

# THE ROTARIAN



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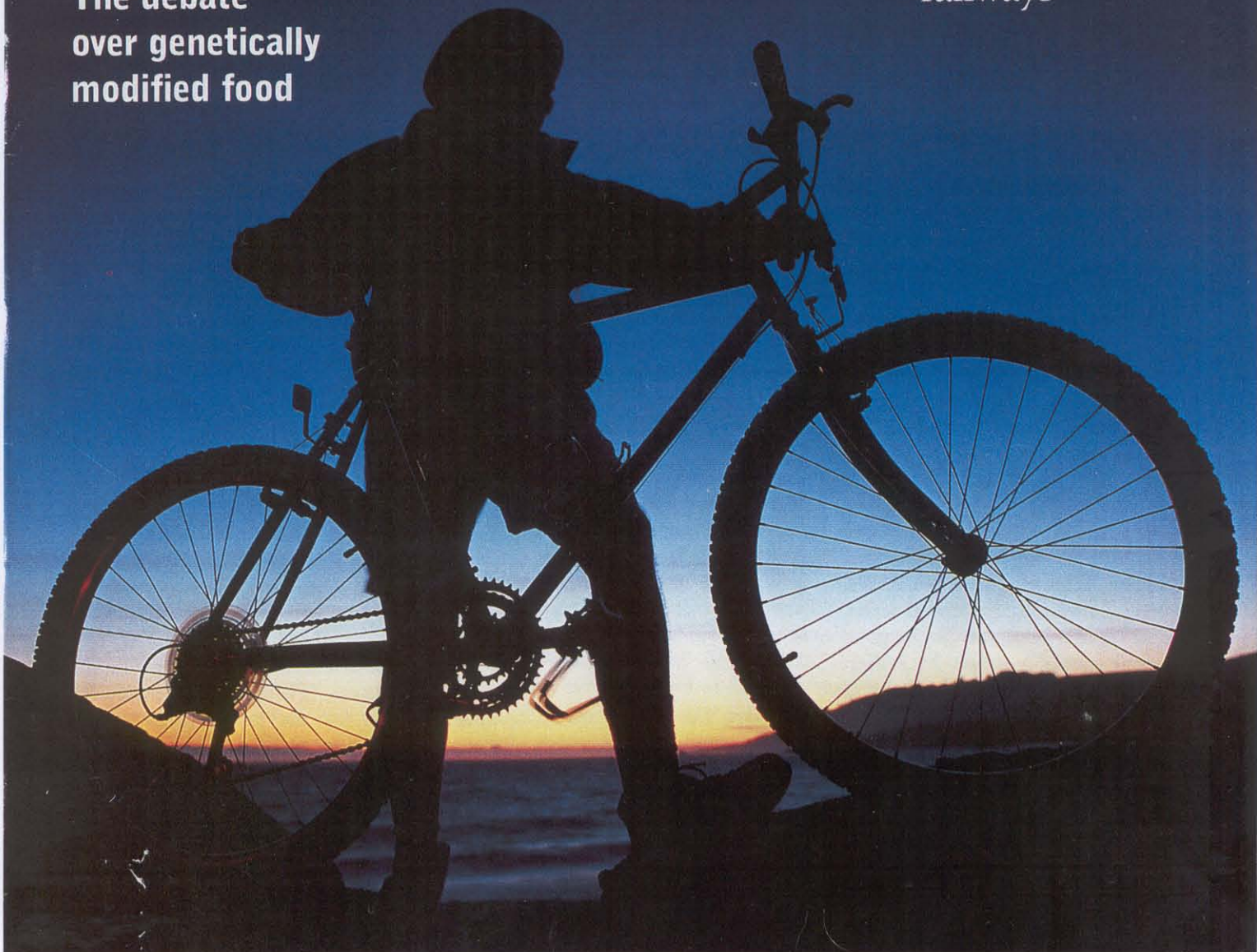
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TODD LINDEN, chief executive officer of Grinnell Regional Medical Center in Grinnell, Iowa, U.S.A., knows that humor heals.

