

It's no joke: We seem to be lacking a sense of humour

As April Fool's nears, surveys find few smiles over pranks at work

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Wouldn't April Fool's Day be a great time to take revenge on your overbearing boss by putting itching powder on his chair before the staff meeting?

Or how about rattling your smug cubicle mate with a prank e-mail about an impending layoff?

Hold the whoopie cushions: As tempting as it may sound to score a point or a good laugh on a co-worker, being the merry prankster in an office that doesn't appreciate it is likely to bring frowns rather than thumbs up from colleagues, according to a poll released ahead of April Fool's Day, this Tuesday.

Just 29 per cent of 125 Canadian marketing executives polled thought playing a trick in the office was even somewhat appropriate on April Fool's Day, with the other 71 per cent proclaiming pranks were unacceptable at any time.

Creative people apparently have a better sense of humour, since the same question asked of 125 advertising executives found 51 per cent believe a good trick can be appropriate, while the rest thought pranks had no place in the office - even though April 1 traditionally has been set aside for mischief since feudal times.

(A serious attitude also surfaced in a Globe and Mail Web poll this week, where 71 per cent of 4,200 readers said April Fool's pranks were not tolerated or encouraged at work.)

"I don't think these results mean Canadians aren't able to take a joke, but I think our perspective on what is appropriate in the office doesn't include jokes that disrupt people at work," says Collin Maria Ezzell, division director with staffing service firm Creative Group, which conducted the two executive surveys.

Most of the pranks cited by survey respondents as inappropriate involved disrupting the routine, such as moving furniture or making equipment unusable.

"People are very protective of their space and messing with their cubicle may be a big source of fun for the person doing the prank. But it can throw off the day for the person who has to pull things together and get back to work," Ms. Ezzell says.

"The message is to use a lot of judgment before pulling a prank."

It's important to choose a target who will get the joke, she cautions. "You've got to know your audience. If you work in a fun, laid-back environment and pranks are something you might typically do in the office, have fun with it. But if it isn't, don't do it just for April Fool's because it is probably not going to be well received."

However, that's not to say there isn't room for a good laugh-inducing stunt, counters life coach Kristi Nielsen, president of Vancouver-based Laughter @ Work (<http://www.laughtercoach.ca>).

"Harmless practical jokes are great fun and they relieve stress. So unless a person is so unfortunate as to work in a company in which people are unwilling to step outside the box at all, then I say go for it," Ms. Nielsen says.

She gives laughter workshops for stress relief in offices. "On several occasions, I have ended up in a company where the people who need stress relief the worst are so strictly regimented and have such low tolerance for anything outside the box, that they were not even willing to co-operate and participate," she explains.

"For me it was frustrating. I left with a feeling of 'I feel so sorry for you people. You are causing your own stressful environment,' " Ms. Nielsen says.

U.S. workplace adviser Peter Handal suggests big companies do more to encourage employees to use April Fool's as a way of blowing off steam.

"It may seem counterintuitive, but humour and laughter are significant contributors to a company's overall success," says Mr. Handal, president of New York-based Dale Carnegie Training, whose clients include AT&T Inc., Bayer USA Inc. and Chevron Corp.

"Study after study indicate that employees who express a sense of humour on the job are more creative, more productive, better decision makers, and get along better with co-workers than employees who don't express their more humorous side," he says.

However, April Fool's shouldn't be a day in which anything goes, he adds. "The most foolish thing an employee could do would be to perform a prank that leads to his or her job termination." These would include stunts with the potential to damage company property or cost the company money by disrupting employees' ability to work.

And it should be something that people will clearly not take seriously, Mr. Handal says. "The goal is to pull off a prank that makes the target laugh. It is, after all, a joke."

Ms Nielsen's idea of a winning prank is one that makes a valid point.

For instance, a business partner who was accompanying her on a flight to a business trip asked her to pack a lunch for them, because he assumed it the was a woman's job to do the cooking.

"I packed a lunch all right. I took two boxes of frozen entrées (one chicken Alfredo and one lasagna) removed the contents and then made sandwiches and carefully glued the boxes back shut," Ms. Nielsen says.

When he saw the boxes, he balked at the thought of having cold pasta at 20,000 feet. "I said: 'Well, I am hungry, and I opened the box that held a corned beef and Swiss on rye sandwich.' "

Because the partner had a sense of humour, "this was an effective way of teaching him a lesson he needed to be reminded of," she says. "Every time he showed his sexist attitudes from then on, all I had to say was: 'Cold chicken Alfredo for you.' "

Lightening up the workload

Want to make your workplace more fun? Here are some tips, suggested by Robert Half International to help lighten things up:

Say no to sarcasm. Using humour doesn't excuse berating others.

Poke fun at yourself. Laughing at your foibles in a lighthearted way can lighten the mood without offending others.

Laugh with others. By sharing in the fun you can be perceived as having a great sense of humour without ever telling a joke.

Create a "funny file." Sharing appropriate workplace cartoons (such as the Dilbert comic strip) or amusing newspaper articles or funny e-mail links can provide a diversion to co-workers.

Start a fun committee. Invite co-workers to brainstorm activities through the year, such as lunchtime games that could raise the office fun factor.

Trivial pursuits. Quizzes about sports, celebrities or food can get everyone involved even if the only prize for the winner is congratulations on the bulletin board, or an e-mail.

Capture crazy moments. Keep a disposable camera on hand for all to use to snap candid shots of happy and silly scenes in the office and post the results on a bulletin board