

## Laughing at Workplace Stress

By Patricia Morgan

The idea of using humor to enhance business, to increase creativity, to improve relationships, to minimize stress and to develop client attract-ability is not a new one.

***Hard work has a future payoff.  
Procrastination pays off NOW!***

It's been around for over twenty-five years. A 1985 survey by the staffing firm, Robert Haft International, concluded that only 15% of employees are fired because of incompetence. The remaining 85% are let go because of lack of people or social skills. They just plain do not get along with others. Smiling and laughing with others is a key social connector and a sense of humor is a relationship enhancer, if used appropriately.

First off, hear this clearly; telling a joke is not necessary to establish a reputation as a light hearted person with whom to work. Most people are looking for relaxed and spontaneous responses in conversations. Indeed, Dr. Robert Provine's research indicates that only about 10 to 20% of laughter is created by something considered "humorous." We primarily smile and laugh to give the message "I like you and want to connect." Smile and laugh no matter how you get there. It is good for your health and increases your likeability factor.

**Avoid perfection by laughing 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 humor. If you can't give up your perfectionist tendencies, at least laugh at them. When we identify our weaknesses and laugh about them we become more approachable. This strategy is the opposite of defensiveness. Show me someone who likes to deal with others' defenses and I'll show you a martyr. Jokes have targets. Situations and your self 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."

Occasional self-deprecation not only makes you more approachable to clients and others, it is a wonderful coping mechanism as it reduces 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.



Here are some more hints about **using humor 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 will not guarantee we win the lottery."
2. Humor is like a conversation lubricant. When words feel tense, a little humor 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 when I was determined to change my colleague. I learned that all I could change was a dime for two nickels."
3. As we know from the advertising world, humor sells many products and services. Perhaps the benefit could be humorous. Use the concept of three. The first two are the truthful details while the last is the surprise or exaggeration. "Our slicer/dicer makes food preparation easier, helps you create gourmet meals and will make you a star on the food channel."
4. Business creativity can be increased by letting go and brain storming off-the-wall ideas. Fooling around has resulted in products such as Post-it notes. They began as the glue that went wrong, and then very right.
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 am doomed for bankruptcy." Reversal: "Lucky me! That prospect said *No* and now I have time to make cold calls." Spontaneity: "That prospect said *No* and now I will create what she will really wants!"

**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 like "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 generate great ideas.

7. Make a big deal about ending on time. "We did it!"

There are a zillion ways that we can inject more humor 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 humor bulletin board.
2. Start the day by reading the comics. Cut out your favorite ones and tack to your humor 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? Yes, I'm Canadian, eh?
4. Have fun pens and other office tools.
5. Collect objects for your office that bring smiles such as fun posters, Groucho Marx noses and glasses, silly pens or a rubber chicken.
6. Pass on fun email messages. Hit "delete" on the heavy, moralizing ones.
7. In the washroom have some fun items to see and read such as *Uncle John's Bathroom* series.
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 thousands of doldrum-free moments.

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