

# Scoping It Out

## Lighten Up!

Darlene, the manager of a large group of colleagues, was losing weight and had cut her long hair. Yet her peers and subordinates kept telling her she needed to “lighten up!”

They weren’t talking about her appearance, of course. Instead, they were criticizing her too-serious personality.

Darlene didn’t really know others perceived her as overly serious. She was, after all, constantly engaged in self-development courses and pursuits that would broaden her horizons. But she knew, when despite the success in her life someone actually asked her if she was having fun, that she must look like she wasn’t.

She had to admit that she is a deeply serious person. Even when everything is absolutely fantastic, top-of-the world incredible, she is serious. Throw into that a little, “I don’t deserve how great everything is,” and, “If you’re on a high, keep your guard up because the low is just around the corner,” and you’ve got . . . serious.

None of this is necessarily a problem except that others depend on Darlene to create an atmosphere that motivates them to come together to accomplish great and wonderful things. They want Darlene to be genuinely “up” and “into it” all of the time.

Unreasonable? Not really. Taking a job as a manager means that your attitude affects everyone else’s.

So should Darlene slap on a stupid smile and grin at everyone all day? Jump up and down with excited praise when people do what they are paid to do?

Well, for starters, yes! Sometimes you have to make yourself act happy or as if you are having fun until you begin to believe that you are. But more important than obvious and exaggerated behavior is an attempt to stop what you have always done before. If you continually excuse your own behavior with, “That’s just the way I am, and if people don’t like it that’s their problem,” your future as a manager—or as an employee, for that matter—is predictable.

Here’s another example: Edwin travels often in his job. Although he enjoys traveling, the stress of being home just 2 days and then gone for a week takes its toll on workplace relationships. Always in a hurry and needing to tend to immediate demands, he has little time or patience for casual “bonding” with the staff. Edwin feels his colleagues should understand this and excuse his abruptness or preoccupation with other matters.

But he should consider that those colleagues might *not* understand because they don’t have the same demanding schedules. So they might not have any real empathy for him. If he continues to expect them to understand, he will continue to upset them.

Like it or not, Edwin needs to schedule some down time between trips so he can get in the right frame of mind to interact with others while he is in the office. In the long run, it is not worth the stress to himself and others for Edwin to sacrifice these relationships in order to keep up a superhuman pace.

Getting into a frame of mind that helps you “lighten up” can be simple. Some strategies for success include:

- Listening to positive messages or upbeat music before you go to work rather than focusing on depressing newscasts.

- Reading a daily affirmation from any best-selling inspirational book.
- Writing your own affirmation each morning. Write it several times.
- Visualizing the kind of workday you would like to have rather than dreading a bad day.

I learned this strategy during a golf lesson. My instructor asked me to name the golf club I most disliked. I admitted I loved my 5-iron but not the woods. When I use the woods, I explained, I always hit the ball at the wrong angle. I would “top” it.

So he lined me up for a shot with my 1-wood. Just as I was going to swing, he shouted, Stop! What are you thinking right now?”

“I’m thinking, “Don’t ‘top’ the ball!”

With that he explained to me that my mind was registering only a missed shot. It wasn’t hearing the “*don’t*” part of “Don’t ‘top’ the ball.”

He was right. I was seeing myself scraping the top of the ball with the wood instead of hitting it dead-center as I should.

So he challenged me to change my thinking.

“See yourself taking a clear and powerful swing that connects with the ball,” he instructed me. I did. And you might not believe this, but that ball went soaring! Changing my thinking absolutely worked! The message registered. My mind does not register the “don’t” it provides a picture of what I don’t want because that is what I am thinking.

I use that concept every day. You can, too.

When you’re facing a difficult meeting or an extremely busy day, steer your thoughts toward the positive. Think about what you want, not what you don’t want. Smile, or—at the very least—don’t frown. Your positive attitude will set the tone for your day. It will feed on itself.

These strategies sound simple. But for a manager like serious Darlene, they are anything but. Still, she has resolved that once a week she will make a deliberate attempt to “lighten up.” If it doesn’t work, she hasn’t lost anything. If things improve, she will have learned something.

After that, she has to decide. She can keep using what she has learned or she can step back into the dark. It’s her choice.

You have a choice, too.

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