INSTITUTIONALIZING LEVITY AT COURSERA

At Coursera, humor and levity were built into the fabric of the place. There wasn't just one leader cracking jokes, or a team responsible for creating a fun, quirky culture. Levity was distributed, bottom-up, and hard-wired.
　　　　　—Former Coursera employee

Rick Levin, CEO of online learning platform Coursera, commenced his company's weekly all-hands meeting. As was typical, Levin started to run the organization through a formulaic list of current priorities (and progress achieved) across the firm's functional groups.

But on this specific afternoon in early 2015, the assembly featured an uninvited guest. A mystery man lurked behind Levin as he began his remarks. The man was wearing the same clothes as Levin; however, he was much younger, seemed to be bald (or wearing a bald cap), and eerily peered through a Google Glass headset.

The younger man assumed an exaggeratedly aggressive persona of Stanford University computer science professor Sebastian Thrun, the German CEO of Udacity, Coursera's top competitor. With the demeanor of an unhinged mad scientist super-villain, he routinely interrupted Levin's remarks in a German accent to lambaste Levin's presentation and Coursera at large: "Oooo... you think you ist so fancy and smart, yah? My self-driving cars vud drive circles around you!" he exclaimed.

Uproarious laughter and applause met the Thrun imposter's diatribes as Coursera's employees relished their CEO's verbal dismemberment. Levin appeared unfazed by the impostor's outbursts and chuckled alongside his employees.

The impersonator was Connor Diemand-Yauman, one of Coursera's earliest hires, a star employee and founder of their B2B vertical business line. He recalled the stunt:

Rick was characteristically generous with the spotlight, always encouraging me to bring my whole self to work (even when that involved roasting him in front of the company). We had so much fun with this role play, which humanized Rick and signaled that others could also be fun and quirky and weird.

For Levin, few things could have been more self-deprecating than allowing a subordinate to denigrate his leadership in front of every single employee. But did this levity come at the cost of productivity and growth? Levin didn't think so:

The lighter moments didn't take that much time away from work. If levity is worked in correctly... it can actually keep people more engaged. It also can set a tone for the culture, that we're here to do serious and important work but also respect and enjoy each other along the way.

Figure 1 – Rick Levin and Connor Diemand-Yauman (dressed as Sebastian Thrun)

Photos courtesy of Coursera.

All-hands meetings at Coursera were as much an opportunity for "serious" updates as they were for levity, and these light-hearted moments became woven into the fabric of the organization.

SUMMARY

All too often, we associate humor in the workplace with funny individuals (often outgoing, playful, lager-than-life leaders). But Rick Levin, and Coursera more broadly, demonstrate how companies could institutionalize levity and humor.

In this case, we review four specific strategies that helped Coursera and its leaders create a culture of levity that transcended any one individual leader:

1. Identify and empower culture bearers.
2. Infuse levity into dry business processes.
3. Start levity-infused traditions.
4. Embrace surprises and pranks.

1. IDENTIFY AND EMPOWER CULTURE BEARERS

Instead of needing to be the source of humor themselves, leaders can cultivate humor through a select number of well-respected, talented, and humorous teammates, or "***culture bearers***." Leaders can enable and enhance these individuals' exposure to broaden a culture of levity that becomes decentralized from leadership. The result is a more distributed, robust, and enduring sense of levity in the organization.

The partnership between Rick Levin and Connor Diemand-Yauman was a superb example of this strategy in action.

Rick Levin

Levin began his career as an economics professor at Yale University, progressing from assistant professor to department chair from 1974 to 1993. He then served as Yale's president for the next 20 years, saving the university from financial ruin and returning it to global prominence. In 2013, Levin sought out a new challenge and moved to the Bay Area to lead Coursera.

