

CHAPTER ONE

Levity Is a Funny Thing

*If They're Busting a Gut,
They'll Bust Their Butts*

Two guys walk into a bar . . .

Whoa, whoa, whoa. You can't start a serious business management book with a line like that. That flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Harrumph, grumble, grumble.

Well, you can relax. This is no joke.

Two guys walk into a bar. They're both leaders at the same company. One has a big, infectious smile and is laughing as he opens the door. The guy at his side hasn't actually cracked a smile since *Laugh-In*. Quick test of your judgment skills: Which one's better at his job?

You're going to need a little more info, right? Nope. It's a simple call, and current research backs it up: The guy who's laughing and enjoying himself is

better. He's considerably more likely to be more productive, inspiring, engaging, committed, efficient, secure, and trusted—overall a better leader.

Likeable sure, but why is he better?

For one thing, look at it from the point of view of the people who work with him or for him. How would you rather spend your days? Working with a buttoned-down stiff whose idea of fun at work is rolling up his sleeves or for someone who allows you to let loose every now and then—like the employees at Lego America who zip around campus on scooters, or at Principal Financial Group where employees have set up mini golf courses in their offices, or at Google with its annual employee ski trip, or at Ben & Jerry's where factory workers take home a couple of pints of ice cream a week, or at *Sports Illustrated* where employees creating the "Swimsuit Edition" . . . well, we don't know exactly what they do for fun, but we're pretty sure it's not *buttoned-down*.

If people are having fun, they're going to work harder, stay longer, maintain their composure in a crisis, and take better care of the organization.

Here's one example.

An excited Kirt Womack of the Thiokol factory in Utah sprinted into his manager's office on the first day of spring and asked if the folks on the factory floor could do something fun—say, head outside and fly paper airplanes—if they met their quota two hours early. The manager wrinkled his brow and vetoed the idea. Kirt persisted, "Well, then, what if we exceed our quota by 50 percent?" Figuring he had nothing to lose, the manager finally gave in.

Later that day, at 1:30, the manager checked on things and found that his employees had reached

110 percent of their quota. By 3 PM, they'd surpassed 150 percent. The airplanes were launched, laughter rang out, and people frolicked (funny word, frolicked).

This tale is no big deal, right? Sure, except for the fact that a 50 percent increase isn't exactly insignificant. While this tale illustrates the benefits of levity at work, it also underscores the dire need to enlighten management. You should know what the supervisor's initial reaction was to his workers' hitting the 150 percent production goal by 3 PM. Rather than connecting the dots and seeing the link between the promise of fun and working harder, he instead commented, "Imagine what you guys could have accomplished if you hadn't taken two hours off to screw around!"

The manager's initial ignorance did little to dissuade the workers. The kind of joyous, playful, break-the-tension fun they engaged in is taking place all around the world in organizations that care about performance, retention, and profitability. Motivated purely by the opportunity to have a little fun at work, the aviation workers increased their performance dramatically. The next week they negotiated for a volleyball game on the factory floor as a reward and again hit record production levels. Each week, they continued to request fun rewards and turned in astounding production numbers. By the third week, when they had earned a trip offsite for ice cream cones, the manager finally got it.

That, in a waffle cone, is the power of the Levity Effect at work.

An increasing body of research demonstrates that when leaders lighten up and create a fun workplace,

there is a significant increase in the level of employee trust, creativity, and communication—leading to lower turnover, higher morale, and a stronger bottom line.

The research also shows that managers who have taught themselves to be funnier are more effective communicators and better salespeople, have more engaged employees, earn a lot more than their peers, and are much thinner. Okay, maybe not the last one.

