
It is OK to Laugh at Work

How to add some laughter on the job

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Introduction

Let's face it. Work is work. That's why we don't call it play. Just because we all work for a living doesn't mean we can't laugh while on duty. While laughter has a magical effect on people by lightening the mood, diverting anger, or opening up communication lines it also has some dangers. We will explore ways you can add humor to your work day and some of the issues you might face when adding humor on the job.

There are several ways you can add humor to the work day. The trick is not to overdo it. A general rule that seems to work is that less humor is better than more humor. Adding subtle comments, poking fun at yourself, or targeting obvious bad guys can be used successfully to spice up an ordinary situation with a little humor.

Poke fun at yourself

Subtle comments can be woven into a presentation to help make the presentation more fun by keeping the audience's attention. One can use an ironic comparison or mild sarcasm to subtly poke fun at the situation while not losing the original intended message. Those little comments tend to keep the listeners off balance just enough to keep them attentive.

Using yourself as the butt of a joke is another way to insert a bit of humor. Our leaders often poke fun at themselves by joking about where they are from or how they speak with a southern drawl. Poking fun at yourself is a fairly safe way to have some fun without making someone else feel bad. By making fun of yourself you not only get the benefits of humor but you also come across more genuinely. Making fun of the obvious bad guy can add humor to a situation. Since the butt of the joke is the obvious bad guy we don't have to worry about making anyone feel bad by making fun of him. He deserves it! Examples of obvious bad guys who could be joked about might include competitors or the government. When using any of these methods try to limit the amount of humor you put into the situation. You are trying to spice up the story, not become a stand-up comedian. Less humor tends to go over better.

Using less is more

Since I am the Chief Financial Officer I present the financial numbers to our leadership staff regularly. Numbers and accountants tend to be very mundane. My job is to try to get that subtle comment into the presentation to liven it up a bit. Using the less-is-more theory, I usually try to poke fun at something at the

beginning or end of my talk. Sometimes I get carried away and try to put more humor into the numbers than I probably should. This usually happens around Christmas when the mood is already pretty light. One year I presented the numbers by using graphs of Christmas decorations, such as, candy canes, ornaments, and Santa Clause. I felt that this was pretty effective in getting the financial story for the month across while having a fair amount of fun doing it. My grand finale turned out to be funnier than I expected. I had put rows and rows of snow flakes dropping down on the last slide. Due to the slow speed of the computer and the large amount of snow flake rows I had inserted, the slide show could not be stopped. The CEO tried to continue with the next presentation but couldn't get the snow flakes to stop coming down. Everyone at the meeting laughed harder each time he tried to stop the show and move on. This unplanned event was unexpectedly quite funny.

Be prepared

Many times unexpected events like the never-ending snow flakes add humor to the day but often you need to plan out your routine so that the humor appears to be somewhat spontaneous but is really rehearsed. Planning to make a funny situation occur takes considerable effort but is worth the time. Every year our organization has a United Way campaign to solicit donations from our employees. As you can imagine, asking employees to donate money to the United Way is not usually a fun task. This year the folks in charge of the campaign did a video spoof of "The Brady Bunch" that had some management members dressed up like the Bradys, talking with local United Way agencies about how donations help support their agency. This video took hours of time to put together but was a great example of using humor in the work place to lighten a normally drab subject.

You don't always need words

Humor in the workplace does not have to be telling funny stories or acting out amusing skits. Humor can be added to the day by simply putting a comic strip up on the bulletin board. You don't have to say anything. The comic strip can be the impetus for a little humor. Maybe put some weird 'conversation piece' out on your desk for a little attempt at humor. I have seen folks put a can of "BS Removal Spray" on their desk. Place one of those on your desk next time you have an interview or meeting. See what reaction you get. Many times the odd little things you do in your work day can be just as funny or liven up the mood of the unit just as well as telling a funny story.

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One odd little thing I tried once concerned a fellow employee who would say, “let me play devil’s advocate” and proceed to offer another opinion of whatever was being discussed at the time. He did that at every meeting. I got a little amused and annoyed about that so at one meeting I decided I’d beat him to the punch. I purchased a devil horns head band and waited until he wanted to play the devil’s advocate. When he made his move I said, “no, let me play devil’s advocate” and put on my devil horns. This became the standing joke for a while: get the horns on if you want to play devil’s advocate. This stunt didn’t take much creativity to pull off but it really did lighten up that meeting and many meetings to come.

Be careful of insults

Humor in the workplace can often get out of hand because what you thought was a hilarious anecdote ends up being offensive to those with whom you are sharing. You must consider the potential reaction your humor will receive prior to letting it slip out of your mouth. This is difficult when you are trying to be spontaneous but, if at all possible, you should plan out your humorous thoughts ahead of time so you give thoughtful consideration to others’ potential reaction before you hit them with those thoughts. If you have doubts about how the humor will go over, by all means run it past a couple of valued co-workers first.

