

Jest Practices! Best Practices for Humor in the Workplace

By Craig Harrison



Most agree that humor in the workplace can have beneficial effects. Yet not all humor is good humor. The challenge: how to interject appropriate humor and fun into our serious jobs without hurting others or seriously undermining the company. When used appropriately, humor can work for you.

Humor that Uploads Also Uplifts

Humor has the power to make people feel special. When you include people in fun it simultaneously improves morale, reduces stress and facilitates team building. With the prevalence of telecommuting and workgroups scattered geographically, the challenge of furthering working relationships, bonding and building camaraderie is real. At one San Francisco Bay Area company a workgroup staged an elaborate Remote Baby Shower. The expectant mother, who was out-of-state, called in for a pre-arranged conference call with her workgroup. When she did...surprise! Everyone was having a party in her honor. They uploaded digital photos of a decorated conference room and each other, and e-mailed sound files with well wishes. Everyone shared in the good cheer. This creative use of technology brought employees closer to each other, figuratively if not literally.

Humor That Brings People Together

Workplaces are full of opportunities to use humor for the benefit of all. Milestones are a natural place to employ humor. Dress like the recipient as a tribute during a surprise birthday party. Other celebrations to mark anniversaries, project completions or similar accomplishments are perfect opportunities to utilize humor. Even surviving certain projects is cause for celebration and fun.

Holidays are another natural time to employ humor. Halloween is a time for contests to see who can best decorate conference rooms; for other companies the anniversary of their founding is cause for celebration. Silly speeches, skits and spoofs abound.

And the Award Goes To...

Staging award ceremonies is a great way to have fun, recognize each other and revel in the shared work experience. Whether the categories mimic those found at the Oscars, Emmys or Tonys, or are derivative, esprit de corps rises when the team laughs at itself and each other. Best Supporting Actor, Best Impersonation of an Inanimate Object, Best Special Effects, Most Likely to Secede, or Lifetime Achievement Award.

Humor Is The Winning Ticket

Pranks can alternately be uplifting or uprooting. A desktop publisher, on April Fools Day, adorned his co-workers cars' windshields with mock yellow parking tickets, complete with envelopes for remittance. Upon closer inspection, these true-to-life replicas of tickets had whimsical offenses of significance to the recipients. The departmental joker's ticket cited him for "excessive use of farce" and the hard charging corporate counsel's infraction charged him with a "Failure to Yield." Of course the initiator of the gag was later cited for impersonating an officer. Everyone laughed at the spoof once they realized it was a joke. Judge Judy's signature at the bottom of the ticket gave it away.

Pole Position

A fast growing company didn't have enough office space for full cubicles for its new hires. One unfortunate hire's assigned cubicle had a giant pole in its midst. To her credit she never complained. Co-workers felt for her. One night they hit the streets, collecting various fliers from telephone poles in their neighborhoods. The next day when the new hire reached her cubicle, the offending pole was now covered with notices about missing pets, renters seeking apartments, cheap movers for hire and even local GRE study groups. Not only did the employee know her co-workers felt her frustration, it bonded them as well as they pulled together to help one of their own.

One Person's Humor is Another Person's Horror

When targeting humor consider targeting yourself. Everyone has a different idea of what's funny and what's not. Many a well intentioned prank or joke has backfired. One co-worker sent another a prank letter impersonating a local media figure. The recipient mistook it for real, interpreted it as harassment and called the FBI. Oops!

The Benefits of Self-Effacing Humor

When we make fun of ourselves it actually demonstrates our healthy outlook, showing we don't take ourselves so seriously. As a result, we're regarded as more approachable and down to earth. Don't make fun of yourself excessively. Such humor loses its effectiveness with overuse.

Everyone from politicians to CEOs to Southwest Airlines flight attendants use self-deprecating humor - humor that makes fun of themselves - to get people laughing at, and consequently with them. You can too.

While gallows humor may feel appropriate during layoffs and cutbacks, strive to employ humor that uplifts and taps universal themes for best results. Many of today's work environments are rife with moody bosses and co-workers, repetitive tasks and unpredictable market pressures. Stress abounds. Managers often tell me they can't afford the time or cost for my humor workshops; how can they afford not to address workplace stress.