The following pages include experiences of real businesspeople we've studied across a spectrum of real industries—high tech, manufacturing, services, retail, financial services, health care, and so on. Some of these leaders didn't start out as fun-loving souls; in fact, many spent years in gray suits, brow knitting in conference rooms with their colleagues. But they all learned to shed some of their seriousness, break away from the pack of the mirthless, and carve successful, enjoyable, rewarding career paths. And a lot of their secrets to success aren't listed in the company handbook. They are the product of innovation and creativity. Few corporate manuals exist, if any, that recommend paper airplane flying in aeronautical factories or require incorporating a rap song into a memo on new commission plans. Wise leaders learn to discover for themselves the tricks of the levity trade. But, you might not believe us if we simply gave you a few examples and said, "Go. Have some fun." Instead, we'll prove to you the connection between the punch line and the bottom line through a variety of interviews with CEOs, business leaders, salespeople, ad executives, business owners, and individuals from many other walks of life. All share some similar traits, which we will ex-

plore here, and all have learned to lighten up for real, tangible results.

How they did it is what this book is all about. You'll discover how to master the Levity Effect to impact your career and your life.

THE PATH TO 'GREAT'NESS

First, the proof. Grab your spoon; here comes the pudding.

It's hard to believe that a warm and fuzzy subject such as fun could impact an organization's success. But the remarkable case for levity at work is growing, with the most convincing numbers culled from more than a decade of research by the Great Place to Work® Institute. Data from the organization's one-million-person research database reveals that "Great" companies consistently earn significantly higher marks for "fun."

Each year, the Great Place to Work® Institute asks tens of thousands of employees to rate their experience of workplace factors including, "This is a fun place to work." On *Fortune's* "100 Best Companies to Work For" list, produced by the Great Place to Work® Institute, employees in companies that are denoted as "great" responded overwhelmingly—an average of 81 percent—that they are working in a "fun" environment. That's a compelling statistic: Employees at the best companies are also having the best time. At the "good" companies—those that apply for inclusion but do not make the top 100—only 62 employees out of 100 say they are having fun. That gap in experience is, surprisingly, one of the largest in the survey.

Now, a skeptic will ask, “Are successful companies just more fun to be in, since they are winning and profitable, or does fun create success?” It’s the old, “which came first, the chicken or the egg” question. As we met with Amy Lyman, chair of the board and cofounder of the Institute, she explained that fun and success go hand in hand. And, all companies should be wondering how to have more fun.

“It’s absolutely a question companies should be asking themselves because it is something that happens in great workplaces,” she said. “In fact, it would be very unusual for a company to be among the ‘100 Best’ and not score well on the fun question.”

Wow. In case you didn’t catch that, let us repeat it. It would be rare to be one of *Fortune*’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” and not score well on the fun question.

Correlations to fun on the 57-question survey are all “very high, very positive,” Lyman added. In fact, employees who strongly agree with that statement are extremely likely—a rock solid 0.61 correlation—to also reply positively to the statement, “Taking everything into account, I would say this is a great place to work.”

Lyman explained to us that as a company moves on its journey from being lousy to good to great, they must first address basic issues such as physical safety and even friendliness. But to compare, the percentage increase from the good companies up to the best on the friendliness question is just 11¼ percent. On the fun question, the gap is 29 percent.

“In other words, when companies make the leap from good to great, they must start addressing so-

phisticated trust issues. One corollary to developing strong bonds of trust is that people are able to also have a great deal of fun at work,” Lyman says.

“If you are interested in increasing the opportunities for fun across an organization, and people genuinely engage and have fun, then that is an indication to me of a strong workplace culture that people will want to commit to. You would see a correlation between fun and reduced turnover, better recruiting, greater camaraderie . . . all those positive things you see happen in great workplaces. You can also see the exact same thing happen within a work group.

“Many people are taught that business is sterile and numbers oriented, with the human element secondary to all else,” she explained. “This hard-nosed mentality goes back to a time when people were thought of as cogs in the machinery, as opposed to now, where people are seen as contributors and producers of work. Fun is part of life. When leaders see people as human beings who are more productive when they are having fun, it makes all the difference.”

In fact, fun was one factor that was considered when the Great Place to Work® survey was developed. The survey statements were compiled by listening to employees’ opinions on what makes an engaging workplace. As employees told their stories it was clear that the “100 Best” companies enjoyed a high level of trust. Another point that came through very clearly in employees’ stories was that in the great workplaces employees were allowed to have fun on the job.

