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Laughter is the best medicine

Sean Langley has been looking at alternative remedies as the current financial crisis begins to bite in the workplace ■

Recently, I have come to realise that my career began at an authority that was ahead of its time – 30 years ahead, in fact. I will explain!

As I write, the coalition government has just announced it is cutting £2bn worth of special projects created by the previous government, because they claim funds are not available. The removal of some of these projects will have a direct bearing on the benefit infrastructure.

This comes on top of the £6bn of public sector cuts already touted, with dire warnings of stringent job losses to follow. The future does indeed look bleak and – it is hard to imagine your workplaces ever being the same again.

Those are the prospects you are faced with, and the enormity of the challenge is all too apparent. In June's *Benefit*, I stressed the importance of a **positive mental attitude** being crucial to successfully leading teams through these difficult times. With that, you can tackle the daunting task.

As financial cuts take effect, the likelihood is that you will be expected to continue delivering improved services, with less human resource at your disposal. The need to streamline policy and procedure is evident

and, many are embracing such methodology as **'systems thinking'**, promoted by John Seddon's Vanguard group.

However, what is evident to me is that you will have to squeeze every last drop of output from your remaining workforce, when, all the time, the risk is that they will feel the strain ever more.

One way to do this is to apply pressure to your teams to meet targets, but this can actually be counter-productive. A better way is to create an environment where your teams want to optimise their output. Driving compliance will always result in lower value than true commitment.

Consider this. Why do world maps tend to be Euro-centric? The time-alignment to Greenwich may be one factor but, does north have to be at the top? Apparently, this began when European navigators used the North Star and the magnetic compass. Previously, the top of the world map was to the east, which is the origin of the word orientation. You may need to re-orientate to get the most from your teams.

For example, how about the positive effects of power-napping? This consists of a 20-minute period of controlled sleep during the day, to relax and recharge. This can dramatically improve mood, alertness and performance, thus reducing mistakes or accidents. A study by NASA on its astronauts found that a power-nap can improve performance by 34%.

Losing just 20 minutes of a 7.5 hour day for a power-nap equates to less than 5% of a person's productive time, but if you improve performance by 34% for the remainder of the day, then the net effect is positive.

When I began work in 1979, a colleague used to regularly fall asleep at the desk in the afternoon. Rather than wake him, we used to pull the blinds down so he could not be seen by the public. I used to think this odd but, now I know... he was power-napping!

What I am advocating is that you build

this time into people's working days. But not everyone will want to power-nap, as it can affect your normal nightly sleep pattern. As an alternative, how about utilising the positive effects of laughing?

Using techniques devised by Dr. Madan Kataria, **'laughing clubs'** have sprung up all over the world – take a look on You Tube! Businesses have adopted the theory that more productive people are those that take their work seriously but take themselves lightly. Those that have seen *The Naked Office* will understand that perfectly.

By holding laughter sessions, it has been found to improve stress management, efficiency and team working. Research has also shown that laughing lowers blood pressure and boosts immunity, by releasing the body's natural painkillers, endorphins. So, there are multiple benefits – improved performance, added to a reduced risk of lost productivity through sickness.

Can you afford not to take these cost-effective suggestions seriously? Do you recall Robin Williams' performance as Professor John Keating in *Dead Poets Society*? Jumping on the desk during lessons, he urged pupils to understand the benefit of looking at things from different angles. Maybe your map of staff management needs re-orientating?



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