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ARTICLE
LEADERSHIP & MANAGING PEOPLE

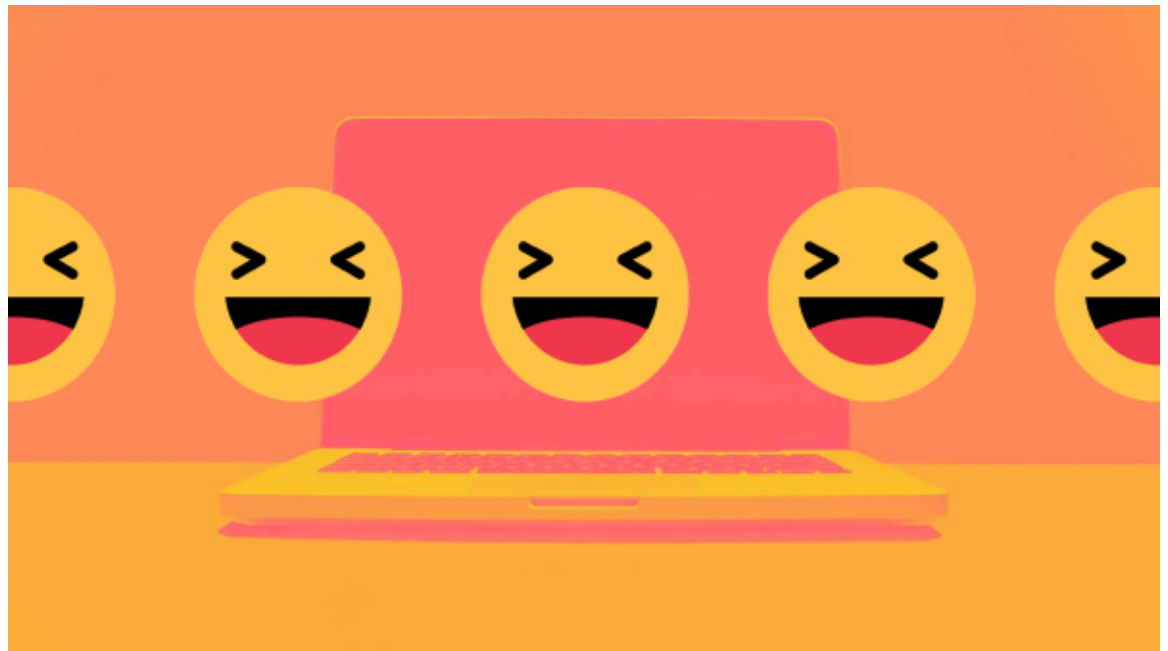# Laughter Will Keep Your Team Connected — Even While You're Apart

by J. Stewart Black

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Laughter Will Keep Your Team Connected — Even While You're Apart

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Videoconferencing has been around for more than 20 years. Until the pandemic, though, you would find that many if not most people needing to attend a meeting remotely would be calling from a real conference room full of their teammates. Today, we're routinely holding videoconferences that are 100% virtual. And that introduces a problem technology can't fix.

The problem is us, specifically the fact that that we haven't evolved socially — or even neurologically — to the point where we can bear much isolation. So much of our wellbeing, and by extension what makes us productive, is predicated on physical proximity, that the removal of that proximity for any period of time can be severely damaging. One surprising casualty of social distancing? Laughter.

Normally people laugh about 18 times per day. And 97% of that time we're laughing with others — we are 30 times more likely to laugh with others than to laugh alone. Think about it: When was the last time you had a funny thought alone and laughed at it out loud? Now think a bit more: How often when you laugh and your friends laugh at something, is that something actually funny? It may surprise, but research shows that 80% of what people laugh at is really not that funny.

So why do people laugh? They laugh because others laugh. They laugh in order to laugh with others. Just as everyone starts yawning when just one person yawns, most people can't help but laugh when those around them do. This is why comedy shows on TV have prerecorded laugh tracks.