While Levin could do a respectable impersonation of President John F. Kennedy, he wasn't known for his comedic prowess. Instead, Coursera's leadership team celebrated Levin's self-acknowledged, fairly serious, deeply analytical, low-ego servant leadership. And yet, Levin still believed that he could harness humor as a powerful tool at Coursera. He elaborated:

> I set ambitious goals for myself and my team and conveyed a view that what we're doing is really important. At both Yale and Coursera, I felt that what we were doing had major social impact—on the scale of things that are important in the world, we were right up there. So we were doing serious work that deserved everyone's full commitment, and the cause was bigger than the individual. Humor is one of the tools by which you can get people to tackle these challenges… Humor is not a strategy in itself, but one of a number of means to create a positive, humane, productive culture.

Connor Diemand-Yauman

Diemand-Yauman joined Coursera with a passion for helping marginalized individuals gain new skills and employment.   He founded Coursera's B2B (business-to-business) strategy and business line, as well as much of Coursera's early pedagogical strategy. He also led a number of cultural initiatives, including the founding of Coursera's LGBTQ employee resource group, and the creation of a number of humor-infused events—including the Sebastian Thrun skit, an April Fools' video on underwater basket weaving,[1] and a Katy Perry-themed recruiting video.[2]

When Diemand-Yauman came to Coursera as one of the earliest employees, he felt significant ownership and agency over his work. He was an incredibly hardworking, talented, and mission-

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[1] "Underwater Basketweaving with Phineas Dunne," YouTube, September 23, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFmhoUoybSc&t=7s (September 3, 2019).

[2] "Katy Perry - Birthday (Music Video) Coursera Parody," YouTube, December 5, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmSN-IaQNDc (September 3, 2019).

driven employee, and these talents contributed to his rapid rise to leadership. Humor was just one component of the value he brought to Coursera, but one that helped motivate and inspire teammates from across the organization. Diemand-Yauman reflected:

> Rick, Daphne, and Lila… the entire executive leadership team… gave us so much space to be spontaneous, silly, and weird. The other early employees and I worked extremely hard, and the leadership responded to our efforts with more and more leeway to sculpt the organization, its culture, and its business practices. It would've been easy for them to shut down my pranks or all-hands comments, but instead they embraced and encouraged my antics, bad puns and all.

Coursera cofounder Daphne Koller remembered how she and Levin enabled this type of behavior, despite not gravitating to the spotlight or desiring to be the source of humor themselves:

> I tend to be more understated. I'm not going be the one who goes to the front of the room and does pranks and stuff… Even though Rick and I didn't necessarily crack jokes ourselves, we set a tone in how we interacted with others. We signaled that people could be themselves. Part of that was how we responded to jokes. Did we respond in a frowny "this is not appropriate" type of way or did we respond by joining the fun?

Proactively identifying and supporting star performers who *also* cultivate a culture of levity can be a powerful step towards institutionalizing levity at any organization. Leaders like Levin and Koller actively encouraged all of their employees to "bring their whole selves to work" and recognized the significant sway that star performers like Diemand-Yauman had on the organization's culture. Their encouragement allowed for humor and levity—and, more broadly, genuine authenticity—to be driven bottom-up by the employees themselves, incorporated into the organization through many channels rather than a single charismatic leader.

2. INFUSE LEVITY INTO DRY BUSINESS PROCESSES

Leaders can also institutionalize levity by infusing it into recurring, traditionally dry business ceremonies. The process is simple: identify recurring ceremonies across an organization (e.g., all-hands meetings, quarterly planning, weekly stand-ups, growth planning) and identify traditions and norms to make them more active, playful, and surprising. Sometimes these traditions happen organically—an unexpected moment that is celebrated and amplified through corporate tradition—and other times they happen through thoughtful planning and execution. Either way, culture bearers or other employees should ideally lead this transformation.

For example, as explored earlier, Levin and other Coursera leaders set the expectation that all-hands meetings would be a space both to share mission-critical updates *and* embrace a culture of levity. Once leadership established an *expectation* of levity in this organizational practice, levity was institutionalized in a way that didn't rely on the contributions of any individual person.

