LEADERSHIP MATTERS

Leading with a Sense of Humor

By Susan Reese

“A SENSE OF HUMOR IS PART OF THE ART OF LEADERSHIP, OF GETTING ALONG WITH PEOPLE, OF GETTING THINGS DONE.”

Surprisingly, that quote comes from Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had a couple of the most demanding jobs possible. Being in a leadership position in an educational institution is another demanding job that would seem to require a healthy sense of humor. After all, it takes a pretty good sport to present a challenge to his or her students to meet a certain goal and offer in exchange to sit on top of the school’s roof for a day if that challenge is met; however, many a school principal has spent an entire school day ensconced in a lawn chair on a roof—and not always in the best of weather. You really must have the ability to laugh at yourself when you kiss a pig in front of students and colleagues or repeatedly get dropped into a dunking tank as part of your school’s big fundraising event.

Why do administrators volunteer to do such outlandish things? First of all, great school leaders will do almost anything to help their students succeed, but perhaps they also understand what the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH) has found—and, no, I didn’t make up that organization just to be funny. Humor creates social bonds. As comedian and pianist Victor Borge once put it, “Laughter is the closest distance between two people.” AATH also says that, when used meaningfully by adults, humor can help teach children social skills.

“Humor stimulates and impacts virtually every human system,” notes the AATH Web site. “It should be used to teach children to be likeable, intelligent human beings.”

The AATH Web site is pretty funny in itself, and one reason is the component of humor that involves incongruity. It features articles and white papers with titles such as, “Humor and Smiling: Cortical Regions Selective for Cognitive, Affective, and Voluntary Components,” along with one titled “Humor, Klinogon and Vulkon Humor.” Whoever said academic research couldn’t be fun? Another article on the AATH site is “Laughter and Mental Flexibility” by Steve Bhaerman. He provides advice on humor-cultivating practices to “generate creative options rather than to obsess, worry and control.” Among these is “pumping irony,” learning to see ironies, paradoxes and incongruities in our lives so that we are more likely to find “out-of-the-box” solutions. Other techniques include “reframing” to allow looking at a situation in a more useful way, and “practice seeing funny” to be able to see things through different layers of meaning.

Educator Mary Kay Morrison is the author of the book, Using Humor to Maximize Learning: The Links Between Positive Emotions and Education. She says the purpose of her book is not just to encourage educators to maximize the benefits of humor in education but also to optimize a healthy lifestyle. “Humor generates trust among colleagues and can facilitate a reduction in tension, fear and anger,” writes Morrison. “Leaders who have the ability to assist others in seeing the ‘humor’ in difficult situations can nurture communications and ease tense situations.” She also notes that humor enhances creativity and supports the change process, and organizational change is one of today’s hot topics for school leaders. We often experience unexpected change, suffering and loss in our lives, Morrison notes, but, “When we are able to find the humor in a situation, we can begin to heal and move ahead.”

As previously noted, AATH cites creative social bonds among the benefits of humor, and Morrison notes that a strong bond of trust among the members of a school community is essential for school improvement. “Leadership is correlated with building relationships based on trust,” she says. She devotes a chapter of her book to creating an optimal teaching and learning environment, and for her that means one that includes “laughter, joy, spirit and enthusiasm in both the school and in the classroom.”

Morrison’s concept of humor optimizing a health lifestyle appears to have some scientific research to back it up. In a January 2005 article in The Laughter Remedy newsletter, Paul E. McGhee, author of the book, Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training, notes that a study of mothers with newborn infants found that those who actively used humor to cope with the stress in their lives had fewer upper respiratory infections, and their infants also had fewer infections. The type of humor employed may make a difference in health, however, since McGhee also cites research that shows a close relationship between hostility and heart disease. Coronary heart disease has been linked to Type A personalities, and hostile humor has been found to be the main kind of humor enjoyed by Type A. So, while laughter may be the best medicine, it works better if it is not infused with hostility.

“A sense of humor is good for your health and the health of your school, but maintaining one is not always easy. Sometimes it requires stepping back and taking a look at the situation. It may take a little time if the situation is bad. As Carol Burnett once noted, “Comedy is tragedy plus time.” As a school leader, you have to deal with a lot of crazy stuff on a daily basis, and, well, sometimes you just have to laugh.

Amuse Yourself

For more information about a sense of humor and how it can benefit education and your health, here are some Web sites to visit.

You will laugh—and that’s a promise.

The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor www.aath.org

The International Society for Humor Studies www.lnu.edu/abs

The Humor Project www.humorproject.com

Mary Kay Morrison’s Humor Quest www.gugh.net/humor

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Susan Reese is a techniques contributing writer. This can be contacted at susan@printmanagementinc.com.

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