

Using PSYCHOLOGY & HUMOUR for Results

Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) Scott Friedman (Motivational Humourist) & Tim Wade (Productivity Psychology) join forces in a quest to help more organisations achieve better results... with humour!

With downsizing, rightsizing, and criticising sweeping workplaces around the world, employee insecurity, fear and disengagement are at record levels. The only thing constant in organisations today is change. So how do you keep your employees engaged and motivated amidst the craziness of today's workplace? Good question... and the answer may just make all the difference in the world to the long term success of your organisation.

GPS is the answer! And like a Global Positioning System, this GPS will help guide you through life's most difficult roads, but this GPS stands for 'Get Playful, Silly'. Will play, you say, save the day? Yes, play.

Pop Quiz: If job security and payment were exactly the same for either option, would you prefer to:

- WORK hard, or
- PLAY hard?

The fact is that if the financial reward is the same, and there is no difference to your job security, then most people would choose PLAY over WORK. Why? It's more fun!

Work & Play

Does that mean work is not fun? Why? In physics, Work equals Force times Distance.

That means Work is where energy is exerted from one physical system (you) to move a body (your work) in the direction of that force (completion). To push something in a desired direction implies resistance. That sounds unpleasant.

There is no definition of Play in physics. But it is otherwise defined as "an activity guided more by imagination than by fixed rules" or "to be engaged in recreational activities". There are two important components here, imagination and recreation.

Einstein once famously said "Imagination is more important than knowledge." This is because knowledge and new inventions are born from imagination. Imagination offers creative solutions to existing problems. If the existing way of doing things worked, then everything would be lovely, there would be no stress and we wouldn't need any creative solutions.

Clearly then, we need imagination and creativity to create a new way of doing things because the last set of rules don't work anymore. This is how we come up with new rules until they have outlived their usefulness too, and will also need to be imagined into extinction.

In managing change, one core challenge is managing the psychology of your people where they are considering an uncertain future. Uncertainty leads to fear, fear leads to anxiety, anxiety leads to stress. Stress IS defined in

physics! Stress is a "force that produces strain on a physical body". This is of course what we want to avoid.

As human beings we are attracted to comfort and pleasure and we like to avoid pain and unpleasantness. How high on your list of fun things to do is: going to the dentist?

In fact when we feel stressed, we seek recreation to alleviate the stress. Recreation is simply re-creation, or creating again, bringing us back to ourselves, which we do by having fun and being creative. So fun is required to de-stress. If we use fun in the process of change, the stress can be removed before it gets out of control. It's rather like stomping on small sparks of fire while they are unthreatening. Ignore them and the ensuing inferno can be disastrous.

Psychology of Stress

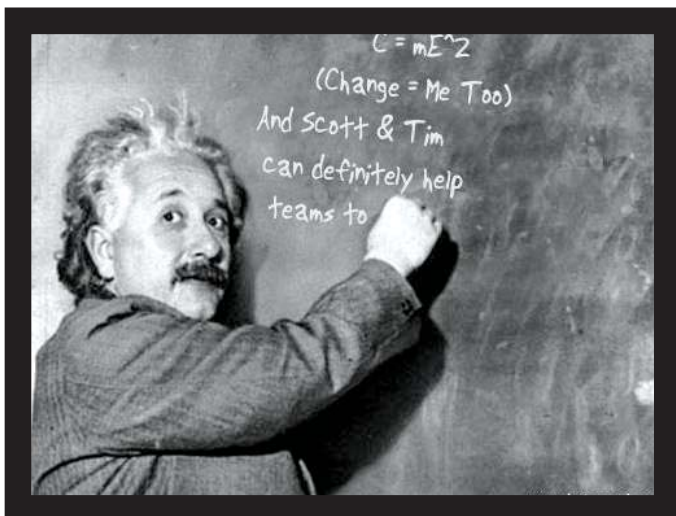
In a recent stress survey by the American Psychological Association, money and work continued to be the leading causes of stress for 75% of Americans, a dramatic increase from the 59% reported for the same stressors in a 2006 study.

The report¹ said: "Nearly half of all Americans report that stress has a negative impact on both their personal and professional lives. About one-third (31%) of employed adults have difficulty managing work and family responsibilities and 35% cite jobs interfering with their family or personal time as a significant source of stress. Stress causes

more than half of Americans (54%) to fight with people close to them. One in four people report that they have been alienated from a friend or family member because of stress, with 8% connecting stress to divorce or separation."

