

## WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT BOARD MEMBERSHIP?

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When the Vietnam Conflict ended in 1973, 566 military prisoners of war returned from captivity in North Vietnam. Statistics from previous wars suggested this group would suffer Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. But they didn't. In fact, they suffered fewer psychological problems than any other group in history ever has. Why? They credited their use of humor for their positive results.

In 1996 I joined the Navy's team of researchers to better understand what it takes to bounce back from adversity—not only to survive but to thrive. The Vietnam Prisoners of War taught me lessons about resilience and humor that I have used in my work with corporate leaders and board directors ever since. Specifically, they taught

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me that in a POW camp and in a board room, humor accomplishes three main goals: it releases tension, creates a social lubricant, and restores a healthy perspective on difficult situations.

Groups operate as systems anytime people come together and communicate with one another over

a period to achieve a goal, but few groups rely on the system as much as a group in crisis does. The VPOW system, with its related use of humor, acted as a type of anchor in humanity. Because they were cemented in a strong social structure, they had a buffer against fragmentation of self or of the system. Humor within oneself and with others allows for taking control of a senseless situation.

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Using humor to deal with adversity is not a new concept. The Bible says, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a brittle spirit drieth the bones." More recently, psychological research indicates that human beings want power and authority over their futures. We want to feel that we have a say in how things will go for us, so when we perceive that our actions will make an outcome likely, we feel optimistic and secure. When we don't, we feel insecure. We feel like victims. Sometimes people stay in a victim's frame of mind after a loss or disappointment. They doubt their capacity to make their lives happen according to their own aspirations, so they wait to be rescued or blessed by good fortune. They start to feel undermined and overwhelmed, and they can become totally immobilized.

However, alternatives exist to these feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Learning to turn challenges into opportunities is one way to do that, but it won't happen automatically. We need ways to keep our hearts merry or our

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spirits will become brittle with the perceptions of powerlessness. Humor can help us vent anger and frustration that might otherwise prove destructive. Joking about difficult customers or situations can be a release valve for aggravation that might otherwise distract directors tackling a high-stakes decision.

Humor has its basis in the individual, but it manifests itself in interpersonal relationships. When responding to what helped them make it through, the research respondents described humor from both an intrapersonal and interpersonal perspective. That is, they reported a sense of humor within themselves and an appreciation for the laughter they shared with each other. One participant's observation that, "The larger the group, the more lighthearted things were. The smaller the group, the more intense things were" reflected the comments of many.

Their need for control served as a framework for the VPOWs who created and maintained a system of strong interpersonal relationships and group affiliation that helped them survive over seven years in captivity and thrive during the years since repatriation. The VPOWs taught each other how to use humor as a weapon for fighting

back and as a tool for building cohesion—the same tool that many directors fail to use.

## **VPOWs taught each other how to use humor as a weapon for fighting back**

Directors realize the social benefits of humor when they use it effectively to help them "save face" with self-deprecating humor or when they use it to soften the blow of an unpleasant message. Also, the shared use of humor builds a sense of closeness and community when everyone shares inside jokes and a you-had-to-be-there history. In short, humor acts as a social lubricant that helps directors smooth out the rough patches.

Humor also helps restore perspective and solve problems, two of the chief responsibilities of any board. Humor interrupts circular and other unproductive thinking patterns and provides the jolt we often need to quickly adopt new perspectives—the same facility that leads to creative problem-solving and innovation.

## **Humor interrupts circular and other unproductive thinking patterns**

Much evidence exists to support the idea that humor is a determinant of resilience. People have learned to rely on it not in spite of crisis but because of it. However, although the use of humor is considered an aspect of communication competence, one of the obvious and striking facts about humor is that most people most of the time cannot or will not effectively produce humorous messages. Rather, people more often function as receivers rather than as sources in humorous exchanges. Therefore, management will often need permission from board directors to engage in humor. It won't happen automatically, and it

won't develop from a grassroots effort within the company. Directors must set the tone at the top.

Humor isn't just joking; it's a mindset that allows us to find mirth through surprise and exaggeration. It makes us feel good, but most employees will limit their joking and bantering in the presence of the boss, especially if the boss hasn't shown an appreciation of humor in the past. However, if leaders actively engage in and

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encourage humor, they will find appreciative audiences among their employees. Humor allows leaders to appear more approachable and accessible because we like best those who make us laugh.

Some of my clients have said they feel reluctant to use humor because they fear it will reduce their credibility. The facts tell a different story. Research tells us that the appropriate use of humor enhances a leader's perceived status. In fact, I often encourage new leaders not to be surprised if their jokes get funnier as they climb the corporate ladder.

Becoming aware of the value of using humor to expand coping behaviors can increase directors' understanding of the powerful role humor and laughter can play in helping them bounce back from the hardships change can bring when it comes more by imposition than invitation. Then, consciously and actively working to find humor in difficult situations helps them feel better until things get better.

When directors use humor to tackle problems effectively, build strong relationships, and explore new ideas, they can turn challenges into opportunities. Humor gives us a modicum of control in situations when we would otherwise feel as though we had no power over our destiny. Humor makes good business sense. Morale

tends to be higher in workplaces where leaders use humor, and higher morale frequently leads to fewer sick days, lower stress, greater productivity, and higher profits.

To prevent a disjunction of the self and to find meaning in a situation void of meaning, the VPOWs relied on resources many of them did not know they had. Their internal sense of mirth and humor, their reliance on one another, and their group interactions all combined to create a system for survival that worked for them decades ago—a formula for success that will help directors now. As the VPOWs taught us, humor plays a critical role in helping us bounce back from adversity, especially when we align ourselves with others who will help us laugh.

What's so funny about board membership? Not enough.

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