Now, organizations create fun in a hundred different ways. Intuit has a fun committee that rotates personnel every quarter and creates low-budget activities for all to participate in—everything from potluck breakfasts to Jeopardy games. AstraZeneca has a fun department that brings *funsters* to the company, singing, distributing toys, telling jokes, and doing dances to set the mood as part of their health and wellness series. Valero has volunteer bands that play at community and employee events. The list goes on and on and is detailed in later chapters.

The only rule Lyman points out is that the fun in great companies is natural, organic.

She explains, “A few years ago, one of our clients was experiencing low levels of camaraderie among employees. They decided to have an ice cream social at the end of the month with the idea that this would help with their camaraderie opportunity. As the leaders were explaining it, we realized their goal was to appease the critics. The organizers said, ‘Employees complain we don’t have enough fun, so we’ll show them. We’ll give them ice cream.’”

Through a discussion with the leaders about their intentions and the potential consequences—that employees would probably be able to see the real reason for the ice cream social—Lyman suggested that it might be more meaningful if the ice cream celebration was linked to a work achievement. The company had received a recent grant, and the employees had all contributed to this accomplishment. The lights went on for the leaders—seeing the link between fun and the celebration of an accomplishment—and the event was a lot more successful. This was a small start for this company, yet it had a big impact.

One of Lyman's favorite examples of real fun happens daily in one of the product design work groups at software giant Microsoft. As reported in their "Culture Audit" submission to the Institute, "Each day, one person signs up to blast a song across the room at three o'clock. Everyone is dragging by that point and needs a break. Some people get up and dance. Everyone claps when the song is done."

How do you create that kind of real fun? It works because there is a sense that people are all working together toward a common goal. People enjoy each other's spirit. The relationship comes before the fun, which makes the fun real and acceptable. Another company could try this, and people might get ticked off.

Lyman is quick to point out that at great companies, fun goes hand in hand with trust. "Fun benefits from high trust and vice versa," she says. "Since people are trusting, they aren't afraid to make fools of themselves and take more risks. And in turn, trust is reinforced and benefits from the fun experiences people have."

This scenario was played out at a university we studied that wanted to lighten up the dour environment. When the president asked maintenance to do something about an ugly new satellite dish on the top of a building, the crew manager gave employees the assignment and asked them to be creative in their approach. They took his request literally. Since it was fall, they painted a giant jack-o-lantern on the dish. The president and student body loved it. Now the dish is painted seasonally, and employees in the typically low-profile maintenance group can't wait for their turn to express themselves in a

high-profile, fun way. That never would have happened if the employees hadn't felt enough trust in their manager to take a risk.

As will be evident in the following pages, trust gradually develops as managers show their employees that they can laugh at themselves and can use levity to diffuse tense situations. These managers come across as more approachable, which also fosters rapport and eases stressful times. They understand that levity at work doesn't just mean fun and games; sometimes it's as simple as unfurrowing a brow or relaxing clenched jaws.

No one knows this better than Jim Olson and Vern Wardle. They've worked together for decades at Harman Management Corporation, the world's first and one of the largest and most profitable Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises. Jim is the president, Vern the COO of this chain of 350 restaurants.

As background and a personal insight, Vern and his wife have long shared a secret signal: Three of anything means "I love you." It could be three honks of a horn as his wife returns home or a kitchen light flashing on and off three times before Vern leaves for an early morning flight.

One day at the office, after a heated disagreement, Vern and Jim each stormed to their adjoining offices. After a few minutes Vern was sitting at his desk, still fuming over Jim's pig-headedness, when he heard three slow, distinct knocks on the wall. He shook his head a little and grinned. Jim had used Vern's own secret message to apologize. Laughing a little to himself, Vern rapped the code back: One, two, three. "I love you, too, buddy."