One of my less successful humorous attempts was when I had this great idea of teaching employees about compliance by asking them a series of multiple choice questions with two silly answers and one real answer. I thought the two silly answers would be funny while still giving the employee a choice to pick the real answer. My question to the employees was

Employees who do not obey the laws, regulations and codes that apply to SOMC:

- a) Are promoted.
- b) Are from the west side.
- c) Are subject to disciplinary action including possible termination.

Let me first explain that our President and CEO grew up on the west side (of our town) so choice (b) seemed ridiculous and funny to me. I thought answers (a) and (b) were clever little jokes that people would laugh at while noticing that (c) was clearly the correct answer.

Shortly into the presentation I asked this question to a couple employees who just happened to live on the west side! They did not think (b) was funny. I not only insulted them but did not teach them anything. Well, maybe I taught them that I was an insensitive goofball. Clearly after seeing the look on their faces I determined that what I had thought was a little funny joke was not funny to everyone. I immediately apologized and pulled that question out of the presentation. Don’t make this mistake. Think ahead about how others might take your statement.

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When your humorous attempt gets too far out of hand be sure to apologize to those you have offended. As mentioned above sometimes the apology can be as simple as a verbal “I’m sorry” but one time when I went a little overboard it took more than “I’m sorry” to get things back to normal. Once, for some dumb reason, I developed a plot to make one of my employees think that the office had mice in it. I guess that was because in conversation it became apparent that she was terribly frightened by mice. I thought it would be funny to play on that fear. On the first day of the ploy I dyed rice black and placed a few “droppings” in places that I knew she would see. I had other employees mention that they thought they had seen a mouse here or there. When I came into work on day two I noticed someone had called an exterminator who was busy placing poison and glue traps throughout the office. One of those glue traps was under the woman’s desk I was trying to “get.” I was rather embarrassed that my ploy had received an exterminator house call but I did not let on or let up. My helper and I devised the grand finale for day three. He went out and purchased a fake mouse that night. On the morning of day three with the woman sitting at her desk my helper and I mentioned that we thought there was a mouse in the glue trap under her desk. She started to freak. My helper crawled under her desk and then threw the fake mouse out across the floor at which point the woman went nuts. She was terribly afraid and just went bananas. My helper and I didn’t get too much of a laugh on this one before we had to settle her down. When she found out what I had done she was even more furious. A simple apology did not cut it. I ended up buying a fresh flower arrangement the next day to sooth the ruffled feathers. That apology cost me a few bucks. It also taught me that cruel humor is cruel, not funny.

I still think it was kind of funny in a cruel sort of way.

Read the room

Sometimes being funny isn't. One of the perils of trying to be funny is that some situations are not ripe for humor. We must develop a sense of timing. Just like we need to be sensitive to how others might react to what we say, we also need to cultivate a sense about whether humor would fit into the given situation. If we are not sensitive to the situation our attempt at being funny might backfire.

Years ago a fellow co-worker and I were summoned to our boss's office. We walked into the office, closed the door and sat down in front of his desk. He had his back to us when we came in and sat down so we couldn't see his face. We couldn't see the message written on his face. He stated that he called us into his office to talk because he had heard from one of his colleagues that we wouldn't talk in meetings because he intimidated us. My co-worker smiled and said that's probably because we had told the group that he flogged us at night. I cracked up and laughed thinking that was really funny. The boss turned around to face us, pounded both fists on the desk and yelled "#*@!, you may think that is funny but I don't! " Needless to say we both determined that perhaps humor was not an appropriate response to his initial question.

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I learned a valuable lesson that day. You must "read the room" to get a sense of the situation you are in. Sometimes being funny is not such a good idea. When you sense that humor may not fit into a situation then don't try it. It won't work.

Humor is for everybody

Everyone cannot be funny. However, everyone can use humor to liven up their day. Anyone can add a couple little humorous jabs into a conversation or plan for a lighter version of their normal talk. Those little gems will make you smile and keep everyone on their toes. Remember not to get too involved in producing a comedy. The less-is-more theory will dictate that you shouldn't try to do too much with your humor. Just enough to catch folks off guard. Be careful not to start using humor if the situation can't support it and think ahead so you won't hurt anyone's feelings. If you are using humor now, keep it up. If you have never used it, then give it a try. It will be fun. It is ok to laugh at work.



About the Author

Dean Wray is the Vice President of Finance for Southern Ohio Medical Center. He serves on the SOMC Medical Care Foundation board, the Portsmouth City Health Department board, is treasurer of Cornerstone United Methodist Church and also serves on Cornerstone's administrative board. Dean has been a little league softball coach for the past ten years and is a private pilot.