Laughing in response to other people laughing is not just a behavioral phenomenon. When we laugh, our body releases two key chemicals. First, our pituitary gland releases endorphins into our blood where they make their way into the brain and spine. Endorphins are polypeptides that interact with opioid receptors in the brain to help relieve pain and trigger feelings of pleasure. In fact, studies show that people can endure 15% more pain simply by laughing for a few minutes beforehand.

Second, when we laugh, our brain releases dopamine — a neurotransmitter that creates a sense of euphoria. Dopamine can enhance learning, motivation, and attention. In fact, the overall health benefits of laughter and the neurochemicals involved include improved immune functioning, stress relief, increased tolerance for pain, improved cardiovascular health, reduced anxiety, sense of safety, and improved mood. Laughter is also associated with higher motivation and productivity at work. Which brings us back to Covid-19.

The isolation we have imposed on ourselves to combat the pandemic is severely curtailing social interaction, leading to decreased laughter, and a consequent reduction in beneficial chemicals that our bodies need. To make matters worse, the associated stress and fear we are experiencing alone is pushing our biochemicals in the wrong direction. When we are under threat, danger, or stress, our body releases cortisol, a glucocorticoids hormone produced in the adrenal glands on top of each kidney, into the bloodstream. Most cells within the body have cortisol receptors, so its effects are widespread. Too much cortisol can result in weight gain, headaches, irritability, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and high blood pressure.

So, what can you do as a team leader to mitigate these effects? When taking on the job, you might not have thought that it would be your job to influence the body and brain chemistry of your subordinates. But in today's home-alone, virtual team world, that's exactly what you should be doing: for your team members to stay healthy and productive, you need to get them to laugh more and stress less. Does that mean that you need to become a comedian? Not at all. But it does mean

that you need to take deliberately steps to foster some laughter. Here are five concrete steps you can take to do that:

1. **Slow down**. Most leaders feel that they need to make every virtual interaction as fast and efficient as possible. When virtual interaction is all people have, this is a mistake. In these times of isolation, an important part of a leader's job is to socially, psychologically, and emotionally connect and reconnect the team and not just get work done. Laughter is one of the best ways to do keep a team emotionally connected. But you need to give it time and space, even if you have to put off some of the actual work.
2. **Get the video working**. Humans are amazingly good at reading both visual and auditory clues and cues when it comes to laughter. The more channels you can give them to give and read cues the better. For that reason, make sure that all your people can and do attend via video, because that will increase the cue-flow for laughter.
3. **Smile a lot and talk in a slightly higher voice**. People naturally look to the leader of a meeting for signals as to what is okay in terms of behavior, including permission to laugh. The simplest and strongest facial signal that laughter is okay is a genuine smile. The key auditory cue is the pitch of your voice. Almost regardless of culture, a slightly higher pitch in your voice signals that you want to set a lighter rather than more serious tone for your group.
4. **Set the example**. Because like a yawn, laughter sparks laughter, perhaps nothing is more powerful in generating some laughter in your team than laughing yourself. However, just as people can generally differentiate between genuine and fake smiles, they can tell the difference between a real and a forced laugh — which leads to the final recommendation.
5. **Get in the mood yourself**. You need to start with your own chemistry ahead of any meeting. It's easier to keep laughter (and its neurochemicals) going than it is to start cold in front of all the faces on your Zoom page. Ideally get yourself laughing — even for just a few seconds — in advance. I'd advise watching a funny video just before the meeting starts.

One day, I hope, we will find a vaccine for the coronavirus, and we'll be able get back to more natural social interactions. But it is very likely that even after the crisis is over, more people will work more often from home alone, which means the laughter issue is here to stay — because no matter how much better the tech gets, social behavior and neurochemistry evolve over thousands of years. Since that pace is unlikely to accelerate suddenly over the two, 20, or even 200 years, leaders are going to have to get good at making laughter happen.

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