Is there just a trace of a smile on your face? There were certainly grins on Jim's and Vern's faces that day. In fact, for a long time, they've been laughing all the way to the bank. That's because from a corporate perspective, managing with levity affects the bottom line. It certainly has for Harman Management and many others you'll read about.

Lyman cited a number of research studies that have linked the strong positive cultures of the "100 Best" companies with strong financial performance. If you had invested your beloved dough in the "100 Best" companies to work for over the past decade, you would have earned almost two times the return to the S&P 500 (Figure 1.1)—indicating that great workplaces produce outstanding returns for their shareholders.

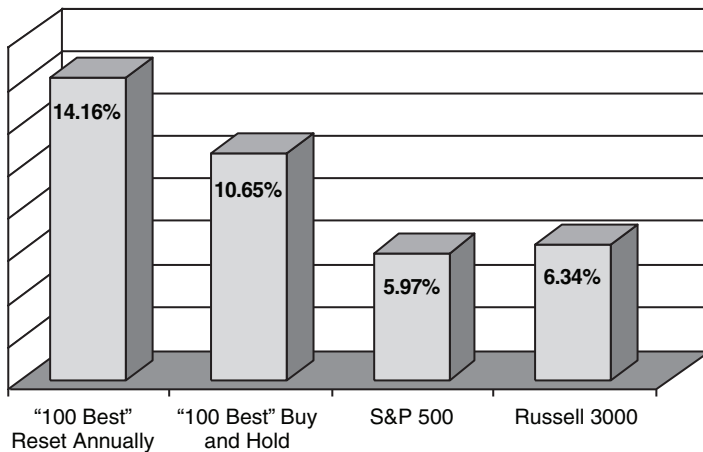


Figure 1.1 Annual Returns of *Fortune's* "100 Best" versus the Stock Market, 1998–2006. *Source:* Russell Investment Group.

Take the example of Ann Machado, founder of Creative Staffing, an employment agency in Miami. Years ago, her company began offering fun shopping sprees by limo to her employees—and revenues grew at more than 40 percent annually. But when someone talked her into replacing the fun with traditional HR benefits, such as a new disability and pension plan, revenue growth slowed to only 9 percent annually. “We got too serious,” she said. She reinstated the fun and revenues shot back up. Imagine that.

THE ‘BODY’ OF EVIDENCE

It turns out that fun is serious business. Still, there are a lot of seriously unfunny managers out there. And here are their names.

No, seriously. Most of the leaders we spoke with admitted spending part of their careers in the camp of the sourpuss. It’s understandable. The pressure to perform, the desire to excel, and the need to justify acclaim ultimately sap leaders of their inherent, childlike inclination to seek out play and fun. They lose themselves and assume another identity that, in one form or another, squashes levity while nurturing gravity.

In a national study conducted by Harris Interactive, more than 5,700 workers were asked to identify a TV boss who reminds them of their own. Some of the most popular responses included:

- Charlie from *Charlie’s Angels* (absentee)
- Judge Judy from *Judge Judy* (no nonsense)
- Donald Trump from *The Apprentice* (demanding, powerful)

- Simon Cowell from *American Idol* (judgmental, insulting)
- Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons* (sinister)
- Michael Scott from *The Office* (idiotic)
- Tyra Banks from *America's Next Top Model* (quick to point out flaws)

The results included only three positive examples:

1. Sam Malone of *Cheers* (amicable, fun)
2. Miranda Bailey from *Grey's Anatomy* (tough, but fair)
3. Jack from *Lost* (smart, looks out for the team)

In October of 2006, at our request, international research firm Ipsos conducted a 1,000-person national survey of working adults to measure the effect a manager's sense of humor has on employee retention. Survey participants were asked to rate their bosses' sense of humor, and in another part of this general consumer survey, they were asked how likely it was that they would be working for their employer a year from now. The results are illuminating:

Employee Rates Manager's Sense of Humor	Employee Rates Likelihood of Working at Current Job a Year from Now
1-6	7.75
7-10	8.96
(1-10 Scale, 10 is highest)	

The Ipsos research numbers show that employees who rated their managers' sense of humor as "above average" (a score of 7-10), rate the likelihood that

they will be on the job a year from now at almost 90 percent (8.96 out of 10). But those employees who rated their managers' sense of humor as "average" or "below average," rate their chances of staying at only about 77.5 percent.