A studyⁱⁱ of Singapore executives cited "work overload, role ambiguity and relationships with colleagues" as the major stressors, while "switching-off", exercise and "quiet control" were the most common coping techniques.

An earlier studyⁱⁱⁱ looked at stress in Singapore professionals such as general practitioners, lawyers, engineers, teachers, nurses and



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When the rules of the game change, laughter is more creative and resourceful than frustration.



life insurance personnel. It said: "Results showed that performance pressures and work-family conflicts were perceived to be the most stressful aspects of work. These two stressors also significantly contributed to the experience of overall work stress. Further, stress arising from work-family conflicts, performance pressure and poor job prospects was negatively associated with the level of work satisfaction."

Yet without stress we don't grow. A muscle grows only when stressed to the point where the body determines the muscle must grow to accommodate such persistent levels of stress. But like a piece of metal, stress it quickly and it will break, apply such pressure slowly and it will stretch and grow. Wisdom comes from such stretching experiences. Success comes from applying experience in a new way to solve a problem. Experience is gained through the application of new approaches to a problem where previous attempts have failed. Therefore wisdom is born of failed attempts. Regardless of the outcome of the attempt, the fact that an attempt was made means action was taken. Taking action

in the face of an



uncertain outcome means that there is a degree of stress associated with taking the action. Therefore stress is necessary for ultimate success and wisdom!

Pressure Cooker

Given that some stress is necessary, in order for this stress not to be debilitating and limiting to our progress, we must maintain progress while taking steps to regularly diffuse some stressors. Like a pressure cooker maintaining high levels of pressure, it releases some steam once a certain level of pressure is reached. Without the release the cooker would explode, but with the release the food is cooked faster, and you don't have to scrape it off the walls!

So we need to release the steam, and the simplest, easiest, cheapest, least time-consuming way to do this is with humour. It's the ability to let go of the stress, anxiety and heartache, and embrace the positive emotions of joy, curiosity, spontaneity, passion and play. To do this, first you must decide to make work more fun.

Now if your shoulders hide the fact that you have a neck, you're stressed! The same applies to your staff. When you feel the stress creeping up your back, shoulders or neck take one minute to change your emotional state and embrace the humour of the situation.

Take a One Minute Humour Break

A simple attitude change can make all the difference in the world. Once you've made that decision, here are a few of Scott Friedman's starting ideas to play more and stress less.

1 Celebrate the first stress of the day!

Yes celebrate it; the bigger the stress, the bigger the celebration. If you have computer problems first thing in the morning instead of cursing the computer try...

"Woo Hoo! Computer problems again, how lucky am I to face the trials of technology once again? Snack time!" Then go and give yourself a quick snack break to appreciate your challenges.

And what we realise is that stress is not an event, it's just a perception of an event and we can react however we like. If we can celebrate or laugh at the first stress of the day we can do the same with the rest of them.

2 Call your hand phone from your work phone and complain.

Leave a message for yourself on voicemail. "Hi Kui Peng, this is Kui Peng, if you're like me and I know you are, you're not having a very good day. I was stuck in traffic and was 30 minutes late to an appointment, my boss told me I may be losing my job and I think I may be losing my mind. No need to call me back, I'll just see you when you get home, and do me a favour and clean up the place a little. Alright, love you, goodbye!"

When you get your messages on your hand phone, you'll have a good laugh and realise that life isn't really that bad. You might also realise that the only difference in emotion between the time the message was sent and the time it was received is not the events that happened, nor the people involved, but the time difference itself. This suggests that our perspective can change when distanced from the immediacy of experiencing life's challenges, and therefore our most immediate reaction might not be our wisest, nor our most productive, nor even conducive to having a good day.

ⁱ Stress in America, American Psychological Association, 2007

ⁱⁱ The Singapore executive: stress, personality and wellbeing, Ho, 1995, Journal of Management Development, Vol 14, Issue 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Work stress among six professional groups: the Singapore experience, Kwok et al., 2000, Social Science & Medicine, Vol 50, Issue 10.

