

PM WORLD TODAY – FEATURED PAPER – DECEMBER 2008

Finding Humor in Project Management

By Zelda Jones, PMP

*Editor's note: This paper was originally presented at the 2nd Annual UT Dallas Project Management Symposium in Richardson, Texas, USA (<http://pmsymposium.utdallas.edu/>) in August 2008. As a Media Partner for that event, PMForum agreed to republish selected papers in **PM World Today**. This paper is included here with the consent of the author and permission of the Graduate Program in Project Management at The University of Texas at Dallas School of Management, who is the copyright holder of the conference proceedings. All conditions and disclaimers of the copyright holder pertain.*

Abstract

Project Management and Project Managers are not considered to be overtly funny. As the US economy begins a slow down with more companies announcing layoffs and closures, it is difficult for employees to remain positive and focused on their work. Studies have shown that encouraging humor in the workplace can increase worker retention and workplace satisfaction. Other studies have shown that humor stimulates the right side of the brain, the side that supports thinking outside the box which facilitates problem solving. Historic and contemporary figures have employed methods for bringing a certain light heartedness to difficult situations including managing projects.

This presentation will contrast project management humor with that of other professions, show that leading companies are incorporating humor in the workplace, and give suggestions for finding humor in project management. The author will relate humorous project management incidents based on real-life experiences.

Key words: project management; humor; effects of humor; stress management; workplace morale

Is There Hope for Humor in Project Management?

When asked about his experiences in finding humor in Project Management, veteran Project Manager (with battle scars to prove it) Don Meadows, PMP, said,

"If there is humor in Project Management I would contend that you brought it with you when you started the job."

If you are in this profession and don't have that sense of humor, the most applicable term for you is 'masochist'".¹

From the outside looking in, Project Management doesn't seem to be an overtly humorous or fun profession. Project Managers are never featured in the spontaneously erupting joke-fests that seem to occur when likeminded people congregate and tell funny stories. Recently, in an independent and non-scientific survey eleven people were asked which profession they thought had a more humorous reputation – Project Management or Accounting. Of those asked, seven responded with 'neither', two said 'are you kidding', one didn't respond verbally but simply rolled their eyes, and one asked rather flatly 'is this going to be a joke'.

Accounting doesn't have the greatest reputation for being a humorous sort of profession, but there are far more Accounting jokes and stories than there are for Project Management. An Accounting joke can be quick and to the point (example: Accounting acronym: CEO – Chief Embezzlement Officer) and the general population will get it. Project Management jokes seems to need an elaborate set up to facilitate audience understanding. Here is an example:

A tourist walked into a pet shop and was looking at the animals on display. While he was there another customer walked in and said to the shopkeeper, "I'll have a C monkey please". The shopkeeper nodded, went over to a cage at the side of the shop and took out a monkey. He fitted a collar and leash onto the monkey and handed the animal to the customer saying, "That'll be \$5,000."

The customer paid and walked out with his monkey. Startled, the tourist went over to the shopkeeper and said, "That was a very expensive monkey. Most monkeys are only a few hundred dollars. Why did that one cost so much"? The shopkeeper answered, "Ah, that monkey can program in C very fast with no bugs. Well worth the money."

The tourist looked at a monkey in another cage. "Hey, that one's even more expensive! \$10,000! What does it do?"

"Oh, that one's a C++ monkey; it can manage object-oriented programming, Visual C++, even some Java; all the really useful stuff," said the shopkeeper.

The tourist looked around for a little longer and saw a third monkey in a cage of its own. The price tag around its neck read \$50,000. The tourist gasped to the shopkeeper, "That one costs more than all the others put together! What on earth does it do?"

The shopkeeper replied, "Well, I haven't actually seen it do anything, but it says it's a project manager".²

Can humor be applied to project management? While Project Managers are required to take their project responsibilities seriously, must we perform our roles without humor? What are the benefits of humor, and can humor be successfully integrated into the workplace?

Physiological and Medical Benefits of Humor

Project Management is often a high stress profession, and stress has been related to serious health risks. Stress can lead to decreased brain function, high blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke. In the workplace stress can also lead to absenteeism and employee burnout thus increasing personnel related costs.

Experts agree that daily exercise, a healthy diet, adequate sleep, and applying a sense of humor are the primary ways to counter the effects of stress. Proper nutrition and exercise contribute directly to the quality of sleep you may or may not be getting. The electronic world we live and work in isn't conducive to exercise, and our grocery stores and restaurants are filled with unhealthy, but quick foods to accommodate our fast paced life styles. Humor may be the only stress reducing factor (of those listed here) that can be effectively incorporated into our daily lives with minimal investment of time and effort.