According to Tim Keiningham, senior vice president of Ipsos Loyalty, "The connection is not an anomaly. There is a statistically significant correlation between your manager's sense of humor and your willingness to remain with an organization."

Clearly, there are as many different leadership styles as there are people, but a sense of humor is essential regardless of the leadership style. In a 2007 survey by Robert Half International, of 492 employees, 65 percent said it is "very important" that managers have a sense of humor. Perhaps they understand what managers may sometimes forget: The need for fun is hardwired into our systems and has a biological impact on the body.

LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE

In 2005, researchers at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore showed that mental stress constricted blood vessels, reducing blood flow. Laughter, however, caused the tissue that forms the inner lining of blood vessels (the endothelium) to expand, increasing blood flow. All this science corroborates the old maxim: serious as a heart attack.

But does the magnitude of this scientific fact resonate with you? Stress reduces blood flow. Let us type this slowly so you don't read it too quickly: Stress reduces blood flow. And you know all that

flowing blood? Yeah, it delivers oxygen to the brain and keeps your heart beating: two important characteristics you desire in employees.

The University of Maryland study observed 20 adults who watched clips of a violent movie (say *Pulp Fiction* or *Charlotte's Web*) and a humorous movie (like *Borat* or *Titanic*). On one hand, they found that blood flow was significantly reduced—by about 35 percent—in 14 of the subjects who watched the stressful film. On the other hand, blood flow *increased* by 22 percent in 19 of 20 volunteers after watching the funny movie. Although some *Borat* fans do seem to exhibit a certain blood flow restriction to their brains, that's another thing altogether. The research team concluded that the increased blood flow experienced by most participants was equal to that seen in individuals after 15 to 30 minutes of exercise. Tae Bo, my butt!

Dr. Lee Berk, assistant professor of family medicine at the University of Maryland and a researcher at the Susan Samuel Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, said, "Laughter is not dissimilar from exercise. It's not going to cure someone from stage-three cancer, but in terms of prevention, it does make sense. In a sense, we have our own apothecary on our shoulders. Positive emotions such as laughter affect your biology."

In a series of follow-up studies, Dr. Berk went on to prove that just looking forward to a humorous or lighthearted event impacts us physiologically in very positive ways. The research demonstrated that merely anticipating something funny reduces levels of at least four of the neuroendocrine hormones associated with stress. The result was a measurable

change in moods: Incidence of depression fell by 51 percent, confusion went down by 36 percent, anger fell by 19 percent, fatigue by 15 percent, and tension by 9 percent.

For this reason, Hal Rosenbluth, CEO of Rosenbluth International, the nation's largest travel-services company with \$2 billion in revenues, considers it "almost inhumane if companies create a climate where people can't naturally have fun." From his perspective, "Our role and responsibility as leaders and associates is to create a place where people can enjoy themselves. I know our company is doing well when I walk around and hear people laughing. The enjoyment translates into performance."

Art Hargate, CEO of Ross Environmental Services, a heavily regulated company in a highly policed industry (hazardous waste), told us that his firm has a long-standing tradition of being serious. "We're in a very serious business, and the margin of error is very narrow. The regulatory environment is very strict, and there are nasty penalties . . . our customers expect us to be very serious people about what we do. Our work environment is very serious, very intense. So lightening up is hard for us. Over the years, I've always thought, 'Geez, the pressure is so intense, maybe it's bad for people. The constant stress response is one that I feel like over time can be debilitating. We've got to lighten up.'"

Since they started lightening up a few years ago, the company has experienced record growth each year. Coincidence? Hardly. Hargate says, "I think lightening up a bit has helped our productivity and

made it easier for us to grow. It actually improves our focus and quality of output.”