3 Create a lyric and sing to yourself.

For example sing the following to the tune of *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* ("You'd better not shout, you'd better not cry...") etc)

*It's taking too long, my temper is short
I'm spending my life on hold with tech support
It's a crazy, hazy, stressed out kind of world.*

*My talent is gone, I'm losing my mind
And now I have to worry 'bout the flu of the swine
It's a crazy, hazy, stressed out kind of world.*

Singing about our stressors helps us keep things in perspective. It doesn't matter what you do as long as you do something to change your emotional state. Whether it's doing something a little outrageous or just thinking different thoughts, we gain control over our emotions.

Psychology of Fun

When we practice something, we build stronger neurological links in our brain. These stronger "neuro-pathways" enable us to do things more automatically, moving us from the unconscious incompetence of not knowing what we don't know, through conscious levels of incompetence of being aware of what we don't know, to consciously and deliberately applying our newly found competence, until we get to the point of unconscious competence.

The more we do something, positively or negatively, the stronger the neuro-pathway for that action and the more likely that we will eventually do it unconsciously. Feelings of emotion applied during learning dramatically enhance the strength of the neuro-pathway.

The neuro-pathways in our brain do not usually link singing with unpleasantness or stress. That's because we usually sing when we're happy or celebrating. So when we sing while frustrated, our body has to decide whether we are stressful or happy. Now there's an incongruity. But for our entire life when we've sung voluntarily, it's usually been at happy occasions or when we are happy. So the neurological association with singing is a very strong supporter of a positive

emotional state. Singing about waiting on hold for tech support then transforms the frustrating experience into something ridiculous and unreasonably funny. A smirk finds its way onto your face. You're smiling.

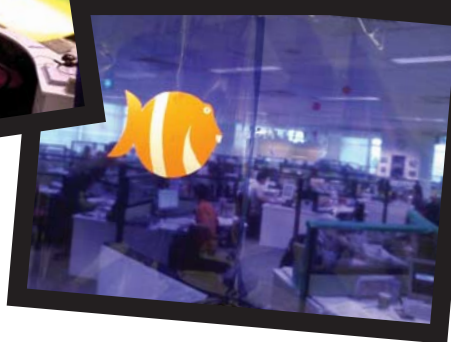
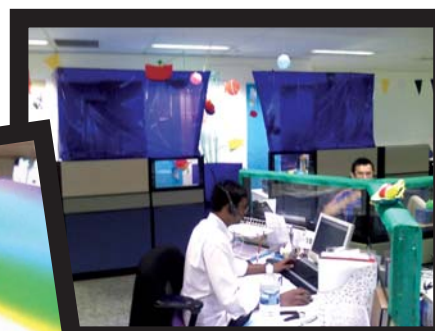
Now your neuro-pathways in your brain have switched lanes from the stressed and miserable to the fun and productive. Our focus switches. We stop thinking victim-centric, frustrated thoughts associated with self and darkness, and begin to open our awareness to what is around us while we wait. Perhaps we start to do something else that needs to be done. Organise some paperwork, jot down some goals for the day, read a printed document and make some notes. The inconvenience is no longer a productivity killer and stress builder. Outcome: Positive.

Create a Visually Fun Environment

Creating a sense of excitement and variability in the office environment can offset the internal perception of task monotony and work stress. The desire: decrease absenteeism and attrition and increase morale.

"When transforming call centres into award-winning operations," shares Tim Wade, "I always included a bi-monthly theme for the internal decoration of the centre. That meant for one month, the whole centre was decorated by the staff, usually with a team-based competition to reward the winning team. The theme would be linked to some event that was coming up, like the Formula One Grand Prix for example, or a sporting theme, or a festival theme like Chinese New Year, Hari Raya or Christmas. Each team in the office would choose how to decorate their areas accordingly. We might have given each team a budget of \$80 or something small so that they could chose some items to add to their own decorations."

"During a sporting theme, I once spent a few hours one weekend turning my own desk area into a model aquarium with fish and scuba divers hanging from the ceiling and blue cellophane enclosing my workstation in the open office environment. That sparked the rest of my 300 staff into a creative frenzy and the whole office looked amazing. Everyone would tour the centre and laugh at the creativity. Every time you'd walk past a particular creation, you couldn't help but smile. During a Christmas theme, one team had Santa Claus' legs coming through the ceiling boards with his sack of presents on the floor below. It was



unanimously hailed as the most creative and ended up winning the prize."

