

# BUILD UP PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MENTAL CAPACITY THROUGH HUMOUR

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By Christina Hersom,  
[chhe@implement.dk](mailto:chhe@implement.dk),  
Implement Consulting Group

When did you last find yourself in a situation where humour just emerged between the lines? Or when did you last have a laugh so deep you could feel it deep inside yourself? Humour not only lifts your mood momentarily, it is also a powerful enabler of your overall psychological capacity at home and at work as well.

## What do we know about humour and resilience from science?

We know that our response to humour consists of two components – a cognitive component when we understand it, and an emotional component when we enjoy it and find it fun (Southwick and Charney, 2012). Thus, humour activates different areas of our brain and thereby broadens the kind of attention that leads to exploration, creativity and flexibility in our thinking. This is so, because humour broadens our momentary thought-action repertoire (Fredrickson, 1998).

At the same time, humour builds enduring personal resources that suit situations in our private life as well as organisational situations. Humour incorporates resilience mechanisms such as cognitive reappraisal, active problem-focussed coping and infusion of positive meaning into ordinary events. As Viktor Frankl (1963), Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, remarked on humour in his search for meaning, it is “another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation” and the “ability to rise above any situation, even if for a few seconds”. I believe these seconds can

be very important to create the capacity to generate alternative approaches and solutions to problems when we get lost or stuck. For example, humour can help us face our fears, reducing stress hormones and neurotransmitters, such as cortisol, norepinephrine (noradrenaline) and epinephrine (adrenaline), by presenting the positive and negative at once. This way of refining things is associated with optimism and positive psychological mental health (Reivich and Shatté, 2003).

Professor Ann Graber (2004) said that humour combines optimism with a “realistic look at the tragic” by confronting, reframing and sometimes transforming the tragic. This is an important component of resilience (thriving, learning and growing despite adversity) because it helps us confront and cope with things we fear or find painful, while at the same time being exposed to it in the right amount of passivity. We are still psychologically safe because of the distance and the control created by humour in itself. Frankl noted (1986) that through humour “we make use of the specifically human capacity for self-detachment inherent in a sense of humour”.

A “fun” way to survive or not, humour is associated with the ability to tolerate stressful situations (Martin et al., 2003). We do this by reducing tensions and psychological discomfort, but also by attracting support from others. This addresses a relational perspective. Let me unfold this with an example from my work as a leadership consultant.

### **How humour builds capacity in real workplaces**

Earlier this week, I had a conversation with two highly experienced officers. They work as leaders in some of our toughest criminal environments. We had some really fun moments and it was a real pleasure to share and talk to them about humour. We focussed on how they as individuals, leaders and colleagues should use their emotional and cognitive flexibility every day to cope with the complex situations they face in more or less unpredictable

environments. We also reflected on humour as an important mediator of well-being, enabling them to thrive while at the same time handling difficult, dangerous and stressful situations as part of the job. We concluded that humour in workplaces requires a high degree of social intelligence or “knowing my relationship” to be aware of what can be put into play in a specific relationship and not another. I will argue that attention to this is a prerequisite for humour to function properly in an organisation.

Later that day, after working with the leadership, well-being and performance of the officers, I reflected on humour as a “connector of people”. Because our reward centre in the brain is activated by humour, can we make stronger connections to the people we share humour with? Don’t we all have our favourite kinds of humour? I.e. partners who seem to adjust to your humour immediately and at the same time can make you wonder in a fun way, smile or laugh out loud or just “push” to excitement or energy in you again and again.

From this perspective, humour can be seen as an important contributor to the creation of stronger relationships, stronger communities and results in the organisation. We simply build psychological capacity by using our humour at work!

### **Final reflections on humour**

Personally, I find humour extremely life-giving. Humour is one of my top VIA character strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). This means that when I find myself playing, e.g. with strange perspectives, holding onto something absurdly said or done, flirting in a sarcastic manner or choosing crazy paradoxes among colleagues, clients and networks, I always feel free, creative, energetic and I feel like I perform better. Positive emotions are certainly released, creating a spill over effect and positive spirals. For me, this happens especially when the more advanced forms of humour are at stake, adapted spontaneously to situations. This is where it really strengthens the positive events and makes the difficult easier.

But what about you? Do you experience it too? If so, then humour can be more important to you than you realise, perhaps even one of your best drivers?

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## Humour and your personal leadership

Taking responsibility for your own thriving and mental health despite adversities and challenges at work, you may consider these questions and incorporate them in your personal leadership: What is humour for you at work? In what relationships do you expand and maintain the positive tension between you and others? Why does this exist? Is it based on a certain kind of humour? Why do you feel energised by it? How does it help you – and the other person(s) to build meaning, capacity and to handle workplace situations? And not least: How can you build, keep or expand your most important humour relationships in 2019?

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## Put humour on the agenda

But how do you put humour on the agenda and make it a part of your everyday work life? An idea could be to facilitate a humour workshop that puts humour on the agenda as a social function. These are some points to focus on before, during and after the workshop:

### Before the workshop

1. Agree on the purpose by talking about humour and consider whether the atmosphere is right for working with this theme
2. Choose to put humour on the agenda as a theme at an upcoming meeting – at least one hour
3. Explain the purpose of the meeting invitation and select a facilitator

## During the workshop

4. Talk broadly about what kind of humour you see and hear at your workplace (funny exaggerations, dry talk about “something” between the lines, absurdities, self-irony, sarcasm, laughing about life, funny use of body language, witty humour etc.)
5. Ask everyone to contribute with at least two cards/Post-it notes that show examples of experiencing humour and that everyone thinks is okay to put up on the wall: What do I think is good humour? (When I ...), What do I not think is good humour? (When I ...). (This will function as an implicit expression for setting boundaries)
6. Examples can be gathered on two different walls
7. Review the examples together and find your humour cultural patterns: What characterises your workplace/group in a good way and what gives you less energy overall?
8. Discuss in small groups: What should I do more or less of in order to create opportunities for thriving and energy through humour, for myself and others around me?
9. Ask people to notice humour continuously and to share the best laughs together in the future

## After the workshop

10. Share the week's (or if you are a less humorous group, the month's) best laughs, crazy or serious situations that required humour or distance and talk about what humour does for you as an overall unit and as individuals.

Build up psychological and mental capacity through humour

## Literature

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