HUMOR IS A FUNNY THING

Of course, all of this begs the question: Why doesn't every leader incorporate more levity into their interactions with employees? Simply put, they don't know how.

Remember the day you were first promoted to a position of leadership? (Congratulations, by the way.) Suddenly, you were in charge of leading a new group of people. This was *your* crew. You were the captain. The ship sailed under your command and, by golly, you would sail the hell out of it. Ahhhrrggh, ya scallywag.

In the excitement to don your tassel-shouldered uniform and Cap'n Crunch hat, in your rush to hoist the main mast and grasp the wheel, setting course for the wide open seas of corporate success, in your eager attempt to bark out your first orders to “heave” and “look lively,” you suddenly realize that you have absolutely no idea how to actually lead the crew to do (Cap'n) Jack Squat.

You don't really know how to connect with your people as a leader because up until now you've never needed to. That was always someone else's burden. You just played your role. Maybe your promotion to management was more the result of doing your job well or bringing some new-fangled idea to the table rather than your ability to manage a team of actual human beings. Perhaps your recent work significantly contributed to the bottom

line. You made the bosses a little richer, so, wham! Here's your reward: a nice, new title along with some added responsibilities.

Let's stay with the pirate ship analogy—if for no other reason than to torture you. Maybe you moved up through the ranks. You started as a mere swab-bie. Did that for nigh on ten year. Somebody stabbed the First Mate between the shoulder blades (probably you), and you took the post. Now, after more'n two-score year of sailin', you've moved up to Cap'n, cuz you outlived the rest . . . and you've got a killer eye patch and teeth composed of various precious metals.

Of course, we can't ignore the possibility that you just flat-out deserve this position. (But where's the fun in that?) You did the education thing, got your MBA, have read all the best-selling business books and attended dozens of continuing education courses and seminars. You wear power attire and can recite the *Seven Habits* in your sleep, backwards, and in Mandarin, *nee pow*. But most important, you know the business.

However you got here, you are now responsible for managing other people, getting them to *do stuff*, and as great as you were in your old position, it doesn't mean much if you can't lead people out of a soaking wet paper bag. General George S. Patton said, "Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it."

So why is levity the answer?

For one, studies on group decision making show that people who use more humor tend to yield greater influence over group decisions. People just work

harder for people they like. We reject that old Machiavellian garbage about, "It's better to be feared than loved, if you cannot have both." We're pretty sure Machiavelli just sat around in his prince suit thinking up memorable quotes on leadership rather than actually leading anybody anywhere. Today's equivalent rhetoric would be, "I don't care if they hate me, as long as they respect me!" Pretty sensible philosophy (snort).

Imagine this scenario: Milton and Lois are sipping their morning coffee as they walk down the corridor at Frigsten Incorporated.

Milton: Ugh! I can't stand our boss. The very thought of him turns my stomach.

Lois: (agreeing) Absolutely hate his guts.

Milton: Seriously, I just flat-out despise his existence.

Lois: You got that right. If he were to die tomorrow in a grisly gardening accident, I wouldn't even shed a tear.

Milton: The man is a blight. An embarrassment to human reproduction.

Lois: Hate. His. Guts.

Milton: Ditto. But you gotta respect him.

Lois: Oh yeah, no doubt. Totally respect him. Tons of respect.

Milton: Me too, hands down. But I still hate him.

Lois: Can't even breathe for the hatred!

Levity helps foster respect and positive relationships with employees. It also makes the work itself more palatable. Consider how much your employees would begrudge the assignment of walking around for hours in 100-degree heat or in the pouring rain.

Yet, put some on a golf course, and they would do it gladly. (Some would even pay for the privilege.) The difference between the two scenarios is the addition of fun (though we personally wonder how much fun it is to break a three iron over your knee while using curse words that would embarrass Sarah Silverman).

Incorporating levity into your leadership style makes sense on so many levels, yet many of us still would rather walk the plank (sorry knave, that's the end of the pirate lingo) than attempt it. It's the unfortunate result of a common misconception.

