

# Directions

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This article appeared in our June 2009 email newsletter. *We welcome your comments on any of our articles. Send an email to [info@ecdavis.com](mailto:info@ecdavis.com).*

## **It's Summertime: Can 'living be easy' even during a recession?**

*by Ellen C. Davis*

Goodness knows this has been a tough year. And we do not mean to diminish those difficulties when we suggest that this summer may be a good time for injecting some light-heartedness into your workplace. Not just gallows humor, but true belly laughs can be good for the soul and good for the business.



Case in point: Southwest Airlines. I recently read that Southwest is currently the strongest US airline financially. And while known for doing many things right as a business, Southwest may be best known for its corporate culture, punctuated by a remarkably effective use of humor. How do they do it?

### The Southwest Way to a Sense of Humor

*Think funny.* People at Southwest are masterful at looking at the flip side of all situations. Try to focus and zero in on your most outrageous thoughts – make these thoughts fun, not embarrassing.

*Adopt a playful attitude.* Let your mind be open to uncensored, nonconformist, silly and outrageous behavior and responses to life's daily occurrences. It doesn't mean you have to do outrageous things – but you can always consider them!

*Be the first to laugh.* At Southwest, it's hard not to laugh at the incongruities in everyday situations involving yourself and others. If you don't, someone else will – and they will encourage you to join in. Try to be the first to find some humor in an otherwise awkward or stressful situation.

*Laugh with, not at.* Southwest promotes healthy humor – that is, laughing with others about what they do or what you don't do. Never laugh at people because of who they are (unless you are assured they can laugh at themselves). If and when we do laugh with others about their idiosyncrasies, we should use it as an opportunity to visit our own.

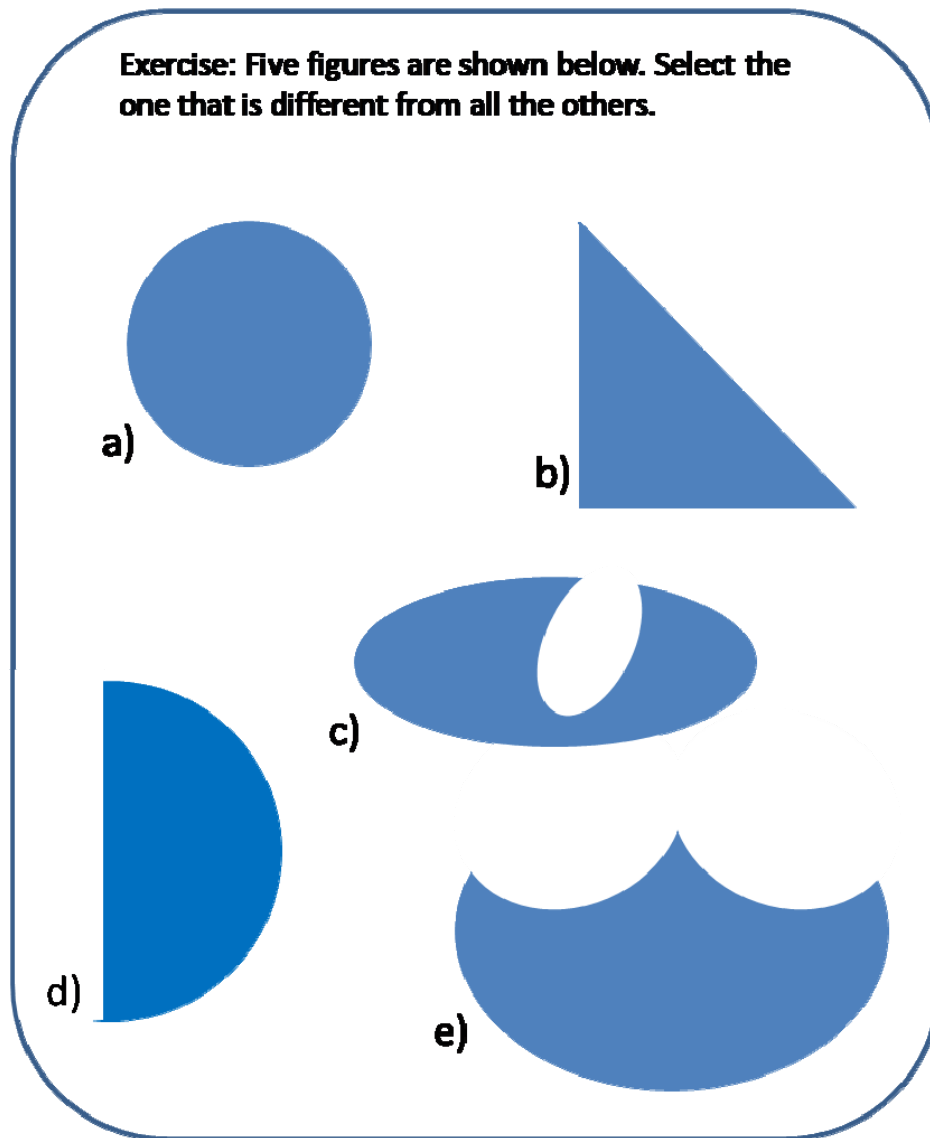
*Laugh at yourself.* Kelleher (CEO) is the first to laugh at himself, not in mockery, but with objectivity and self-acceptance. Laughing at ourselves is a great first step in taking life less seriously.