Institutionalizing levity into ongoing organizational practices has other advantages. In so doing, the leaders of Coursera not only made weekly ceremonies more fun, they also engendered more attention and focus from the team. As one former employee reflected:

> You never knew what was going to happen at all-hands. One minute we'd be talking about quarterly revenue projections and sales target, and the next someone would be singing a song or donning a silly costume. This fun and quirk made people pay attention, and even look forward to the meetings.

In most companies, Objectives and Key Results ("OKRs") planning sessions tend to be standardized and boring. But things were different at Coursera, where leadership gave space for employees to infuse some fun into the process.

For example, before one OKR session, VP of Human Resources Jessica Neal embraced her team's idea to assess their quarterly performance in costume. This unexpected move empowered her team and delighted the broader company, and it quickly became a new norm. During one quarter, Neal's group stood before Coursera's leadership team in lion onesies while another employee sang "The Circle of Life" from *The Lion King* in between their presentations. Levin reflected on the impact of this company tradition:

> The substance of what people said at the OKR meetings was serious, but the presenters dressed up in costumes, so everybody got a kick out of it. They felt like the place was relaxed. It signaled that this was a place where people have a good time while they're doing important work.

Once Coursera's leadership set the expectation of levity for OKRs, it was woven into the ceremony and became self-reinforcing and distributed. Soon, nearly all the teams put their own twist on the ceremony: the business development team (which featured a handful of GSB graduates) self-deprecatingly wore business suits and presented nonsensical graphs while intentionally dropping skin-crawling business terms like "leverage," "synergies," and "paradigm shift"; another team presented their plans for the rest of the year in the style of comedian Zach Galifianakis's awkward interviews in *Between Two Ferns*.

The goofy costume presentations endured well after Neil left the company in 2015. As a result, bland business processes became foundational, enduring pillars of Coursera's culture of levity.

Figure 2 – Picturesque African sunset

(Note: Disney would have sued had we included actual images from *The Lion King*.)
Source: Photo reproduced with permission from OpenClipart-Vectors (pixabay.com)
https://www.needpix.com/photo/852743/africa-digital-art-landscape-nature-savannah-sunset-trees.

3. START LEVITY-INFUSED TRADITIONS

In addition to infusing levity into business ceremonies, leaders can also enable the creation of entirely new, levity-infused traditions unrelated to core business processes.

Thanks in large part to the open and enabling stance of the company's leadership team, Coursera's employees initiated a number of traditions infused with humor and levity that persisted years after their departure. Similar to the OKRs and all-hands meetings, most of these traditions weren't driven by any one individual, but instead owned collectively by the organization.

For example, Coursera's culture bearers organized a number of ongoing traditions, including a weekly whiskey-tasting session, talent shows, and a bi-annual "Make-a-thon," where employees could sprint on creative, riskier projects related to the company's business or culture. Because the leadership focused on creating a safe and inclusive environment and empowering culture bearers (rather than creating traditions themselves), nearly all of these events were coordinated organically by other employees. As a result, the levity they engendered was more impactful, enduring, and shared.

Coursera President Lila Ibrahim reflected on the effect of these cultural events on the high-growth start-up:

> A company's mission is often audacious, and intense. It can be overwhelming and exhausting unless you find ways to create an environment that has some levity. I think when Courserians could be themselves, add levity, and get a positive reaction from a senior, experienced person—it was a powerful positive reinforcer.

One such tradition enabled by leadership was "Formal Fridays." Many larger, bureaucratic, more traditional companies (read: banks) have "informal Fridays," when employees can let down their hair, act more casually, and, in some cases, even wear jeans (gasp!). Coursera, a small, high-growth, super-casual start-up, flipped this tradition on its head by making Friday the one day of the week that employees could wear traditional business attire (read: not pajamas).

Traditions like these—spearheaded by culture bearers or other members of the organization and actively supported by leadership—steeped daily life at Coursera in levity and humor, a necessary complement to the intense nature of the company's mission-driven work.

Figure 3 – Coursera's "Formal Fridays"
Source: Photo courtesy of Coursera.

