

Humor Improves Communication

Paul McGhee, PhD, www.LaughterRemedy.com

"Have I reached the person to whom I am speaking?" (Lily Tomlin, as Ernestine)

[Adapted from P. McGhee, *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*. Call 800-228-0810 to order.]

No matter what kind of job you have, communication will always be an important aspect of your work, whether it's in meetings, phone conversations with clients or discussions between managers and other employees. Many professional organizations (e.g., the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants) now emphasize the development of good "people skills," and communication skills are generally at the top of the list. Unfortunately, good communication is often complicated by the fact that people are stressed out and overloaded with work. You have to earn attention and interest, both in your written and oral communications.

A recent poll reported by *Newsweek* indicated that the biggest work-related complaint that employees had was poor communication with management, with 64% claiming that this impeded their work.¹ Part of the value of humor on the job lies in its ability to lubricate the channels of communication, assuring that it occurs more smoothly and effectively. In the next few months, we'll look at some of the ways humor contributes to effective communication on the job.

Removal of Barriers between Management and Non-Management Staff

As long as distinctions are made between management and non-management employees, there will always be barriers to good communication. Some managers have a style which discourages open communication. When a manager uses humor (especially occasional self-directed humor), however, it says to everyone on the team that s/he's a regular person—s/he's one of us. To function as a team, you need openness and comfort in bringing up difficult issues, and shared positive humor is a powerful means of achieving that. Any organization that wants or needs the full commitment of its employees to work as a team needs to establish a relaxed and open work atmosphere. A manager who shows that s/he has a good sense of humor goes a long way in establishing this atmosphere.

The Tennessee Valley Authority (a federal utility) improved communication within the company by having executives come to work in costumes, stage talk show sketches, and hold charity water balloon fights.²

In many organizations, people with opposing views don't express them, out of fear of reprisal. But it's essential that employees are comfortable expressing concerns and doubts about any decision that's made--especially in the midst of change. Humor creates an environment in which opposing views are more likely to be expressed.

Trust is important here. There's always an element of risk in proposing new ideas, which could either succeed or fail, if implemented. They also could be rejected or ridiculed. A history of shared positive humor helps create a sense of trust which enables employees to open up and express ideas freely without fear of ridicule or rejection.

Emotional Tone of Communication

Our daily communications on the job consist of much more than the information we give and receive. Their emotional tone is just as important. Think back to conversations you've had with people you've met in the past. Chances are you remember your emotional reaction to that person and the general feeling of the conversation much better than you remember what was said. Shared amusement and laughter help assure that both participants in the conversation will remember the good feeling they had long after the content is forgotten.

If you're talking, you're communicating.

This is especially important in situations where the initial mood of the conversation is hostile or confrontational. Research has shown that humor in this situation helps reduce hostile feelings among co-workers. The better mood that shared laughter provides, puts you in a better position to resolve the conflict and get on with your job.³ It is the fact that humor and laughter are incompatible with anger and other negative emotions that makes humor such a great tool for conflict management. Since conflict and stress are so common in the workplace these days, the savvy manager will cultivate appropriately-timed humor as a means of keeping tensions, frustration and upset from escalating.

Awkward Communications

A lighter approach is also an effective tool for easing into sensitive or awkward topics. Like sticking your toe in the water before jumping in, the reaction of the other person tells you whether it's safe to proceed with a more serious statement about the sensitive issue.

"If you're going to tell people the truth, you'd better make them laugh. Otherwise, they'll kill you." (George Bernard Shaw)

Humor can be used to get a negative message across in an inoffensive way. Instead of complaining about a less than full glass of orange juice you're served at a restaurant, you might say to the manager, "You know, I can help you sell 30% more orange juice than you're now selling." When the manager says, "Great, how?" you say, "Just fill up the

glass." You will have made your point without attacking the manager—and you may even get more orange juice the next time!

Using Humor in Meetings

A young and an older mid-level corporate manager have offices right across from each other. Each one spends about half of his time each day in meetings. At the end of the day, the older manager always looks fresh and alert, while the young manager is always exhausted and emotionally drained. Finally, one day following four consecutive meetings, the young guy says to the older, "I don't get it. How do you manage to get through all these meetings and still look energetic at the end of the day? These meetings just wipe me out." The older manager says, "So who listens?"

An employee at a major photocopy company told me that 2/3 of the meetings he attends are ineffective. We've all been in meetings like this. They drain our energy, or bore us to tears. Using humor at appropriate times keeps people engaged and helps assure the success of the meeting.

It's no coincidence that Toastmasters International clubs always have humorous speech contests. They recognize that humor is one of the most important skills to master in delivering any kind of speech. But I remember seeing many speakers when I was a member of Toastmasters years ago delivering a fine speech in a style that looked perfectly natural—until the humor came. The jokes or funny stories seemed tacked on, because the speaker hadn't cultivated a humorous style of presentation.

[Note: If you click on "Improving Your Humor Skills" in this web site, you'll find a series of articles on how to improve your humor skills. By going through the 8-Step Humor Skills program discussed there, and presented in *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*, you'll discover your own style. Any joke, story or funny action that you insert into your talk will flow more naturally, because it will be a natural part of who you are. If you're specifically interested in the use of jokes and stories in meetings, read the basic list of do's and don'ts in connection with joke/story telling. In addition to that list, make it a point to follow these two general rules in using humor in talks or meetings.]

Basic Rules for Using Humor in Talks and Meetings

1) Be sure the humor is relevant to the point you need to make.