A University of Maryland School of Medicine study lead by Dr. Michael Miller³ found that laughter is linked to the healthy functioning of blood vessels. Laughter also releases endorphins – the body's natural pain killers, and energizes our cells similar to the way aerobic exercising does. Dr. William Fry, laughter research pioneer and gelotologist (one who studies humor, laughter, and the exercising of the gelastic muscles), claimed it took ten minutes on a rowing machine for his heart rate to reach the level it would after just one minute of hearty laughter.⁴

Research has shown that the physical act of laughing may help protect against heart attacks while strengthening the immune system to fight off viruses and cancers. Whereas stress is linked to physical problems such as memory loss and decreased performance, laughter appears to be an effective antidote. Since the act of laughing has been proven to be a healthy activity, employers who are taking the position that humor in the workplace is an acceptable occurrence might also reap the benefit of lower insurance costs.

The renowned Mayo Clinic documented the physical changes that occur when someone is laughing, and found both short-term and long-term benefits in laughter.⁵ Short-term benefits include stimulation of the organs, activating the stress response (resulting in a relaxed feeling), and soothing tension and stomach aches. Long-term benefits are considerable in that laughter helps relieve pain and improves and strengthens the immune system which helps fight diseases.

Consider that it takes about 11 muscles to frown and about 12 to smile⁶, but over 80 muscles are beneficiaries of the smile (even a forced smile) by way of muscle stimulation and increased blood flow.

Is a Humor 'Eden' Lurking in Corporate-ville?

"Eden" is being used as a metaphor for a place to practice Project Management without constant struggle, stress, tension, or trauma; where good humor is compulsory, and laughter is on the daily 'to do' list.

Can a Corporation support a Humor Eden?

A Far-Off Vision of Eden

At the Fourth Annual NASA Project Management Challenge held in 2007, Marco Sampietro, a professor at the SDA Bocconi School of Management in Milan, Italy and author of numerous technical papers including Time Dependent Inelastic Emission and Capture of Localized Electrons in Si n-MOSFETs Under Microwave Irradiation (2007) presented his paper titled "The Effects of Humor on Project Management".⁷ Sixty-six other papers were presented at the conference; these papers covered topics such as "Gravity Probe B: Lessons from a Management Study", and "Spaceflight Project Security: Terrestrial and On-Orbit Mission".

Among other findings, Señor Sampietro stated that humor can lower stress levels, has a positive effect on difficult situations, and improves communications. But, isn't it interesting that this professor took the opportunity to talk about humor when his peers were talking about Project Management in astrophysics. Señor Sampietro's vision is that utilizing humor in the work environment can facilitate cooperation and problem solving on all levels.

The Compass to Eden

The Humor Project, Inc. is a company who *"...seeks to help people get more 'smileage' out of their lives and jobs by applying the practical, positive power of humor and creativity"*⁸ by offering educational seminars and workshops focused on learning through humor. By using humor to teach, this company is providing an example by which other companies can make their way towards the Corporate Humor Eden.

On the Road to Eden

The Arts Council of Oklahoma City recently offered storytelling workshops to local employers who wanted to add humor to their workplaces. The council is focusing on the art of storytelling as a method to facilitate communication and reduce stress levels.⁹

The local employers who attended these stress reduction workshops and are now practicing what they learned are well on their way to realizing the benefits of humor in the workplace. Business owners have reported increased foot traffic and a gradual rise in sales.

Eureka! 'Eden' Exists

To further support the value of humor and stress relief in the workplace, Fortune Magazine surveyed employees from numerous companies "Is this a fun place to work?" Fortune Magazine uses the answer when compiling their nationally recognized *"100 Best Companies to Work For"*¹⁰ lists. The implication is that the best company to work for in the United States is a company that recognizes and actively promotes the value of fun and humor as a way to relieve stress in the workplace.

Google was named as the number one Best Company to Work For on both the 2007 and 2008 Fortune lists. Google cites their 'Top 10 Reasons to Work for Google' on their web site including these two:

*#3: **Appreciation is the best motivation**, so we've created a fun and inspiring workspace you'll be glad to be a part of, including on-site doctor and dentist; massage and yoga; professional development opportunities; on-site day care; shoreline running trails; and plenty of snacks to get you through the day*

*#4: **Work and play are not mutually exclusive**. It is possible to code and pass the puck at the same time.¹¹*

The number two company on Fortune Magazine's 2008 Best Companies list is Quicken Loans. Quicken lists their "Fun Company Culture" as a priority in making 'coming to work really fun'.¹²

Fortune Magazine's second list, the Top 25 Paying Companies¹³, is a subset of their '100 Best Companies to Work For'. Google was listed as number 25 while Quicken Loans did not appear on the top paying list. Based on this information, it appears that employees consider not only financial rewards when seeking employment opportunities but also recognize the benefit of working in a fun and low stress environment.