For some reason, many of us have arrived at the conclusion that if somebody has a good sense of humor, it means they're funny. The truth is that humor doesn't always evoke laughter. Researchers Lawrence J. Peter and Bill Dana say, "A sense of humor is deeper than laughter, more satisfying than comedy, and delivers more rewards than merely being entertaining. A sense of humor sees the fun in everyday experiences. It is more important to have fun than it is to be funny."

It's also a heck of a lot easier, especially if your idea of killer material is something you found on a Bazooka bubble gum wrapper. Let's face it; if you only think a sense of humor is to make others laugh, you're in for some serious blows to your self-esteem. At one time or another, we've all put on an awkward grin while a coworker tried to be funny and ended up being pathetic, or worse, offensive.

If you can somehow develop a true *sense* of humor and not worry about just being funny, you'll achieve much more than managers who force comedy on an unwilling/unsuspecting audience.

Have you ever heard of Ty Brown? Probably not. He's not a movie star. He's not a politician. He's not a world-class athlete, or even village-class for that matter. But Ty Brown has something that all of us who take levity seriously should strive for: a top-notch laugh.

His office is just twenty feet or so from ours, and we frequently get to hear his robust laugh. It's truly inspiring. It has to be one of the best, jovial, authentic laughs on the planet today. It's never forced or fake. Ty's not an obnoxious, frequent laugher. It only happens when it's supposed to, and boy is it worth the wait. It puts a smile on our faces. It wakes us up. Doesn't matter what we're doing—dealing with a demanding client, sorting out travel plans, or working out the kinks in a new product—one blast of that laugh brings smiles to the faces of all colleagues within earshot, as well as some needed perspective to the grind.

A person with a laugh like that could ask you to empty the contents of your purse or wallet into his hands “for the good of the company” and you'd do it. Look up “infectious” in the dictionary and you'll find a photo of Ty Brown laughing . . . and one of a leper colony.

Leading with levity is the willingness to laugh and find humor even in the most difficult situations. Abraham Lincoln once interrupted a meeting to read an amusing story in the hopes of dispelling a black cloud that was hovering over his staff. With the tragic Civil War unfolding before their eyes, no one so much as smiled at the president's attempt at humor. Finally, Lincoln stiffened and said, “Gentlemen, why

don't you laugh? With the fearful strain that is upon me day and night, if I did not laugh, I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do."

Aside from a desire to make others laugh, it's important to take time out for fun activities. "Whenever we have a board of directors meeting, we always create some kind of activity along with it," said Jim Olson, president of Harman Management. "So maybe our meeting goes until 2 PM, and we're over in Hawaii, so we take a break, put everyone on a bus, take 'em over to Tommy Bahamas to get 'em all swimsuits and T-shirts, and then come back to the hotel, and go play volleyball. It's the intangible of having something fun to do and the playfulness that comes out in that process that I believe helps us work better not just as business associates, but also as people and friends. It's kind of a leveler. When somebody is dominant in the boardroom, and you get out on the volleyball court and someone else is dominant, you realize people contribute in different ways."

None of the core principles of levity leadership involves repeating verbatim every sophomorically hilarious line from *Dumb and Dumber* in your next production meeting, though that level of levity may have its place from time to time. But that kind of commitment to levity takes a lot of time, effort, and a photographic memory, at a minimum. The ideal methods are much easier than that. As Olson exemplifies, leading with levity is about a lightness of manner and a willingness to enjoy the moment. It's a smile on your face and in your voice. It's an attitude of latitude. It's allowing levity to happen.

Being funny is one thing. Being fun is everything. Stand-up comedy is a skill only a few people

can master; leading with levity is something any willing leader of people can learn.