That's why he introduced the "jolly trolley" at his health care facility. The mobile cart is packed full of toys, games, magic tricks and humorous videos to help lighten a tense, high-pressure environment for employees, patients and family members alike.

Humor also is an on-the-job tool for Linda Terpstra, a business process designer with Sears, Roebuck and Co., in Hoffman Estates, Illinois, U.S.A. She energized a recent team teleconference by introducing each participant with a musical interlude. "What did Tom say when this project was completed?" she asked, for example, and then played "Goodness gracious, great balls of fire!" from the Jerry Lee Lewis song. People laughed, but more importantly, she says, "they stayed involved in the meeting as they anticipated what they might hear next."

It's generally accepted today that shared humor in the corporate environment helps combat stress, spark creativity and unite employees in pursuit of common goals. "Humor is being used in workplaces around the world to help reduce stress and improve communication," observes Joel Goodman of The Humor Project, a consulting company in Sarasota Springs, New York, U.S.A. In fact, an entire global industry of corporate humor consultants has sprung up over recent years. Goodman has conducted workshops in numerous countries, including Japan, Russia, South Africa, Sweden, Taiwan and the United States.

A sense of humor also can be good for your career. A survey by Robert Half International, an executive recruitment firm, found that 85 percent of senior managers would hire candidates with a sense of humor over more serious—and equally qualified—individuals.

As a manager, you must lead the way in the humor department.



ADAM CROWLEY

"Employees take their behavioral cues from managers," observes Loretta LaRoche, of the Humor Potential, a consulting company in Plymouth, Massachusetts, U.S.A., and author of "Relax, You May Only Have a Few Minutes Left" (Villard, 1999). "If you set the tone for more humor and lightness in your workplace, then there will be more." Here are a few ways to constructively unleash your sense of humor on the job:

**> Take your work seriously, and yourself lightly.** Be willing to poke fun at yourself. Goodman recommends telling humorous stories or anecdotes with a punchline that comes at your expense. "As your employees laugh, they'll identify with you and the humanity you share," he says.

**> Stay within your comfort zone.** Wearing Groucho glasses or a funny hat to staff meetings may not be your idea of high humor. But you can still promote a more lighthearted, less stressful work environment, LaRoche says. "Avoid 'catastrophizing'—saying 'Oh, no! We're in real trouble here!' in response to every mistake or crisis."

**> Share the funny stuff.** Collect humorous stories and cartoons from the media and jot down funny anecdotes you overhear. Then share your favorite humor in memos, staff meetings and company newsletters. And don't worry that you'll sacrifice your

employees' respect, says Gavin Jerome, director of Comedy College in Des Moines, Iowa. "In fact, the opposite will happen. You'll come across as wiser and more approachable."

**> Use humor to problem-solve.**

Humor consultant Neil Muscott, based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, recommends short-term "humor projects" to deal with specific employee-related issues. For example, a bank manager wanted to improve teller morale—and service—during peak periods. "The tellers meet once a month to blow off steam by sharing stories about their worst customers, and the employee with the funniest tale wins a dinner for two," Muscott says. "Service has improved dramatically as tellers actually welcome difficult customers as sources of great stories."

**> Avoid risky—and risqué—humor.**

"Steer clear of the R.P.M.s—religion, politics and moral issues such as sex and abortion," advises Jerome. Todd Linden says he's often amazed at the number of individuals who still use inappropriate jokes or anecdotes to kick off a meeting or presentation. "Most audience members will resent your demeaning their own or others' race, gender or beliefs," he stresses. If you're addressing people of other cultures, research their customs to make sure you don't unintentionally cause offense.

**> Check your attitude.** Negativity leads to sarcasm—and humor that causes anger and pain, says C. Leslie Charles, author of "Why Is Everyone So Cranky?" (Hyperion, 1999). "A classic example of mean-spirited humor is the service rep's sign I saw recently: 'I can only be nice to one person at a time—and it isn't your turn,'" she says. "This is the opposite of humor that moves and helps people, which is rooted in a spirit of generosity and goodwill."

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