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Keeping it light: Introducing a model of levity at work

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How does a good company become great? That is a critical question that any organization looking to join the prestigious ranks of the Best Companies to Work For[®] or Best Places to Work[™] should consider. These awards are typically based, in part, on employees' perceptions of their work environment and culture. Organizations that top the charts enjoy positive endorsements and praise for being highly desirable employers and high performing companies. One such organization, Google, repeatedly ranks at the top of the Best Companies to Work For[®] list; organizations with smaller budgets will be happy to discover that despite Google's ample investment in employee benefit programs, Google's strategy is accessible to all. Commentators suggest that what Google and other top ranking organizations have in common is an emphasis on building positive work environments that are rooted in what we discuss in this article as *Levity*. Levity is an uplifting and/or pleasurable dynamic between two or more individuals that lacks tension and anxiety. Levity is . . . office movers who joke about how high or low to hang a whiteboard . . . a supervisor sharing a Kid President YouTube video to encourage the team before a Black Friday opening . . . coworkers who use their lunch break to create short videos of popular work situations (e.g., *If Conference Calls were Real*) . . . a team leader encouraging the team to just pause and take a collective exhale from the pressure of a tense working situation . . . or conversations that lead up to Jack-in-the-Box commercial ideas. The point here is that levity can take many forms, be initiated by anyone, and occur in nearly any setting. Levity is often the glue that binds workers together by lifting the mood and sparing participants from the gravity that often defines work. However, more than just a "soft skill" levity is frequently the competitive advantage in several award winning organizations.

In *The Levity Effect*, Gostick and Christopher describe levity as the magic bullet that makes people *want* to come to work. They view levity as both a characteristic of leaders

(i.e., witty, jovial, and lighthearted) and the work environment (i.e., fun, positive, and enjoyable). Gostick and Christopher deem the benefits of these factors as the "levity effect." They posit that trust, psychological well-being, open communication, creativity, and customer loyalty all stem from levity.

The Levity Effect inspired our current work to define and promote levity as a legitimate variable of interest for organizations. However, we found the authors' proposition that levity is an individual and environmental characteristic too broad and vague, and therefore requires more specificity for levity to become a useful research variable. In this paper, we propose that levity is most appropriately viewed as an interpersonal dynamic.

Beyond discussing the definitional boundaries of levity, what it is and is not, there is great value in exploring both the factors that facilitate levity in an organization and how levity relates to workplace outcomes. This article presents a model on the concept of workplace levity. Beginning with a definition and overview of levity, the authors then propose individual and situational factors that facilitate and support levity. The focus of the paper then shifts to the likely impact that levity has on individual and team/group outcomes. Finally, this article recommends avenues for future research and some practical implications of this line of study.

LEVITY DEFINED

Like any fledgling phenomena, the particularities of levity must be specified to help researchers and practitioners understand what levity is and is *not*. In an attempt to separate levity from other workplace variables, the most appropriate way to describe levity is as a characteristic of the exchanges that occur between people. Diverging somewhat from Gostick and Christopher's idea, we define levity as *an uplifting and/or pleasurable dynamic interaction that*

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lacks tension and anxiety. The term *dynamic* refers to the relationship between individuals; the term *interaction* includes both verbal and nonverbal communication, behaviors, and affect exchanged between individuals.

We propose that levity is manifested in three primary facets: Buoyancy, Amusement, and Edification. *Buoyancy* involves an interaction that is organic in its origin and requires minimal effort. *Amusement* characterizes a pleasurable interaction that incorporates playful exchanges. Finally, *Edification* involves an interaction that is psychologically uplifting in that it celebrates achievements or corrects behavior in a manner that is easily absorbed and appreciated by the recipient. The following sections include a detailed explanation of each of these three facets of levity.

