



THE INCREDIBLE LIGHTNESS BEING: USE HUMOR TO INSPIRE YOUR TEAM DURING A CRISIS

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Feena May's unique experiences and insights offer powerful lessons on how teams can navigate a crisis when humor is the glue that reinforces their bond.

Feena May's journey to becoming CEO of The Inspiring Company taught her the power that humor can unleash in times of crisis. Having trained as a circus clown at the Moscow State Circus, she spent 28 years working with the International Committee of the Red Cross on the frontline of crisis and conflict zones.

Her subsequent PhD in Leadership cemented her experiential insights in the value of humor in times of crisis and clarified her understanding of the precision with which humour can be deployed in organizational settings.

"I define humor as the gift to see life's absurdities with a smile, a capacity to laugh at and with yourself and the ability to share this with others. It is a lightness of being that helps us deal seriously with a crisis without it getting heavy or exhausting," says May.

Leaders know that when a team gels, anything is possible. They know from experience the agility with which a secure, well-integrated team can hurdle any obstacle. In crisis, however, those dynamics shift. Stress levels increase as issues of job security, personal responsibility and strategic realignment rear their heads.

Stress initiates the adrenaline-fueled fight, flight or freeze response in us all, which is anathema to a team in crisis. When constrained by fear the skills required in crisis - creativity, problem solving, innovation and resolve - become blocked.

Research has found that humor can not only reduces stress and improve resilience, it can increase potential creativity and problem-solving skills. It also reinforces a sense of trust and competence.

This is the space in which humor – that is, the ability of leaders to carry themselves with a certain lightness of spirit, kindness and presence – becomes a key trait that can secure the team, reaffirm bonds irrespective of hierarchy and enable innovation.

"The power of humor in leading a crisis is that, as leaders, we open up to other reactions apart from flight, fight, freeze. It is the power to see the opportunity in a crisis rather than the fear. Humor opens the space for this," explains May.

Of course, the quality of the humor matters. Humor that is performative, deliberately provocative and often aimed at a specific target, creates the very tension that effective leaders wish to dissolve. It can also be culturally insensitive.

In contrast, May's definition of humor is more generous and inclusive. It is utilized to foster positive connections.

“When we talk about humor in crisis, we are talking about humor as our capacity, ability and willingness to share ourselves in service of the situation. Humor directed at a person for the sake of ‘laughing at them’ is not in service,” she says, adding that a good measure to assess the intention of humor is to ask whether it is in service and whether it opens space for others.

May’s insights suggest leaders may have much to learn from a silent clown: the apparently simple acts of holding space, creating connection and encouraging exchange.

Here are three reflection points on humor to revitalize your team dynamics:

1. Start to see the use of humor as a way of ensuring a healthy and sustainable work environment.
2. Understand humor as a tool for opening new space in crisis, creating new opportunities.
3. Value humor. A team that laughs together, works well together.