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## **Workplace: Go Ahead, Laugh. It Works at Work.**

By **JOBERT E. ABUEVA**

**A**t her 7 a.m. staff meeting one Thursday last month, Bobbe White passed out an agenda that contained a cryptic item called "stress reduction technique" right after her marketing update. Her 45 bleary-eyed co-workers thought nothing of it until Ms. White, a business development officer at State Street Bank and Trust Company in Quincy, Ill., showed a two-minute ABC news feature on laughter clubs in India.

They knew something was up but they were not prepared for what happened next. First, Ms. White removed her blazer to show off a Laughter Tour T-shirt and announced, "Lucky you, I am a certified laughter leader." Then she asked the employees to stand with her in a circle and led them in warm-up breathing and stretching exercises. After that, she asked them to shake hands with the person on their left while chanting, "Ha ha ha," and then to do the same with the person on their right.

Next were other exercises with names like one meter, in which you stretch your arms straight ahead, swing them to the left shouting "ho," pull the right one in shouting "ho" again and finally throw your head back and exclaim "ha, ha, ha." In lion, you lift your hands to your shoulders, spread your fingers wide like paws, bug your eyes, stick out your tongue and imitate a lion roaring with laughter.

As they proceeded, members of the group erupted into giggles and guffaws. Ten minutes later, Ms. White concluded with a three-part cheer to which they were supposed to scream "yes" each time. They managed the response to "we are the happiest people in the world" and "we are the healthiest people in the world." But when she shouted, "we love our jobs," they broke into uncontrollable howls.

Some of the employees, at least, felt a rush from the experience. "At first, I thought, 'Here is another of Bobbe's wacky team-builders,'" said Jim McDowell, a customer service representative. "But by the time we were through laughing, I felt so invigorated, I was ready to face the rest of my workday."

The experiment was such a hit that the bank asked Ms. White to put tellers through weekly laughter exercises in the basement.

State Street Bank is a recent convert to one of the latest worker-motivation fads: laughter therapy. Laughter has always had the power to relieve stress, reduce anxiety and increase mental energy, of course, and smart managers have long used humor to soften up customers or placate restive employees. More companies these days are seeking to inject fun into the workplace with diversions like Foosball tournaments, treasure hunts and ice cream parties, and more than 20 humor-consulting firms have sprung up to help them.

But full-blown laughter therapy is something else again. It seeks to make laughter a regular, communal affair — and aims to provoke not mere chuckling but rather explosions of mirth. The theory is that group convulsions will put everybody in such a fine fettle that they will work harder and be friendlier to customers.

Ms. White is a believer. "For months, we tried telling jokes to one another at lunchtime but we started to run out of good ones," she said. "When I came across laughter therapy and laughter clubs, and attended a workshop in St. Louis to become a certified laughter leader, the pressure to be funny had been alleviated, yet the results from systematic laughter were just as, if not more, evident and lasting."

The movement originated in 1995 in a Bombay park, where Dr. Madandd Kataria, a physician and longtime student of humor, invited four strangers to join him for an impromptu laugh. Dr. Kataria subsequently refined the method, introducing elements of yoga, and came to the conclusion that a session of forced laughter in the morning gave people a strong sense of well-being.

He started a company, Laughter Clubs International, that has grown to more than 400 affiliates in India, with 50,000 members who meet on their way to work, usually outdoors. One of Dr. Kataria's promoters in the United States is Steve Wilson, a

psychologist and self-proclaimed "joyologist" in Gahanna, Ohio. He invited the Indian doctor to start a World Laughter Tour in North America last year, and says dozens of clubs have opened since then. "Our mission is simple: think globally, laugh locally," he said.

Laughter therapy is not for everyone, of course. It involves physical strain, and may not be for hernia sufferers or pregnant women, Mr. Wilson says. For obvious reasons, it is also a good idea to keep out people with severe colds or the flu.

Moreover, some employees are skeptical about the benefits of group laughter and reluctant to take part in an activity that they view as raucous and even silly.

"I'm sitting this one out," said Joe Wells, a State Street computer technician, who felt more embarrassed than uplifted by the forced jocularity. "I can find other ways to destress."

The bank, in fact, has put out a memo emphasizing that the sessions are voluntary, and Ms. White acknowledges that she may have pushed the concept a little too hard. "I admit, I sneaked it up on my co-workers," she said. "I just know there are other folks in the bank that are dying to join us but aren't ready to. Others are also laughing behind our backs."

Such fear of rejection gives pause even to true believers. Barbara Safke, work director at the operations center of the Wells Fargo Bank in Minneapolis and a certified laughter leader, has reserved the company cafeteria to conduct early morning laughter exercises in March and has sent a memo to employees inviting them to take part. "The need clearly exists because we do a lot of trouble-shooting," Ms. Safke said. "It can get very stressful at times."

Even so, she added: "I'm somewhat apprehensive about starting a club at work. I'll conduct a dry run with family and friends."

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