

Hardy Boys and Funny Girls!

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Hardy Boys and Funny Girls!

Why Humor Works in the Workplace, and When it Doesn't

Written by Craig Harrison

Of the 206 bones in your body there's one you can align without an orthopedic surgeon: your funny bone. Have you exercised yours lately?

A sense of humor is one of the most underutilized tools in most professionals' toolkit. Laughter and play have medicinal qualities, offering physical, psychological and physiological benefits. In the workplace, humor and fun increase productivity, encourage creativity and enhance team building. Humor also builds rapport with your customers, and combats the blues resulting from frequent sales rejection.

Especially in stressful environments like call centers and help desks, tension abounds. The cumulative effect of angry callers, daily problems and endless ques can weigh on employees and leaders. The Rx? Humor to the rescue.

The Three Faces of Humor

Did you know that humor can be used as a shield, a sword or as a bridge? It's important to be cognizant of how you're using it, and of the effect each form has on others.

As a SHIELD humor can protect us from that which is threatening, scary or menacing. Poor response rate to a marketing campaign? Frustration at low quarterly closing

ratio? Losing clients to a competitor of late? Laughing about it takes some of the sting away, protecting us from pain. This is healthy.

As a SWORD, humor can attack, cut down to size or otherwise place a subject or object on the defensive. Where fisticuffs or brute force might be unacceptable in the work world, sarcasm, cutting or ironic humor can equalize an opponent or lessen its impact. Are you encountering restrictive laws, a difficult economic climate or extreme layoffs? Humor can cut these foes down in size, allowing you to cope with adversity.

Self-effacing humor, where we are the butt of the joke, and can laugh at ourselves, is another such example. It protects us from taking ourselves too seriously, signaling to others a self-confidence that we can laugh at our own foibles.

One snarly manager, known for his moodiness, acknowledged it with a “Mood-O-Meter” outside his door. He and his employees took turns forecasting his mood: from fire-breathing to variable clouds to periodic eruptions – proceed at your own risk. Self-effacing humor makes you more accessible and popular.

When used as a BRIDGE, humor is most effective. It can connect us to others, and help us rejoice at that which is universal and thus shared among us. It speaks to our humanity, is uplifting and even unifying. Whether the humor is industry or region-specific, or of a general nature, when addressing what we share in common, it enjoins us effectively.

While delivering an interactive keynote at a recent conference, I was asked if I’d heard about the pending merger of Yahoo and Netscape? They told me the new

company, to be headquartered in Tel Aviv, would be called Net-An-Yahoo! We all had a good laugh at that! Indeed, sometimes it's best if the humor comes from the ranks.

In Praise of “Hardy Boys” and “Funny Girls”

You needn't tell jokes to benefit from humor:

- Adorn your work area with cartoons, headlines or funny photos that bring a smile. Pez dispensers and other toys also make for fun.
- Tap a co-worker to be your humor partner. Bring a daily joke to share at work and on sales calls.
- 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.
- Shower curtains, umbrellas and other devices, used effectively, can set a light or semi-serious tone in cubicle-land. For some, creativity flourishes behind their cubicle's shower curtain.
- Subscribe to a humor Web site to be e-mailed a free daily or weekly humorous story, joke and anecdote.
- Create an office romper room for frolicking and silliness. Include a punching bag, games, a dartboard or Foosball for letting off steam from the daily grind.
- In meetings, earmark a minute for a humorous interlude. Rotate a “humor hand” from meeting to meeting. Employees take turns setting a lighter tone, ensuring everybody is engaged. A 60-second anecdote or activity focusing on the group or task at hand brings colleagues together in a spirit of fun.

Not all humor is good humor. Humor that hurts, ostracizes or is cruel will have a detrimental effect. Strive for humor that is creative and captures our human essence. By now

you know that sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic jokes and crude humor are not only inappropriate, but can lead to sanctions, termination or even lawsuits. Be sensitive when telling jokes involving terminations and personal tragedies. Their hurt can linger long after the fact. When in doubt, leave it out.

Tickle your humorous muscles and flex your funny bone!

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