cardiovascular health, less stress, reduced anger and anxiety, more positive, optimistic mood, increased emotional intelligence, better morale, improved team spirit, better communication, increased productivity, and many other positive benefits. Appropriate humor has no negative side effects, not a single one.

If at first you don't succeed, skydiving is not for you!

The message? Fun, play, and humor are good for you and good for the corporate bottom line! Should boards of directors around the world ask if the organizational humor quotient is up or down in addition to asking about quarterly profits? The answer is obvious. Finally, past columns have asked you the reader to answer the question “What does a genuine human being do?” This column is no exception, however this time I’ll

provide an answer: "Remember to keep humor in everything." And the recipe for tiger soup? First, you catch a tiger...

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- Job Interview Question: You are driving your car on a wild, stormy night. You pass by a bus stop, and you see three people waiting for the bus:

- 1. An old lady who looks as if she is about to die.*
- 2. An old friend who once saved your life.*
- 3. The perfect man (or) woman you have been dreaming about.*

If there could only be one passenger in your car, who would you offer a ride?

Think before you continue reading. This is a moral/ethical dilemma that was once used as part of a job application. You could pick up the old lady, because she is going to die, and you should save her first. Or you could take your old friend because he once saved your life, and this would be the perfect chance to pay him back. However, you may never be able to find your perfect mate again. The candidate who was hired (out of 200 applicants) had no trouble. He answered: "I would give the car keys to my old friend and let him take the lady to the hospital while I stay behind and wait for the bus with the woman of my dreams."