Figure 4 – Coursera talent show

Source: Photo courtesy of Coursera.

Figure 5 – Coursera karaoke

Source: Photo courtesy of Coursera.

4. EMBRACE SURPRISES AND PRANKS

Outside of business ceremonies and other traditions, Coursera's leadership has always embraced (a) surprise gestures of kindness—such as the team (including members of Coursera's leadership) shaving their heads in support of a fellow Courserian diagnosed with cancer, and employees writing anonymous letters of gratitude to each other; and (b) pranks—such as teammates showing up to meetings dressed as the presenter's favorite childhood cartoon character, and employees creating a *Jurassic Park*–themed birthday celebration for a particularly die-hard fan. One employee played the movie's theme song on the trumpet while another ran across the office dressed as a velociraptor!

In contrast to relying on business ceremonies alone to institutionalize levity, the norming of surprises and pranks creates the enduring *possibility* of levity and joy in everyday moments at work. When employees are primed to find and create surprises, pranks, and moments of heart and levity, the result is a more playful and fun work environment. In addition, surprises and pranks (when compared to larger, harder-to-shift, business ceremonies) are also more flexible, bite-sized ways that individual employees can create moments of levity.

These surprises and pranks not only engendered an ongoing sense of spontaneity and levity into Coursera's culture, they also helped humanize seemingly superhuman leaders by giving them regular opportunities to be vulnerable and share meaningful moments with their teams.

Coursera's leadership team could be somewhat intimidating. Founders Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller were two Stanford University computer science professors, and Rick Levin was brilliant in his own right. But the surprises and pranks, especially those directed at the senior leadership, made these leaders more accessible and, ultimately, more effective in their posts.

One example involves Coursera's tradition of "owning," in which people who leave their laptops unlocked are prey for other employees to send random emails from their account. This was a company tradition designed to train people to not leave their computers unlocked in public places.

One afternoon, Diemand-Yauman caught Levin stepping away from his desk. The CEO had left his computer unlocked and free for anyone to use. Connor sensed the gravity of this once-in-a-lifetime moment—for the next 30 seconds, the power of the rick@coursera.org email address was his and his alone. He typed "Everyone gets a raise!" into the subject of an email message, addressed it to everyone@coursera.org, and let it fly. The message was received by all employees at the company. Giggles emanated from conference rooms and cubicles across the office.

In many firms, this type of behavior would be grounds for immediate firing, joke or no joke. While Levin was not exactly elated by the email, there were no repercussions for the prankster. By sending a silly email from the computer of his boss, Diemand-Yauman had "owned" Levin, in Coursera parlance. As "owning" was a prank deeply embedded into the Coursera culture, the incident served to further humanize Levin, the guy at the top.

By embracing warmth and levity in day-to-day interactions like these, as well as in bottom-up traditions and in otherwise dry business ceremonies, Coursera's leadership enabled the institutionalization of levity in its culture.

Figure 5 – Coursera employees (including leadership) after shaving
their heads in solidarity for a teammate diagnosed with cancer.

Source: Photo courtesy of Coursera.

CONCLUSION

While the humor and levity of some organizations is powered by a few select leaders, others have institutionalized levity into the organization's culture and business practices. This case reviewed four strategies for institutionalizing levity at your organization:

1. **Identify and empower culture bearers:** Identify and recognize high-performing, humorous employees for their efforts to build a culture of levity and enable them to create cultural change in the organization.
2. **Infuse levity into (dry) business processes:** Find ways to make key, recurring business practices more humorous, spontaneous, and participatory, and to make such humor an expectation for them going forward.
3. **Start levity-infused traditions:** Encourage the creation of employee-led traditions that allow employees to "bring their whole selves to work."
4. **Embrace surprises and pranks:** Celebrate pranks and acts of surprises to engender an ongoing *possibility* of levity and joy. For those in leadership, signal that well-intentioned surprises are encouraged and celebrated—even if at the leaders' expense, and especially if they have the perception of being unapproachable or superhuman.