Understanding that alleviating stress by incorporating humor and fun, companies are implementing initiatives to assist employees in reducing stress. Employers have created such innovative programs as providing on site recreational facilities with swimming pools, board games, and pool tables. They are also offering free food, live music, interactive games, and various amenities such as ATMs, doctors, dentists, and day care. Investing in a workplace that balances the stress of work with relaxation may be resulting in reduced personnel related costs and lower overall absenteeism.

Eliminating the Stress and Creating the Humor

Napoleon Bonaparte

Project Management wasn't a profession in Napoleon's era, but his career endeavors bear certain features of Project Management. Napoleon's successes were attributable to the repeatable processes he developed and followed. He was

deadly serious about his career, but that did not preclude him from engaging heartily in stress relief.

Napoleon often stopped for troop supplies at Épernay, a French village, where Claude Moët lived and produced a fine champagne. Moët lavishly entertained Napoleon during these stop-overs, and in turn, Napoleon's purchasing power and market influence helped Moët become the most famous wine maker in the world. Napoleon enjoyed the fine champagne so much that he unfailingly stocked it for himself and his troops stating that "*In victory, you deserve Champagne, in defeat, you need it*".

The one battle that Napoleon failed to stock champagne for neither himself nor his troops was the Battle of Waterloo¹⁴. Napoleon's *Grande Armee* was resoundingly defeated by the Prussians and the British, marking the end of Napoleon's reign.

Reaching for a conclusion, we can state that Napoleon was defeated when he strayed from his repeatable processes and let stress overcome him.

Payson Hall

Payson Hall is a prolific Project Management essayist with over 80 articles credited to his name. He holds the attention of his audience by injecting clever bits humor into his papers. For instance, Mr. Hall (with colleague Brian Lawrence) opens "The Problem with Project Management"¹⁵ with a humorous, yet very real look at the Project Manager's first 57 hectic minutes at work on a Monday morning.

At the January 10, 2008 PMI Sacramento Valley chapter meeting, Mr. Hall presented "A Modest PMBOK® Proposal: Blame Management", a tongue-in-cheek look at a possible addition to the existing Knowledge Areas. John Reiling, of Germany, who hosts the PMPOD (Project Management Podcast), interviewed Mr. Hall on March 21, 2008¹⁶ about the proposed Blame Management component. Mr. Hall is at the top of his 'funny' game in this piece giving advice about where to place the blame when things go wrong in your project.

In the proposal Blame Management (BM) would cover the identification of blame events, analysis, response planning, and monitoring and controlling. Being closely related to Risk Management, blame events would be mitigated by assigning blame to those who have been named to the 'blame eligibility' list. Conversely, a 'blame ineligibility' list would also be created to protect, say, the boss. Much of this portion of BM would be achieved through 'blame-storming' sessions.

Mr. Hall submits that there would be times when blame must be assigned to unidentified or vague outside sources such as the economy, the government, or large companies. Innocent bystanders could also absorb blame if needed, e.g. 'the dog ate my homework'.

Walter Viali, PMP

The 2007 President of the Houston Chapter of PMI, Walter Viali, along with A. J. Collier, 2008 President of the PMI Clear Lake Galveston chapter, have found an ingenious method of mixing Project Management with music, fun, and sea cruises. Their Seminar at Sea (and later, Seminar @ Sea II, and Seminar @ Sea III) cruises began in 2006 as a way to earn PDUs while on vacation. The cruise serves as the setting for Project Management discussions, education, speeches, and entertainment. The first cruise attracted 56 attendees with the third one boasting of over 250 attendees.

Mr. Viali grew up in the 1960's, and like many young men of the era, learned to play the guitar. He joined a band in 1966 named "The Wild Things", and played with numerous other bands. Mr. Viali routinely delights his audiences with renditions of Elvis, and often appears and performs in full Elvis regalia.

Mr. Viali has integrated his lifelong love of performing into his Project Management career. As a talented humorist he is the author and presenter of the witty "Why General Custer Should Have Been a PMP!"¹⁷. Mr. Viali explores whether the outcome of Little Big Horn might have been different if Custer had adequately scoped out the project and sufficiently addressed the remaining PMBOK Knowledge Areas. Mr. Viali gave his 'General Custer' presentation at the Seminar @ Sea III to a vigorous round of applause.

Conclusions,,, And Extemporaneous Notes

Conclusions

No matter what form humor takes, it comes with powerful benefits to the human body and mind.

No matter what the profession humor can be successfully incorporated into the workplace.

