

Cracking up?

Award winning comedienne Kate Hull's training consultancy HumourUs might seem like a joke, but its results are no laughing matter say de-stressed housing staff. Is David Brent really onto something? Monica Garrido reports.



We've all heard that 'laughter is the best medicine', though until recently, any evidence of the real benefits of humour was purely anecdotal. In the last ten years, however, numerous studies have confirmed that laughter is not only a passport to a happy life, but could also be a means to increase productivity - and profits. So can housing organisations really tap into the hidden power of hilarity?

Derwent housing association (HA) is on the brink of big changes. "We're moving to new premises, there are changes related to new legislation and in the way the organisation is expanding," says personnel manager Zoë Atkinson. "It will be very unsettling - people don't naturally like change."

For its annual conference, the association was looking for the best way of presenting its staff with the challenges ahead. "We needed something that could make people feel comfortable with what is to come," says Atkinson, "Get people in the right mood and thinking positively."

Enter Kate Hull, award-winning comedienne and director of HumourUs. Hull is a business consultant with a difference. She begins her workshops by talking about the illness that shaped her life: "I graduated from the best acting school in Canada. I couldn't get a job so I ended up having a nervous breakdown. I spent a year and a half in hospital during which time I was chained to the bed and heavily medicated

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with a cocktail of chemicals and multiple diagnosis. I eventually got out of hospital by signing myself out."

In a recent column for the business section of *The Telegraph*, she added: "My psychiatrist declared me a disabled adult and said I would never have meaningful work. So I became a business consultant."

Hull wrote a play - *Cracked up* - about her experiences. "I became ill when I lost my humour," she says, "I had taken

things too seriously and lost my perspective. As I began to get better I began to laugh again. I was touring the play around the world when a woman in New Zealand told me: 'You should teach workshops'. I thought she said that because I was insightful and that I had candour. She said: 'No, you should teach workshops because they are very lucrative'. I'm marketing my psychosis; having a nervous breakdown was the best career move I ever made."

At that point - early 1990s - the link between health and humour had not yet been proved. "Now there are many studies on the healing benefits of laughter and it is also heavily documented how a happy staff will produce more. There is a compelling business case for investing in the well-being of employees", says Hull.

Good humour in the workplace increases productivity, communication, teamwork, morale, staff retention and motivation, while decreasing stress levels, training time and recruitment costs.

Derwent HA didn't know what to expect until the moment Hull came on stage. "She opened up by telling us about her life story," says Atkinson "which she does in such a way that you end up in stitches. She then goes into workshop-style, picks different people from the audience and makes them do funny exercises to make a point. She got one of our managers on stage and asked him: 'What

sort of things at work really get you down?' He said something like not getting the rent in on time. Breaking

down what exactly was about rent arrears that got him down, she eventually had him shouting it at the wall and imagining the colour red. The more ridiculous this got, the more he realised, as did the rest of the audience, how silly it is to get upset about some things - as most of us do at work - and to put things into perspective."

Hull then gets her victim to keep shouting but end on "tee hee", then "tee hee ha

ha" and so on. "She got across that laughter is a fabulous tonic and that if we get ourselves to laugh, things never seem so bad," says Atkinson.

Hull had a break from consulting: "I didn't want to be 'formerly mentally ill' any more - and became a comedian. I turned out to be good at it! I did a lot of comedy and street performing festivals around the world, won competitions and met my husband who is British."

Her husband and business partner is the actor Bill Rodgers. "The thing I say about that is never marry a Yorkshireman, because they won't move. We ended up that if we were going to build a life together, we were going to build it in Yorkshire. In his council house. Never marry a Yorkshire man who's got a council house - they ain't going nowhere. We got married eight years ago."

They now have two children aged four and two. "I don't want to travel anymore so I decided to invent the humour consultancy. It's very popular in North America where you would not have a major conference without a stress-management expert or a 'have fun in the workplace' person. In this country there is nobody, which is quite exciting. I'm a pioneer but also I'm going to have to explain it."

Her first housing client was South Yorkshire HA and its success led to working for the asylum seeker organisation Safe Haven and Derwent HA.

Hull identifies the mental shift from social to private and from landlord power to tenant empowerment, as the biggest challenges for staff working in housing. "Trying to do good for people, but also making money so you can do the good. I work with all kinds of business, pure profit-based business and 'let's make the world a better place' voluntary sector - housing seems to fall somewhere in between."

She also perceives a generation gap among housing staff that divides old timers and up-and-coming youngsters "more clued up" about the changing housing landscape. But she has particular praise for the people at the helm. "The four chief executives I've worked with were incredibly switched on - I was

