

Whistle While You Work

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The idea of using humour to enhance business to increase creativity, improve relationships, minimize stress and develop client attractability is not a new one. It's been around for over fifteen years.

The recent North America humour movement really began in 1979 when Norman Cousins published ***Anatomy of an Illness: As Perceived by the Patient***. Cousins, after being diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, a serious collagen illness, decided that if discomforting emotions could create illness that the converse could be true. Using his own body's disintegration, Cousins embarked on a heuristic experiment with the hypothesis that pleasing emotions could produce positive body chemical shifts. In a hotel room, across the street from the hospital, Cousins systematically watched reruns of Candid Camera, Marx Brothers films and anything he deemed laughable.

He discovered that 10 minutes of a belly laugh gave him at least 2 hours of pain free sleep. There is a well known story of a nurse who once asked Cousins if he had passed his urine sample. He responded in the affirmative, then lifted the container and swallowed the liquid saying something like, "It looks a little murky, let me run it through the system again." The nurse was horrified and then laughed when Cousins' showed her the apple juice container that supported his practical joke. Cousins cured himself and began lecturing about the healing effects of humour. The movement towards humour in the health system, education and workplace had begun.

There are many health and relationship benefits to the use of humour that are well documented by many studies since Cousins' discovery. Humour is an effective stress management tool. It increases creativity, boosts morale and confidence. It can decrease conflict which is useful in customer service. It can help workers get through long days and increase their effectiveness with clients. Let's take a look at some practical information.

First off, hear this clearly; telling a joke is not necessary to establish a reputation as a light hearted person with whom to work. Joke telling takes a certain kind of personality combined with skill. If you are good at it, or are willing to practice and practice creating an effective set up with a great punch after the perfect pause, go for it. Also choose your jokes appropriately. Use puns sparingly. Though people laugh they may send a message that you believe you have superior thinking.

Most people are looking for relaxed and spontaneous responses in conversations. Indeed, Dr. Robert Provine discovered in his research that only about 10 to 20 % of laughter is created by something considered "humorous." We smile and laugh to give the message "I like you and want connect." Smile and laugh no matter how you get there. It is good for your health and increases your likeability factor.

Avoid perfection and add more fun to your work. Laugh at mistakes. "Oops, there goes my delete button. Too bad it was this week's appointments. Now what would I like to commit myself to--the psych ward?" This is called self deprecating humour. If you can't give up your perfectionist tendencies, at least laugh at them. We all have weaknesses and strengths. If we can identify our weaknesses and laugh about them we become more approachable. This strategy is the opposite of defensiveness. No one wants to deal with others' defenses. Show me

someone who does and I'll show you a devoted peace maker or a martyr. Jokes have targets. Situations and our own selves are the best targets. Targeting others as in "Polack" jokes is offensive. Self deprecate your weaknesses as in the quip "I am a legend in my own mind."

Self deprecation not only makes you more approachable to clients and others, it is a wonderful coping mechanism. It actually helps reduce stress. When we cry, we acknowledge the pain we are in. When we laugh, we acknowledge that the pain is over and we have perspective. Self deprecation creates a sense of human vulnerabilities and acknowledges that we are ready to laugh at the absurdity of everyday life. After all life is full of paradox. One event seems like a disaster one day and may be a god send another. Think of Oprah who was fired for crying on the TV news, and now her sensitivity is news. She is now able to make self-deprecating comments about "Oh gosh, the tears are coming again."

Here are some more hints about using humour in business discussions:

1. If you have something humorous to say that helps make the point do so but do not use a joke or a one liner to impress. It will not unless it supports your position as in the following. "This proposal will solve three of our main problems but it doesn't guarantee we will win the lottery."
2. Humour is like a conversation lubricant. When words feel tense, a little humour can relax the atmosphere. Rather than criticize others, tell a self-deprecating and brief story that "demonstrates" what you learned. "That reminds me of a time I was going to change my colleague. I learned that all I could change was a dime for two nickels."
3. When selling a product or service, give specific facts about it and keep your humour in the background. Perhaps the benefit could be humorous. Comedy mechanics teach us to use threes. The first two are the truthful details while the last is the surprise. "Our slicer/dicer makes food preparation easier, helps you create gourmet looking meals and keeps you up with the neighbourhood slicer/dicer Jones."
4. Business creativity can be increased by letting go and brain storming off the wall ideas possible. Fooling around has allowed products such as Post-Its to be invented. They were glue that went wrong.
5. In your daily work, make fun of stressful situations. Use exaggeration, reversal and spontaneity. Exaggeration: "Woe is me and my business. That prospect said No and I'm doomed for bankruptcy." Reversal: "Lucky me! That prospect said No so I have time to make some cold calls." Spontaneity: "That prospect said No. Now what creative move can I make?"

Business meetings don't have to be dull. Consider some of these ideas:

1. Add silly ideas or words to Meeting Agenda.
2. Arrive with fun food—licorice or a cake, for instance.
3. Play perky music as attendees arrive. I love "I Feel Good" by James Brown for such occasions.
4. Meet standing up, especially if you want a brief meeting. No, I didn't say dressed in your briefs.
5. Have speakers be in the nose. Pass a silly nose to the speaker of the moment.
6. Give a standing ovation to those who come up with great ideas.
7. Make a big deal about ending on time. "We did it!"

There are a zillion ways that we can inject more humour into our work spaces to help sustain the long hours. To save you from frolicking exhaustion I'll only list a few ideas:

1. Start a humour bulletin board.

2. Start the day by reading the comics. Cut out your favourite ones and tack to your humour bulletin board or mail to an appropriate client. Do you remember the envelope and stamp routine?
3. Play fun and upbeat music. I like the oldie goodies like Rock Around the Clock. Sounds like your work day, eh?
4. Have fun pens and other office tools.
5. Collect objects for you office that bring smiles. I have little statue of Jean Chrétien holding on to a Maple Leaf flag. He sure did "hold on."
6. Pass on fun email messages. Push "delete" on the heavy, moralizing ones.
7. In the washroom have some fun items to see and read. Uncle John's Bathroom series are a delight to have handy.
8. Drink your herbal tea or water from a funky mug with a cheery image.
9. Make yourself a workaholic sign "Thank God It's Monday."
10. Other signs might say "The little engine that could, did. So can I."

Enhance your business. Put on a happy face, see the craziness of seeking perfectionism, make yourself the humorous target, find joy in being human and make a million doldrum free moments.

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