

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark blue blazer over a blue and white striped shirt, is smiling while holding a black corded telephone receiver to her ear. Her left hand is on a white computer keyboard. The background is a bright office with a window showing a city skyline.

YOU ARE YOUR OWN BEST ENEMY

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You Are Your Own Best Enemy

By Melanie Hope

Would you like to break the ice, instantly engage your audience, and show your sense of humor all in one stroke? Consider using some light, self-effacing humor in your presentation. Being able to laugh at yourself is a very effective way to get an audience on your side. If you can take a joke, others will be able to relate to you, and will even root for you. It shows that you are healthily humble and can accept your own quirks. It also shows that, even though you are the one on stage, you are human – just like your audience. Rodney Dangerfield made a career out of it. It worked for former presidents Ronald Reagan and John F. Kennedy, and still works for Woody Allen and Jay Leno. It can work for you.

Here are some dos and don'ts to help you incorporate some self-funning into your next presentation:

You DON'T have to beat yourself up

There is a huge difference between self-effacing and self-deprecating. You want to make others laugh, not cringe. Being too hard on yourself may turn people off entirely. It will also destroy your credibility. Unless you want to be seen as a caricature, rather than a serious speaker, refrain from getting too personal or too cruel. The goal is to get people on your side, not pitying you. If it doesn't make you laugh, it probably won't work on them.

You DO want to limit yourself

Use this form of humor sparingly. Usually one joke is enough, unless you can bring it back in later to tie things up. If your presentation is too heavy with jokes, it may be seen more as a standup routine or a shtick, rather than a valuable speech, and your message will be lost.

You DON'T have to be a professional comedian

Even if you have no experience with comedy, you may still effectively spice up your presentation with a quick joke or one-liner. Your delivery doesn't have to be any different than the rest of the presentation, meaning you don't have to over-act or do anything slapstick.

Using this type of humor is even more effective if it is done on the spot in reaction to your surroundings. For instance, a speaker who stumbled on her way to the lectern began by saying, "Now you know why I went into speaking instead of dancing."

Self-effacing humor is also a great way to break the tension if someone asks you a difficult or embarrassing question. For instance, when asked how he became a war hero, John F. Kennedy replied, "It was absolutely involuntary. They sunk my boat."

You DO have to be relevant

Stay away from humor that only a nuclear physicist would understand (unless you are speaking for nuclear physicists) or that refers to pop culture that only a few in your audience would identify with or remember. A good rule of thumb is, be general. Such as Rodney Dangerfield, when he said, "I get no respect. The way my luck is running, if I was a politician I would be honest."

You DON'T have to tell the truth

Some of the funniest jokes are funny simply because they sound true at first, and then turn preposterous. Consider Woody Allen saying, "I have bad reflexes. I was once run over by a car being pushed by two guys." It's funny because you know it couldn't have happened, yet he's still laughing at himself.

You can even use such an exaggeration to overcome an obstacle or let your naysayers know you don't care what they think. When Ronald Reagan was told he might be too old for his office, he said, "Thomas Jefferson once said, 'One should not worry about chronological age compared to the ability to perform the task.' Ever since Thomas Jefferson told me that I stopped worrying about my age."

You DO have to have fun

Perhaps the most important part of using self-effacing humor is to truly be able to laugh about what you are saying. The best lines unite people. Look for something that people can relate to and that fits the event for which you are speaking. In other words, make it light-hearted and inclusive.

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