

Collaboration And Teams

How to Be Funny at Work

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Summary. Research shows that teams that laugh together are more engaged and creative. So how do we bring more humor into the workplace, even in trying times? First, recognize that you don't have to be a class clown or a comedian to be funny. Everyone has their own humor... [more](#)

Work is often a humorless endeavor. Whether we're earnestly attempting to solve big problems or striving for profits, jokes and laughter often seem out of place. But levity can actually help us achieve those serious goals.

Research shows that leaders with *any* sense of humor are seen as 27% more motivating and admired than those who don't joke around. Their employees are 15% more engaged, and their teams are more than twice as likely to solve a creativity challenge — all of which can translate into improved performance. Studies even show that something as simple as adding a lighthearted line at the end of a sales pitch — like “My final offer is X and I'll throw in my pet frog” — can increase customers' willingness to pay by 18%. A bad dad joke can literally help you get paid.

So why does this work? Part of it is that shared laughter accelerates a feeling of closeness and trust. For example, when pairs of strangers were prompted to laugh together for five minutes before completing a self-disclosure exercise, their interactions were viewed as 30% more intimate than duos who conversed without laughing first. Even reminiscing about moments of shared laughter causes couples to report being 23% more satisfied in their relationships. And research by Gallup shows that one of the greatest drivers of employee performance is having a close friend — presumably one you laugh with — at work.

A lot of humor's power is chemical. When we laugh, our brains produce less cortisol (inducing calm and reducing stress) and release more endorphins (which give us something like a runner's high) and oxytocin (often called the “love” hormone). It's like meditating, exercising, and having sex at the same time. Plus, it's HR-approved.

So how do we do more of that at work?

First, recognize that everyone is funny in their own way, and that it's possible to both hone your sense of humor and learn to deploy it more effectively. A lot of us worry that because we aren't natural class clowns or comedians, we shouldn't even try to make colleagues laugh. We worry that their jokes or stories will fall flat.

But remember what the research shows: People appreciate almost any kind of levity, provided it's not hurtful or offensive. And it's not hard to stay on the right side of that line.

The next step is to get to know your own and others' humor styles. There are four:

- **Stand-Up:** bold, irreverent, and unafraid to ruffle a few feathers for a laugh. (Example: Wanda Sykes)
- **Sweetheart:** earnest, understated, and use humor that lightens the mood (Example: James Corden)
- **Sniper:** edgy, sarcastic, nuanced — masters of the unexpected dig (Example: Michelle Wolf)
- **Magnet:** expressive, charismatic, and easy to make laugh (Example: (Jimmy Fallon)

If you're not sure which category you or your colleagues fall into, take our test here. The more you understand everyone's styles, the easier it is to read the room and know when to drop that perfectly timed frog joke.

You'll also be better able to mitigate risks. For example, sweethearts and magnets need to watch out for excessive self-deprecation that can undermine their reputations, while standups and snipers have to make sure they don't offend or alienate. You should always avoid poking fun at others' expense or anything that a casual observer would deem NSFW.

Then, try a few simple attempts at humor. One way to do this is to start with a simple observation and then build misdirection to reveal the "unusual thing" you've noticed. For example, if there's something you find even remotely amusing — like the realization that you have no idea what people videoconferencing from home are wearing below the waist — you can use a technique called the rule of three, creating a short list with a last, unexpected, item. You might say, "I miss so many things about the office: having

spontaneous chats in the break room, leaving encouraging notes on my colleagues' desks, and wearing anything other than pajama pants.”

You can also play around with small everyday communications like out-of-office replies and email sign-offs, which help enrich the texture of your workplace in an easy, risk-free way. A few that have made us laugh include “I’m abroad with the most inconsistent wifi I’ve ever experienced... I will pick up with you again on July 10 when I’m back in New York, where the data flows like a subterranean stream,” “Yours, heavily caffeinated,” and “Still wondering who let the dogs out,” following an unexpected appearance by a pet on the last team Zoom. (That last one gets bonus points for using another technique: the callback, in which you joke about a previous amusing incident.)

Ready to take it one step further? Try being a bit cheeky with potential customers, business partners, and negotiation counterparts. Consider how Spanx founder and CEO Sara Blakely first approached the head buyer from Neiman Marcus: She sent a shoe and handwritten note that said “Trying to get my foot in the door; have minutes to chat? And get this: Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once sang a funny duet with a Russian official after a particularly tense first meeting; it was a takeoff on music from West Side Story called “East West Story.”

Finally, **play along with the levity** that springs up around you organically. Practice saying “yes, and” to your coworkers. For example, when a member of the marketing team at trendy shoe company Allbirds, suggested to CEO Joey Zwillinger that the company could hit \$1.25 million in sales by the end of August 2016, following a sluggish summer, they decided to make it a silly wager: The loser would buy a rosé machine for the office. Sure enough, they hit the target, the machine was purchased, and employees started celebrating Rosé Fridays. What’s more, Zwillinger managed to **create a signature story** that expressed his personality, showcased his and his sense of humor, and gave others at the organization the courage to do the same.

Now let's acknowledge the elephant in the room: We're writing this in February 2021, a year into a pandemic that has killed millions and put many out of work. Is this really a time for laughter? Yes. We believe that the leaders weaving humor into this weird new world are the ones truly helping their employees to get through it. From the executive who had her five-year old make signs for her to hold up in meetings ("What are the next steps?" "You're on mute") to the CEO who "accidentally" left his screen-share on during a company wide Zoom call as he typed "things inspirational CEOs say in challenging times" into Google, to the senior director who challenged her leadership team to create TikTok dance videos to share with the broader group, these managers are showing that a sense of humor — and humanity — are welcome at work, especially during difficult times.

Humor comes across as a kind of magic, but it's learnable. It's up to all of us — and especially leaders — to bring more of it into our workplaces, thereby boosting our wellbeing, team performance, and even our organizations' bottom lines. Now more than ever, it's time to take humor seriously.

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