

Send in the Clowns

When it comes to the health of your company, it's time to stop clowning around.

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Getting called a clown is rarely a compliment. Unless you want to join the circus, it's not much of a career goal, either. In addition to the obvious--bad makeup and ill-fitting shoes--all clowns have a surprising amount in common. This is because of a simple truth: Clowns are based on us. They embody what's wrong with human nature, just magnified a bit.

Are you a clown? Do you work with clowns? I break down clown hood into four common traits.

1. Clowns ignore science. Whether it's the magic of fitting 16 full-sized clowns into a VW Beetle or the constant arguments between clowns and gravity, the fruitless conflict between what's real and what a clown desires is a fixture in a clown's act.

Organizations (and politicians) tend to believe that science is optional. It's not. If you run ads and they don't work, it doesn't matter how you spin it; they didn't work. If your industry is changing because of a technological breakthrough, it doesn't matter whether you "believe" in the breakthrough; it's still true. We may have all sorts of business and theological reasons to challenge a piece of science, but denying the reality of a tested universe never leads to a positive outcome.

Kodak, for example, spent years denying, ignoring, or evading the reality of digital photography and its inevitable impact on the film business. And when it recently announced plans to lay off one-fifth of its already-decimated workforce, you couldn't help but holler, "You clowns! Did it just now dawn on you that digital cameras were going to catch on?"

Clowns refuse to measure their results, because measurement implies that they accept the reality of the outside world. Wishful thinking is not a replacement for the real world. Only clowns can get away with that.

2. Clowns don't plan ahead. Clowns get big laughs from slamming into a brick wall or running to catch up with a car that left without them.

Of course, squirrels and sea monkeys don't plan ahead, either. The only species that regularly demonstrates foresight is humans, but we manage to do this only on occasion. People are happy to spend themselves into credit card debt to enjoy today (instead of tomorrow and the next 30 years), and they work hard to maintain the illusion that everything is just fine--until it's not. Just look at the folks now bringing you record federal deficits.

3. Clowns overreact to bad news (and good). We all have memories of a clown bursting into tears when he stubs his toe or drops an ice-cream cone. Those same manic clowns are overcome with glee and laughter when something goes right for them.

We're all clowns in this regard, too. Witness the dramatic fall in the polls of Howard Dean after one ill-timed scream, the near-demise of the Audi after a *60 Minutes* report that questioned its safety, or the irrational mood swings of the stock market.

4. Clowns aren't very nice to each other. From the Three Stooges to the bucket full of confetti at the Ringling Bros. circus, clowns are most famous for willfully inflicting harm upon their fellow clowns. The easiest way to get a big laugh is with a pair of pliers, it appears. If you can't find pliers, a bottle of seltzer will have to do.

Why is it so unusual to find a company where the boss cares for his employees? Why is it even more unusual still to find a workforce where teamwork just naturally overcomes selfishness? Why do we focus on takeover battles, high-profile firings, and attack-dog politics instead of the gradual, inexorable progress that happens when people with a shared goal work together to accomplish it?

If clown hood is our natural state (and I think it must be), then the alternative must be the anti-clown. Success lies in rejecting your inner clown and adopting a long-range view of the world (even if it's just five minutes longer than your peers').

I think we ought to issue little red foam-rubber noses to everyone who reads this magazine. They compress easily, so you can keep one in your wallet. Then, whenever you're in a meeting and someone starts acting like a real clown, silently whip out the nose and put it on. Imagine the impact of 5 or 10 VPs confronting the CEO with rubber red noses firmly in place. Imagine 20 congressmen fighting against short-term pork all wearing theirs.

What would Krusty do? Or Chuckles? Bozo? Figure out the behavior of a real clown--and do the opposite.