

By Calvin Sun

Do you want to distinguish yourself in the workplace and be able to function more effectively there? Consider using humor. Whether you use it during a presentation, on the telephone, or in personal interactions, humor can break the ice and set the tone for your audience. Below are a few tips on using humor at work. For more information, I recommend the book *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Boardroom*, by Michael Lapoce.

1 Defuse embarrassment and tension

My father once gave a presentation in which he referenced Worcester Polytechnic Institute, pronouncing the first word correctly as "Woo-ster." His manager's manager, upon hearing that word, interrupted, saying to my father that the correct pronunciation was actually "Woo-ches-ter." Though this "correction" was actually incorrect, my father did not say so. Instead, he responded, "Sorry, Murray, please forgive me. English is only my fifth language."

As you might expect, the room erupted in laughter. In looking back on that incident, my father always said his response was superior to correcting his boss's boss in public and that it defused the embarrassment and tension of the situation.

2 Cope with unpleasant situations

I once needed to make a telephone call but had forgotten my cell phone. With my daughter in tow, I entered the lobby of an apartment building that I knew had a pay phone. An elderly member of our church had lived there before she passed on, and our family would visit her from time to time. I picked up the telephone, and as I started to dial, I saw a security guard approach me. I waved to him, smiled, and said, "It's okay." At that point, the guard glared at me, said, "No, it's not okay," and ordered us to leave.

Instead of being upset by that incident (although I did write a letter to the CEO of the management company for that apartment), my daughter and I turned it into a joke. I would make a mock apology to her, saying, for example, "Rayna, they didn't have chocolate ice cream, so I bought vanilla. I hope that's okay." Rayna would feign anger, shake her head and say, "No, it's NOT okay."

Are you at the help desk? Do you sometimes have abusive callers? Do those callers have certain pet phrases they use? Maybe you could incorporate the phrases into your daily language (out of their hearing, of course). Or you could start an over/under pool on how long it takes for them to become upset.

3 Avoid inappropriate humor

The greatest danger in using humor is basing it on an inappropriate subject. Stay away from subjects related to race, religion, or sexual topics. Otherwise, you risk not only offending your audience (and hence compromising your credibility) but also being subject to disciplinary action.

4 Be aware of potential misinterpretation

When you make a humorous remark, particularly a joking insult, remember that it could be taken seriously. This possibility increases when the joke is made via e-mail, where body language and facial expressions do not accompany the words. If you really have the urge to use humor in e-mail, make sure to include emoticons, such as the smiley face, or LOL acronyms.

Believe it or not, when my father finished his presentation, people came up to him and asked him if he knew five languages. If some people can misread humor even in a face-to-face encounter, imagine how much worse it could be with e-mail, voicemail, or the telephone.

5 Make fun of yourself

So with all the potential minefields out there, what CAN be a good source of humor? If you're comfortable and secure enough, I suggest making fun of yourself. Doing so can lower barriers between you and your audience by demonstrating that you're just another person. More subtly, it can show that you're sure and secure about yourself.

I once was one of two keynote speakers and was preceding Scott Waddle, the former commander of the submarine U.S.S. *Greeneville*. In 2001, the *Greeneville* struck and sank a Japanese fishing boat, killing nine people. I began my talk by asking the audience, "Who's eager to hear Commander Waddle?" As I expected, everyone in the room raised their hands. "That means," I continued, "that you can't wait for me to finish."

6 Say what people are thinking (but won't say themselves)

Dilbert creator, Scott Adams, once remarked that this idea provides many of his cartoon subjects. When you verbalize what everyone else is thinking, you in effect "take the hit" for them, allowing them the privilege of laughing. In my previous example, where I was preceding Commander Waddle, it's quite possible the audience was more familiar with him than with me. When I made my joke, I was saying to them, in effect, "I know what you're thinking, and it's okay."

7 Poke fun at a boss or other authority figure

As long as you don't go overboard, making fun of the boss is usually a safe approach. In fact, doing so pays a backhanded compliment to the boss, by recognizing that he or she has sufficient prominence to merit such attention. I recommend, as above, avoiding joking about race or religion or physical characteristics of the boss. The safest topics are probably intelligence and business acumen (or lack thereof).

8 Don't tip your hand

An important reason business humor works is the absence of expectations. People are expecting a business presentation, not a monologue from Jay Leno. Any appropriate humor you can generate usually will succeed. Therefore, if you're about to use humor, never tell the audience, "I'm going to tell you a joke now" or "Here's a joke that makes my point." Just start into the joke as if you're giving your regular presentation.

Also, use local details whenever possible. If you're in Washington, don't say "I was walking down the street." Say instead, "I was walking west on K St., approaching Washington Circle, by The George Washington University Hospital." Don't say, "I exited the subway." Say instead, "I exited the Metro at Judiciary Square." These details add to the credibility of the story, increasing the element of surprise and hence the impact of the joke.

9 Delay the punch line until the end

The impact of humor is greatest when you can delay the punch line as long as possible. For example, instead of telling an audience they have to write clearly enough "so that even a judge can understand it," tell them that they have to write clearly enough "so that it can be understood -- even by a judge."

10 Observe the rule of threes

Have you ever noticed how many jokes involve a minister, a priest, and a rabbi? Or a member of ethnic groups 1, 2, and 3? An old saying tells us that "A cord of three strands is not easily broken." Triangular structures are among the strongest ones possible. The number three represents symmetry and completeness. Therefore, when developing your humor, try to involve three elements. For example, when I give presentations on communications lessons we can learn from the *Titanic* disaster, I don't simply say "I use as an example the *Titanic* because my daughters say I'm a loser." I say, instead:


I use as an example the *Titanic* for three reasons:

- It's something everyone knows.
- I enjoy studying and discussing it.
- My daughters say I'm a loser.



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