

Review: Michael K. Cundall Jr. *The Humor Hack: Using Humor to Feel Better, Increase Resilience, and (Yes) Enjoy Your Work*. Resource Publications 2022. 134 pages.

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Michael (Mike) K. Cundall Jr. is a professor of philosophy and a humor scholar. He is also a teacher, a father, a practitioner of a martial art, a woodworker, a learner, and overall, a human being who takes himself lightly and allows himself to be imperfect. All those qualities come across as you read his book “The Humor Hack: Using Humor to Feel Better, Increase Resilience, and (Yes) Enjoy Your Work.” Mike uses conversational language and puts the reader at ease. As you read the book, you can easily see yourself sitting with Mike in his living room or in a coffee shop, having an engaging conversation. And yes, there are plenty of funny moments, jokes, puns and stories. I found myself chuckling out loud and rolling my eyes more than once.

In the book, Mike covers multiple aspects and contexts of the use of humor, including the work environment, healthcare, teaching and learning engagements, and more. Wherever you are and whatever you do, you will find relevant and useful information and guidance in the book. One particular point that threads through the book is the challenge of the assumption that work and play must be separated. Mike touches on this explicitly and implicitly, reminding the reader that including humor, play, lightness and joy into your workspace could enhance, rather than diminish, productivity and engagement. He shares multiple examples, ideas, suggestions and personal anecdotes to illustrate the concepts. Another recurring theme is that of the appropriateness of humor based on context. Specifically, how well you know your audience and what kind of existing relationship you have would direct the type of humor you would use safely. The concept of kindness in the use of humor is emphasized in particular. The goals of using humor are to engage, to lighten and to increase creativity and productivity. But humor is a mere tool, and as such can be used with a variety of intentions, including harm. Mike specifically touches on that towards the end of the book, and has a whole chapter dedicated to reconciliation and apology when humorous attempts result in hurt feelings.

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The book is divided into 13 short chapters, allowing for convenient time allocation. Throughout each chapter are additional clearly marked stopping points with questions and exercises for consideration. Thus, the book becomes an engaging dialogue with active participation, where the reader has an opportunity to pause and think out (or verbalize or write down) their own input. The exercises provide simple practices to try out and expand on the ideas presented in the book. Each question or exercise is typically followed by Mike's own response, commentary or a related story. Frequently, those are real-life stories where he shares things that did not work as expected. This simple acknowledgement of what we may consider as failure gives the reader permission to be imperfect – something that we so often deny ourselves.

While the language of the book is light, the content is packed with high-level scientific evidence and deep philosophical concepts. At its core, the book focuses on humor as a communication tool to help us better connect with our fellow human beings.

Below is a brief outline of each chapter to give the reader a general idea of what's in the book. I encourage you to get a copy and judge for yourself.

Chapter 1: This Isn't a Workbook, it's a Playbook is an introduction of sorts, outlining the format and the intention of the book. It sets the stage for the discussion about humor as a way to connect with others and first challenges the notion that work and fun should be separated. This theme will resurface as a thread throughout the book, with multiple examples and arguments. The chapter is full of examples and stories from Mike's experience, making it both entertaining and credible.

Chapter 2: Humor as a House—An Allegory of Course addresses the challenge of the appropriateness of the use of humor in various situations and with different people. It also nods at cultural differences that make humor even more challenging to use. The house allegory provides an interesting and accessible mental structure to address those challenges. Focusing on safe space, finding commonalities and paying attention, Mike walks the reader through the intricacies of sharing humor appropriately and productively.

As a physician, *Chapter 3: Humor and Health: An Overview*, was of particular interest to me. In it, Mike challenges the separation of work and play once again. Referencing recent research on humor and health, he suggests that we should focus on preventing illness in addition to seeking ways to heal. Humor and laughter are repeatedly shown to boost the immune system and help with illness prevention. Moreover, Mike expands to share that humor and laughter not only benefit

patients, but also healthcare providers. Now more than ever, healthcare providers need any boost they can get to their wellbeing and resilience.