We know clinically that laughter and play have medicinal qualities, offering physical, psychological and physiological benefits as well. In the workplace, humor and fun can increase productivity, encourage creativity, enhance team building, and thus improve esprit de corps.

While we may not be able to control everything that happens to us in our jobs and work environments, we do have control over how we choose to react. I coach others how to create an environment which is safe and friendly, and use humor to help maintain a healthy balance between the pressure and seriousness which comes from high stakes jobs and a competitive marketplace. Remember that humor starts from within. Being able to laugh at your own foibles goes a long way toward creating a healthy work climate in which to flourish.

The following are activities and strategies for you as individuals, workgroups and managers. Be creative and use these ideas to stimulate your own remedies to workplace stress.

- Adorn your work area with cartoons, headlines or funny photos which bring a smile to your face and visiting co-workers. Whether you're surrounded by your favorite Pez dispensers from childhood, or wry cartoons that speak to your tastes, let your work area comfort and humor you while taking some of the edge off the standard office decor.

- Tap a co-worker to be your humor-partner. Bring a daily joke to share. Commiserate about funny workplace events. Keep each other buoyed with good cheer. When the chips are down your humor partner can chip away at your depression, and vice versa.

- Don't think cubicles limit your humor options. I've seen shower curtains, umbrellas and other devices

used effectively to set a light or semi-serious tone. For some, creativity flourishes behind their cubicle's shower curtain. People tampering with your work area? Don't get angry...protect it with yellow "Crime Scene" tape!

- Subscribe to a humor website to be e-mailed a free daily or weekly humorous story, joke and anecdote. Sites such as www.netfunny.com/rhf/ or www.oraclehumor.com/ are two examples.

Are You Laughin' At Me?

One manager, known for his moodiness, acknowledged it with a "Mood-O-Meter" outside his door. Both he and his employees took turns forecasting his mood: from fire-breathing to variable clouds to periodic eruptions...proceed at your own risk. Don't underestimate the power of self-effacing humor for making yourself more accessible and liked.

Room for Laughter.

Some companies designate a room, work area or corner of their office as a romper room, where frolicking and silliness is allowed. Whether yours has a punching bag, games, a dartboard or foosball, it's a room for letting off steam and taking a break from the grind.

Whine Not.

Everyone loathes whiners yet we all need to blow off steam periodically. One group of creative trainers and their manager decreed Thursdays to be effective whining days. They self-policed themselves the rest of the week, making sure not to whine. Yet even their Thursday gripes had a departmental sanction and somehow seemed healthier. After all, they belly ached together. A ripple effect actually improved the morale of departments adjacent to theirs!

Meting Out Humor.



Many professionals approach meetings with trepidation. A dash of humor can make a difference. For regular meetings earmark one or two minutes each meeting for a humorous interlude. In one workgroup a "humor hand" rotates from meeting to meeting. Employees take turns setting a lighter tone to the meeting, insuring everybody is engaged. An anecdote, verbal or physical activity focuses the group on the task at hand and brings colleagues together

in a spirit of fun.

When not to use Humor.

Not all humor is good humor. Humor that hurts, ostracizes or is cruel will have a detrimental effect on others and you. Strive for humor that is inclusive, creative and captures our human essence. By now you know that sexist, racist, ageist jokes and crude humor are not only inappropriate, but can lead to sanctions, termination or even lawsuits. Be sensitive when telling jokes involving terminations, reductions in force (RIFs) and personal tragedies. Their hurt can linger long after the fact. . When in doubt...leave it out!

Appropriate humor can make hard tasks easier, collaborations fun and certainly make workdays go faster. Laugh, and the work world laughs with you!

About the author:

Since the age of eleven when he went door-to-door selling Used Jokes, Craig Harrison has been connecting with customers through humor. As a professional speaker and corporate trainer Craig Harrison's Expressions of Excellence provides sales and service solutions through speaking. Contact him through his website <http://www.ExpressionsofExcellence.com> or via e-mail: humor@craigspeaks.com

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