Extemporaneous Notes

Project Management is too complicated for short jokes

Accounting jokes are funnier than Project Management jokes

Yes, PMs take themselves too seriously

Stick to the repeatable processes; Napoleon didn't

Blame Management is an interesting concept

Earning PDUs while on vacation is every Project Manager's dream

References

1. Don Meadows, PMP, e mail message to the author, 16 July 2008.
2. A Compendium of Project Management Humor, < http://cvr-it.com/PM_Jokes.htm > (12 July 2008).
3. University of Maryland School of Medicine Shows Laughter Helps Blood Vessels Function Better, May 27, 2008 < <http://www.umm.edu/news/releases/laughter2.htm> > (12 July 2008).
4. "Laughter can keep you heart healthy", MyheartCentral.com, 21 March 2008. < <http://www.healthcentral.com/heart-disease/c/7291/22376/heart/> > (12 July 2008).
5. 'Laugh your way to stress relief', 20 July 2006. < <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-relief/SR00034> > (16 July 2008).
6. The Straight Dope: Does it take fewer muscles to smile than it does to frown? 16 January 2004. < <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/040116.html> > (12 July 2008)
7. Marco Sampietro, "The Effects of Humor on Project Management", 02 July 2007. < http://pmchallenge.gsfc.nasa.gov/docs/2007Presentations/Presentations/Sampietro_Marco.pdf > (12 July 2008).
8. The Humor Project, Inc. 2008. < <http://www.humorproject.com/programs/speakersb.php> > (17 July 2008).
9. Clytie Bunyan, 'Employing Humor Has Come Back Into Style at Work', 27 January 2008. < <http://newsok.com/article/3197515/1201380720> > (12 July 2008)
10. '100 Best Companies to Work For', Fortune Magazine, 04 February 2008. < <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/bestcompanies/2008/> > (16 July 2008).

11. Google, 2008. < <http://www.google.com/support/jobs/bin/static.py?page=about.html&about=top10> > (12 July 2008).
12. Quicken Loans, Recent College Grads; 2000 – 2008. < <https://www.quickenloanscareers.com/web/college-graduate.aspx> > (20 July 2008).
13. The Top 25 Paying Companies. 22 January 2008. < http://money.cnn.com/galleries/2008/fortune/0801/gallery.bestcos_toppay.fortune/index.html > (20 July 2008).
14. "The Battle of Waterloo, 1815," EyeWitness to History, 2004. < <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com> > (20 July 2008).
15. StickyMinds.com; 2008 "The Problem with Project Management" , 23 August 2001. < <http://www.stickyminds.com/sitewide.asp?function=search&kind=simplesite&tt=SRCHBOX&tth=Y&freetext=payson> > (12 July 2008). Payson Hall is a consulting project manager and founding member of Catalysis Group, Inc. Trained as a software engineer, Payson has consulted on a variety of hardware and software systems integration projects in both the public and private sectors throughout North America and Europe during his 25-year professional career. He can be reached at payson@catalysisgroup.com in Sacramento, California.
16. John Reiling, Payson interview, 21 March 2008. < <http://podcast.mikrotechnik.net/> > (12 July 2008).
17. PMI Tulsa, 2007. < <http://www.pmitulsa.org/files/pmitulsapresentswalterviali20071.pdf> > (17 July 2008).

*This paper was originally presented at the 2nd Annual UT Dallas Project Management Symposium in Richardson, Texas, USA in August 2008 (<http://pmsymposium.utdallas.edu/>). It has been republished here with the permission of the author and the Graduate Program in Project Management at The University of Texas at Dallas School of Management, who is the copyright holder of the conference proceedings. For information about **The UT Dallas Project Management Program**, or the **3rd Annual UT Dallas Project Management Symposium** set for August 2009,*

visit (<http://som.utdallas.edu/graduate/execed/projectMgmtProg/>).

About the Author:**Zelda Jones***Author*

Zelda Jones is an independent project management consultant based in Texas, USA.

Zelda has long been interested in the benefits of humor in the workplace. She has observed how using humor in meetings grabs the participant's attention and keeps them interested in the topic. In unscientific surveys she found that meetings which included humor produced a greater number of decisions. As our economy fluctuates and employees are apprehensive about layoffs humor can ease some of the tension which, in turn, leads to a higher level of productivity.

Zelda presented "Small Projects in a Big World" at the 2007 UTD Project Management Symposium in Plano, Texas, and "Finding Humor in Project Management" at the 2008 UTD Project Management Symposium. She observed that "Finding Humor..." was much better attended. Zelda has practiced project management for over 20 years. She is of the 'new test' generation having earned her PMP certification in 2006. She continues to collect data based on unscientific surveys.

Zelda can be contacted at jones.zelda@gmail.com.