ALTRUISM ASIDE, WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

There is little doubt that many truly effective leaders understand and wisely wield the power of levity, and with good reason. For each levity action we include in our daily routine, there is a resulting effect. In the following chapters, we will address each levity action and its levity effect:

Levity Action		Levity Effect
Humor	→	Communication
Fun	→	Creativity
Respect	→	Trust
Lightness	→	Health
Wit	→	Wealth

Of all the reasons to incorporate levity into the workday, the most seductive by far for most of us is the last. The *Harvard Business Review* reports that executives with a sense of humor climb the corporate ladder more quickly and actually earn more money than their peers. Why? Quite simply, executives hire and promote the humorous more often than the dour. Wouldn't you?

A Hodge-Cronin & Associates survey of 737 chief executives of major corporations showed that an amazing 98 percent said they would hire a person with a good sense of humor over one who seemed to lack a sense of levity. That's just about unanimous.

This survey may appear rather pedestrian until you consider that chief executives typically only get involved in hiring decisions for the very top levels of management and leadership. And when they do, they're looking for someone who can communicate, who can inspire others to follow, who can, in short, lead with levity.

It was just such a CEO who hired us years ago and trusted us to start a new business line in an 80-year-old company. In two years, using the principles of the Levity Effect, we built a multimillion-dollar speaking and training business from nothing, within a very traditional company that had never done anything like it before.

Still, there were plenty of brow knitters along the way, those skeptics who wanted to tell us what to do, and mostly, what not to do. We had executives argue that we should make our training offering more dignified and less fun. And we were almost convinced. That is, until a visit with a major client assured us we were on the right track.

A vice president of The Pepsi Bottling Group put it this way, "I can get similar content from other training companies, but I can't get the humor you offer. I want my people to love this training or they won't pay attention."

So we went back and made our training even funnier, and more people hired us.

When we took our team speed golfing or broke for afternoon foosball tournaments or Frisbee tosses, the corporate types frowned. When we stopped work at stressful times to throw multicolored plastic balls back and forth across the cubicle plains, we were reported to HR. When we had a

crazy ceremony to present awards for such things as the “most offensive remark” made to a trainer or the “most miles flown in coach hell,” the accounting department questioned the expenses.

Our CEO just smiled.

And with that ally, we held our ground. We took our team from nothing to millions in revenue with a handful of employees. We saw the brand evolve and increased our numbers of clients exponentially along the way. Now, the company uses the enterprise as a hood ornament for everything it is doing.

Our small success cut against the grain of conventional business thinking, yet we continue to grow because we understand the power of levity at work. Our growth is not the result of badgering, threats, and harrumphing but of laughter and creativity.

Funny, isn't it? In the current business climate, where half of all employees report having experienced verbal abuse and yelling and most businesses are spending enormous amounts of time and money searching for a competitive advantage, the solution may be as simple as just learning how to lighten up.

Let's see how.

SIDE LIGHT

THE LEVITY LITMUS TEST

11 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR ENVIRONMENT'S FUN PH

Most companies profess to have fun. It has even become more common for some corporate mission statements to mention fun as a value held near and dear

to the company. But few organizations really walk the talk.

When you think about your organization or when you consider joining a new company, ask yourself the following questions to gauge the levity quotient of your boss, team, and culture. A score of 40 or higher means there's a good chance you'll enjoy working there for the long term.

You've done this before: One means never, two is hardly, three is neutral, four is most of the time, and five is just about always. Circle the number and keep score:

New employees are made to feel welcome.	1 2 3 4 5
Meetings are positive and light.	1 2 3 4 5
We have fun activities at least once a month.	1 2 3 4 5
It's common to hear people laughing around here.	1 2 3 4 5
I can be myself at work.	1 2 3 4 5
We have a lot of celebrations for special events.	1 2 3 4 5
When brainstorming, we like to have fun.	1 2 3 4 5
My boss is usually optimistic and smiling.	1 2 3 4 5
Customers would call us fun to do business with.	1 2 3 4 5
I have a friend at work who makes me laugh.	1 2 3 4 5
We have a good time together.	1 2 3 4 5

40 or above: Congratulations. Your work environment ranks among the best. Geez, maybe *you* should have written this book.

30–40: You need to lighten up to enhance employee engagement, creativity, and loyalty.

30 or below: You have terminal seriousness. Call us.