In *Chapter 4: Humor Basics: Incongruity*, Mike runs through the various humor theories and expands on the incongruity theory. With plenty of examples and jokes of various levels of being funny, the reader is bound to have a solid understanding of the theory. The embedded exercises prompt us to contemplate, seek and practice the use of humor within the context of the theory. And again, while this chapter can be seen as more of an educational one, it touches on the necessity of human connection and shared experiences as a pre-requisite and a fertile ground for humor.

Ironically, *Chapter 5: Mirthful Meetings* does not, for the most part, talk about meetings. Using meetings as an example of a notoriously disliked activity (having the reputation of being tedious, unproductive and unnecessary), Mike continues to promote the use of humor as a tool for human connection and interaction. In this chapter he challenges us to consider how we see our co-workers and how that affects our experience of meetings and of our work as a whole.

Chapter 6: Lighthearted Workspaces: Designing for Levity is a very important chapter that provides a plethora of ways to increase the level of engagement at your workplace through the introduction of joy, humor and levity. Most importantly, the practical suggestions include plenty small changes that can be easily implemented. Mike emphasizes that the goal is to shift the overall culture and that is something that would take time. Thus, he gives the reader permission to mess up and fail, while sharing his own experiences. After reading this chapter, you will want to play with the suggested ideas and test them out right away. Go for it!

Being a leader is an honor and a great responsibility. Leaders represent their organization and set the tone for those they lead. Being a good leader involves a combination of various skills and characteristics, many of which we actively and constantly work on improving. In *Chapter 7: Lead with a Joke*, Mike goes through a list of traits that are typically attributed to good leaders. For each trait, he draws parallels to the use of humor and how it can enhance that trait.

In situations of high stress, humor can help cut through the paralysis of panic. Rich with examples from the battlefield and from medical emergencies, *Chapter 8: Humor Under Pressure* gently guides the reader through the benefits of humor even in the direst situations.

Chapter 9: Office Humor analyzes our work environment and provides a variety of practical suggestions, ideas and examples on how to make the workspace one that people would enjoy being and interacting in. With the goal of boosting engagement and satisfaction, Mike shows

the reader how the use of humor and lightness are very practical and efficient tools. In this chapter Mike also starts to touch on the concept of teasing and how it is different from bullying. Work environment presents inherent hierarchical structure that can complicate the use of humor. The book guides the reader regarding relevant considerations in this aspect.

Whether you are an official educator, a learner, or someone who communicates and shares information and skills (that should be all of us), the use of humor has been shown to enhance engagement and learning. As an educator, Mike shares multiple examples from his own experience, as well as references to scientific studies in *Chapter 10: Classrooms and Teaching Spaces*. This chapter is also filled with practical advice, ideas and suggestions.

This book was Mike's pandemic project. Being forced into a digital space, we have all experienced virtual meetings, classes and even doctor's appointments. The setting is very different than that of in-person interaction, calling for different focus and strategies for injecting humor. In *Chapter 11: Electronic Laughs and Digital Spaces*, Mike touches on the challenge of misunderstanding messages when lacking the cues that we have in person, and provides examples on how to overcome those challenges.

Chapter 12: Humor and Apologies, is extremely important, addressing situations when humor results in someone being hurt, and the notorious "just kidding" response. Mike talks about intention, responsibility and kindness, while sharing his own experiences. Recognizing our fallibility as humans, he gently and carefully guides the reader to connect to their humanity, their best self and their care towards others.

The last chapter, *Chapter 13: He Who Laughs Last: Concluding Thoughts*, is a summary, a conclusion and an urge to go and make changes, no matter how small, in the direction of including more joy, humor, levity and mirth in our lives.

As you finish reading the book, you feel lighter, more joyful and enthusiastic to apply what you read. You feel that you know Mike personally and are looking forward to getting together with him again. I believe that was the intention and the goal of the book—to encourage the readers and make them ambassadors of playful attempts to incorporate humor in their lives. I'm sure going to do that.²

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