Prizes could be something like a team dinner or a movie night, yet the result saw a contribution to increased productivity, decreased absenteeism and increased employee opinion survey results. "Together with other initiatives, absenteeism in various centres dropped by between 12% and 27%," Tim added, "attrition slowed, customer service levels increase by 80% and productivity increased by up to 17%." That's a positive ROI.

Try to leave about a month in between themes, so that the office is without a theme

for a while. The contrast adds more impact to the theme. Sometimes the transition from Christmas to Chinese New Year will shorten the period that your office will be 'left fallow', but the rule of thumb is: month on, month off.

Create humour rituals that honour, reward and poke positive fun at yourself.

The health of any organisation is in direct proportion to that organisation's ability to laugh at itself. Many companies are just too darn serious. Their structure and formality inhibit open communications and stifle creativity. If organisations would loosen up a little, they would realise that informality and spontaneity foster open communications and stimulate creativity. What setting is more informal and spontaneous than one with good humour, fun, and play?

More individual techniques concern how you choose to behave with more humour. Humour is a technique that can be learned, practiced, reinforced and internalised just like other skills. The first ten minutes of the morning set the 'attitude' for the rest of the day, so start light.

Here are **10 easy ways** that Scott Friedman suggests you can get started:

1 Start every morning by greeting everyone in the office with a big smile and a hearty

hello. They will wonder what you're up to or at least know that you're in a good mood, meaning that they are likely to have a better day. Instant positive response!

2 Place funny cartoons, appropriate jokes, or postcards on a company bulletin board. Sign your name with a note saying, "I thought you might enjoy this." Not only are you giving them an opportunity to laugh at this cartoon or joke, but people are saying, "I'll be darned, he's a real guy. What a surprise, he has a sense of humour just like us!"

3 Sprinkle internal communications with humour. Add a cartoon or funny one-liner to memos and you would be surprised how many people start reading those little memos.

4 To get meetings off on a productive foot, serve everyone ice cream or lollipops at the start of the meeting. Creative communication is guaranteed to improve.

5 Inject humour into meetings. Have a dress-up in your meeting once a quarter. Share fifteen minutes of jokes at the start of every meeting.

6 Have a positive party funded by negative people. Every time someone in the office is caught being negative, they throw two dollars in a positive pot, and once a quarter the

pot buys pizza, happy hour, or humour props for the office.

7 Wear amusing buttons or badges. One executive wears one that says, "Save time, see it my way." Walk into your next meeting with a button that says, "God is watching, give Him a good show." Try, "Start each day with 'PMS'- a Positive Motivating Smile." Or "If you're too busy to laugh, you're just too busy."

8 Give rewards for the worst mistake of the week. This will encourage employees to share and learn from their blunders.

9 Spike your environment. Place positive and appropriate humour props around your office. How about funny glasses on your plant or a red clown nose on your phone?

10 Have one "call in well" day a year. Instead of calling in sick, you would call up and say, "I'd really love to come to work today, but I just feel too good. Love ya! Bye!"

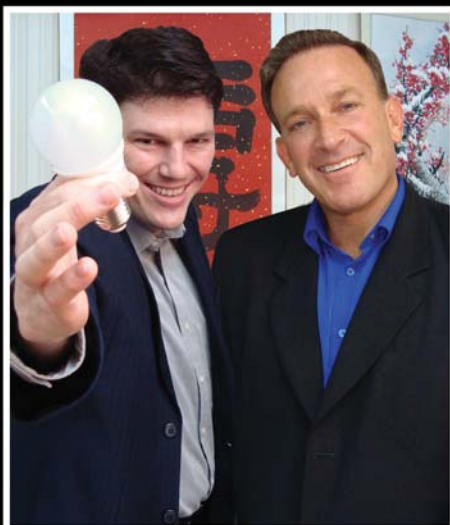
So the next time you are feeling stressed at the office, remember you have a choice to let it be painful or you can choose to be playful. My advice is to activate your GPS.

And remember, laughter is contagious, why not infect the whole company? It's the best cure for whine flu! 🗣️

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- 100% Increase in Communication Effectiveness

Scott Friedman. Motivational Humourist, Certified Speaking Professional, National President of National Speaker's Association USA 2004-2005.

Tim Wade. Productivity Psychology, Professional Speaker, 15 Years MNC Operational Leadership, Executive Committee Asia Professional Speakers Association 2008-2009.

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