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### DIANE STAFFORD AT WORK: Choose to create a fun work environment, Oak Hill High School grad says

Six months after Joel **Zeff** was hired in his first job, he lost it when the business closed.

Instead of moping, he grabbed a harmonica (he doesn't play the harmonica) and stood outside the company improvising a blues song (he's not a blues singer) and made it on the TV news stations.

A marketing and public relations career followed, as did the birth of a motivational speaking business based on improvisational comedy.

**Zeff**, a graduate of Kansas City's Oak Park High School, returned to Kansas City this week from his home in Dallas and put his skills to work at the National Tour Association convention at Bartle Hall.

Within five minutes he had several hundred attendees standing, yelling, making silly moves, and, generally, feeling good about the morning.

Within 10 minutes he had some of the attendees plucked from the audience doing improv that made people (well, me) laugh so hard that tears flowed.

**Zeff** is funny. But the secret to his success in generating enthusiasm, teamwork and self-confidence is his ability to help people make choices -- especially the choice to create a positive environment.

It's a message he conveys in *Make the Right Choice: Creating a Positive, Innovative, and Productive Work Life*, a book published this year by John Wiley & Sons Inc. You can get a hint of his shtick at [www.joelzeff.com](http://www.joelzeff.com) (click on Media to see skit clips).

"You have ownership of the choices you make," is **Zeff's** motto. Perhaps charitably, he believes that everyone has the power to decide each day whether to be happy or unhappy.

**Zeff** wants to make it clear that he's not telling people they have to be funny. Rather, they need to have fun.

And while the definition of "fun" varies wildly among individuals, he offers one definition for the workplace: It's an environment where you can be energized and passionate about what you do.

"I believe that sane people wake up every morning and want to do well," he said.

"I also believe that you won't care about anything you don't have some responsibility for, some ownership over.

"If you're not getting that feeling on your job, you have the choice: Tell your managers what you need, or let your frustrations mount. Sure, it may be a risk when you make those choices -- to speak up or leave -- but it's what you need to do to put the passion back in your work life."

Using volunteers to act out improv routines, **Zeff** pushed the hilarity quotient high. But after each skit he came back to the motivational stuff:

"Do you see what happened here? The manager -- me -- gave them the opportunity to be creative, to work together as a team. They took initiative. They helped each other do well. They responded to your positive support. The more you applauded, the more productive they were.

"That's what we need in our jobs -- to match opportunity with positive support. When that happens, it's amazing what people come up with."

**Zeff** believes improv comedy is a good metaphor for workplace relationships: The routine works if players help each other and don't quit when things start to go bad.

"It won't work if you're passive," he warned. "It won't work for 'bye-bye' people -- the ones who have checked out and don't care.

"But the lessons from improv work for people who aren't afraid to try, who aren't afraid of making mistakes."