Buoyancy

In physics, buoyancy is considered an upward acting force that keeps an object afloat. In simple terms, an object may rise because the upward forces propelling it are greater than the pressure from above. Likewise, in a psychological context, where the nature of work is inherently serious and taxing, buoyant interactions interject lighter moments in the work day. Unstrained communication occurs when individuals find convergent interests that propel the conversation forward. As one of the more distinctive properties of levity, “lightness” occurs when interactions are organic and relatively effortless. Buoyancy may play out during a weekly meeting where employees discuss items on the agenda, but are also able to spend some time commenting on outside topics like sports scores, favorite television shows, and other random streams of thought. It can also arise between long-time coworkers who have developed a productive working relationship. Buoyancy can even occur between acquaintances once some comfort and familiarity is established. For instance, after finding several things in common, a doctor may use an off-the-wall analogy to explain a medical diagnosis to a patient that lightens the mood and enhances the patient’s understanding.

Amusement

The Amusement facet refers to the importance of allowing fun into the workplace. Amusing interactions are defined by pleasure, enjoyment, and playful exchanges between individuals. Workers who are able to amuse themselves (and others) throughout the day inevitably lighten the mood and contribute to a positive work environment. As a frequent Best Companies to Work For[®] award winner, Southwest Airlines provides a shining example of levity taken seriously within an organization. The airline intentionally encourages its employees and leadership to be authentic and to inject their own personalities into their work. One may see this principle in action during a Southwest flight. Their creative safety messages allow crew to go “off script” with their own brand of humor in what would be an otherwise dry presentation. The flight attendant provides amusement while simultaneously gaining passengers’ attention. Other examples include companies like:

- Dormify, that allows impromptu dance parties in the middle of the work day;
- Bigcommerce’s sales team, that begins each day with a ping pong game to encourage competition; and
- Google, which launched a Pac-Man themed version of Google Maps on April Fool’s Day as a way to bring levity to an otherwise routine GPS application.

Amusing interactions can take many forms. However, it is important to note that disparaging, negative, or divisive communications are intentionally excluded from levity as they tend to have a negative effect on relationships. Edification

Levity does not just point to a light environment, but also one where improvement is woven into the fabric of daily operations in a way that makes people feel good about the activity. Edification takes the “work” out of personal and organizational improvement. The properties of edifying interactions include:

1. they are initiated with intent to uplift and support others’ efforts;
2. individuals’ strengths and achievements are acknowledged; and/or
3. they provide instruction to promote psychological and behavioral improvement.

As previously mentioned, the edification facet in particular, distinguishes levity from other interactions that may appear fun on the surface, but at the [unwilling] expense of some. Of course, individuals may misinterpret messages, but the general intent of the messages conveyed may not be meant to belittle, criticize, dominate, or disrespect others. This aspect of levity distinguishes it from potentially harmful interactions such as teasing, sarcasm, and harassment.

Edification may manifest in a variety of ways. For instance, during a nonverbal interaction, an individual may congratulate another for an exceptional idea with a “high five” to display respect for that person. Coworkers can express appreciation through handwritten notes and kudos via email. Edification can also show up in team building scenarios; for instance, a manager can pass out index cards with each team member’s name and ask each person to draw a card and share one thing they appreciate about that person. Network marketers are taught that edification should involve positive and affirming descriptions of others that convey one’s belief in their abilities or expertise. An example provided by Catherine Soliz-Rey, a network marketing writer provides an example statement that may be used to introduce contacts, “Annabelle is . . . making it happen! She is a leader doing what she has to do because she is motivated and has vision. Anabelle knows this business and is passionate about her reason why she is doing it. That is was I call long-term thinking.”

In sum, we have proposed that Levity is an interpersonal dynamic rather than a personality characteristic. Furthermore, we have proposed that levity has three primary manifestations, namely, buoyancy, amusement, and edification. Levity need not require all three simultaneously. Which of the three or particular combinations is highly dependent upon a particular work context. Some work contexts might be more amenable to one of these more so than the others.

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