We've all seen people in meetings tell jokes or anecdotes that have no bearing on the issue at hand. We're left trying to figure out the point of the joke, which assures we'll miss any important information provided during that time. Irrelevant humor is distracting, and may even be annoying.

2) Remember the sandwich approach.

Make your point, then illustrate it with humor, and then remake the point again. The final reminder of the point is not always necessary, but helps assure that your audience doesn't go away remembering only the joke.

I once provided a program for a company which builds and operates large senior living communities. Residents paid a set fee for their meals, and were allowed to eat as much as they wanted—but were not allowed to take food from the dining room to their apartments. Despite the rules, food theft had become commonplace.

In the context of encouraging employees to see the funny side of the extremes to which residents would go to sneak out fruit and other food for evening snacks, I walked onto the stage in a suit that had large inner pockets full of things like bananas, apples, carrot and celery sticks, rolls, a potato masher, a plastic turkey baster, and even a bottle of Pepsi. I went through 15-20 minutes of my talk before I got to the point where I was discussing this issue. As I encouraged the audience to find the funny side of the situation instead of getting angry at residents, I pulled these items out—one at a time—from my suit pockets, pants pockets, my socks, and even inside my shirt. (The big items were tucked in my shirt behind my back.) There were howls of laughter as I went on and on pulling items out. The audience left with an entirely different outlook on the theft problem.

If you're often in the position of leading meetings or speaking to groups, make a list of the key points or issues you generally discuss. Be on the lookout for cartoons, jokes, or personal incidents that illustrate or connect with these points in some way. (The Internet is a great source of jokes and stories.) When you find a joke or cartoon you think is funny, ask yourself, "What kind of point could this be used to illustrate?" Then simply put it in a file labeled by a key word. When your next meeting rolls around, you'll have quick access to humor that relates to the issues you'll be discussing.

If you're looking for a funny way to start a meeting you know no one wants to attend, try opening it by saying, "After many requests, this staff meeting is being held anyway." At least part of the annoyance people feel in having to attend will melt away, increasing the chances of having a productive meeting.

One woman who was promoted suddenly found herself as the boss of people who had previously been her peers. She knew this would be a sensitive issue, so she opened up her first meeting in her new position, by saying "Don't think of me as your boss. Think of me as a friend . . . a friend who's always right!" Everyone had a good laugh, and she was then able to proceed to a more relaxed discussion of how things would work from that point on.

If you're issuing some kind of criticism or bad news in a meeting, people tend to stiffen up, react emotionally, and not hear what you want them to hear. Shared laughter helps take the sting out of these situations. It shows that you're not really upset at the employee, but that some changes do need to be made. This is especially effective when the manager confesses a similar mistake s/he him/herself has made in the past.

The accelerating pace of business in recent years has created the need for rapid decisions. This increases the chances of making a mistake, since you may not be able to obtain all the information you need before making a decision. One manager who had made a mistake in judgment was preparing for a meeting designed to determine how to deal with the mistake, and move on. He walked in wearing a bull's eye on a T-shirt. The T-shirt playfully acknowledged that the blunder was his responsibility, and allowed other employees to vent their upset through laughter before the meeting even got started. This helped assure a more productive meeting.⁴

Another manager made a mistake, and knew he would have to justify his actions in the meeting that was about to take place. After presenting his defense as well as he could, he said, "That concludes my prepared evasion. I will now evade questions from the audience." This melted some of the negative feelings in the room, and allowed everyone to focus more clearly on how to best deal with the circumstances they were now in. Once a mistake is made, it is important to acknowledge the error and move on. The ability to laugh at your mistake helps reduce the tension resulting from it and focus on moving forward.

Another manager was planning a meeting in which the team had to deal with a problem they had been putting off. Prior to the meeting he hung a sign on the wall containing a quote from W.C. Fields: "There comes a time in the affairs of men when we must take the bull by the tail and face the situation." This triggered laughter as people walked into the room, and made the point that the team had not committed themselves to coming to grips with the problem—which helped create a climate for doing so at the meeting.

Research examining the dynamics of humor in task-oriented meetings suggests that it can play the pivotal role in moving the group toward a consensual solution to a problem. One study examined 26 hours of videotaped meetings held by six different management groups.⁵ The meetings generally opened up with "a stiff, serious tone and a communication process that was sometimes complaining and sometimes adversarial." Humor during this phase (whose average length was 30 minutes) was infrequent. When it did occur, it evoked laughter from only one or two participants, partly because it focused on discontent with others' point of view.

It was after this initial serious phase that—for a period of a few minutes—the pattern of joking changed into humor that caused the entire group to laugh. While the early joking emphasized the differences between people at the meeting (and was sometimes disparaging), this mid-meeting humor drew people together and led to smoother interactions as differences were discussed.

This mid-meeting humor "appeared to allow them to continue by creating a more freely flowing pattern of communication, which led to the eventual resolution of their differences." It "seemed to facilitate a transition from a feeling of tension and defensiveness to a realization of relative safety and playfulness . . . This apparently shared comic vision seemed to create a working bond, overcoming previous estrangement . . . it cultivated a climate in which creative, playful, unconventional problem-solving

could mature." (p. 290-291) Following the laughter, the "groups seemed to progress much more rapidly through the remaining stages of the decision making process."

If you've been in many meetings, you've probably seen this impact of humor in action. You may want to plan ways of building positive humor into your meetings once differences of opinion have been clearly expressed, in order to speed up movement to a consensual solution. Anything you do to momentarily establish a playful atmosphere in the room helps create a non-judgmental frame of mind in dealing with differences of opinion. The shared laughter helps the meeting move more quickly toward the resolution phase, which means everyone can get back to their desks more quickly.

References

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