*Take work seriously, but not yourself.* One of Southwest's mottoes is: "Take yourself lightly and take your job and responsibilities seriously." By adopting this motto, you may soon discover that life's burdens and anxieties are lighter – sometimes even lighter than air.

*Source: Nuts, by Kevin & Jackie Frieberg.  
Broadway Books, New York, 1996.*

You may like the idea of Southwest's "way," but not be sure how to take that into your work setting or even how to be a humorist yourself. (We suspect that most of *our* readers are not quite ready to don a clown's suit for casual Fridays.) Here's some food for thought:

- A key is to start with the things that make you laugh. Incorporate fun into your personal behavior; don't create a "culture statement about fun." Your modeling can be far more effective than a mission statement on culture! It's ok to start small; try putting cartoons on the bulletin board, wearing a funny hat, or sharing laughs from a situation comedy you watched on TV.
- Get your team engaged, too. We all know the importance of creativity to problem-solving, but tend to forget about the importance of fun to creativity. Consider starting your next serious problem-solving session with a little fun exercise that also sparks creativity. Here's something you may want to try:



What's the "right" answer? Well, if you chose B, you got it right because that is the only figure with all straight lines. However, perhaps you chose C because it is the only asymmetrical figure. That is also right! A case can also be made for A, as the one with no points of discontinuity. And D ... and E. In other words – all figures are right, depending on your point of view.

Use this exercise to share a small laugh and to help open up your team's thinking. Remind them that if they assume there is only one right answer to the problem you are facing, the team could erroneously stop looking as soon as they find the first solution. A different – maybe better – solution could be there by searching just a little further.

Source: A Whack on the Side of the Head, by Roger von Oech.  
Warner Books, New York, 1983.

A 2000 issue of the Harvard Management Update makes these suggestions:

- Hook up a punching bag and flail away.
- Hold a laugh lunch. Show a hilarious film clip.
- Add something funny in your routine emails.

The point is this: *humor is not something only a professional comedian can do.* That same Harvard Update offered this quote from psychologist Joseph Dunn: "The difference between a comedian and the rest of us is not that more funny things happen to a comedian, but that he or she more often recognizes the humorous aspect of things that happen to everyone."

Be on the look-out and bring more humor into your workplace!

As a PG-13 rated closing note, I want to share a Southwest Airlines joke I found at [www.about.com](http://www.about.com) when preparing this article:

*A mother and her son were flying Southwest from Kansas City to Chicago. The son (who had been looking out the window) turned to his mother and asked, "If big dogs have baby dogs and big cats have baby cats, why don't big planes have baby planes? The mother (who couldn't think of an answer) told her son to ask the flight attendant. So the boy asked the attendant who responded back, "Did you mother tell you to ask me?" The boy admitted that this was the case. "Well, then, tell your mother that there are no baby planes because Southwest always pulls out on time. Your mother can explain that to you."*

