



Why Be Serious About Humor (Humor, Consciousness, And Competence)



By Steve Wilson

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“The world is divided into two kinds of people: those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who don’t.” There. I did it. I started right out in keeping with the time-honored humor writer/speaker’s tradition of citing at least one quotation from Mark Twain. Actually, I am appealing to the great spirits of humor to guide me as I offer up thoughts, opinions and observations about going beyond the basics of the skill of using humor. Please note that, in a dramatic departure from another sacred tradition, I am going to spare you E.B. White’s remark that, once analyzed, humor is about as funny as a dissected frog. I cannot, however, contest this cautionary canard: “there are three rules for creating humor, but unfortunately no one knows what they are”. (I would hope that would be sufficient illustration to convince the reader that I am fairly well-versed on the subject. If not, well, there is still some important ground to cover, so let’s not get hung up here.)

One of the characteristics of professional speakers who are especially effective is that from time to time they are serious about humor. If you are not willing to be serious about humor at least some of the time, you will probably end up attending a workshop session like, “Why You’ve Plateau-ed in Mediocrity”.

“Using” Humor

Funny “bits” (or their beginnings) sometimes occur spontaneously while you are up there on the platform doing something else with your audience. This is referred to as “shtick happens”, and you should know three things about this phenomenon: (a) if you value humor, you can count on unplanned humor happening to you, you just don’t know when it will happen; (b) experienced speakers hang on to these gems and, over time, polish some of them into great, even legendary, pieces of funny “business” that are particularly effective; and (c) what distinguishes the use of humor at an advanced level is a combination of the unplanned shtick plus the purposeful use of *the right humor at the right time* (in contrast to “any humor, any time”).

For a few speakers, humor is an end in itself, but most speakers will want to use humor to further other purposes in presentations whose ultimate objectives may be far from evoking laughter. Robert Orben championed humor for its ability to sell, convince, instruct, entertain, and communicate. “It is,” he said, “the ideal vehicle to capture interest, attention, and approval.” Skilled professional speakers, therefore, do not stand at the podium merely spewing gratuitous humor (that is, telling jokes for the sake of telling jokes); they make humor “work”.

If you want to master humor, you will honor your audiences by using humorous illustrations, props or activities that fit the occasion, deepen the understanding of your message, or bring about new perspectives. Well-done humor also establishes rapport and builds credibility by allowing you more personal transparency to the audience, while deftly displaying lovable vulnerability and authenticity. (Doesn’t that just give you goose bumps?)

The Dimensions Of Consciousness And Competence

One way to extend your humor skills is to take some time for a deeper reflection of the unique miracle of being able to use humor effectively. *Unique*: because to some extent the ability to produce funny material and perform it humorously is a talent that resides more in some people than others, which some will develop more than others. *Miracle*: because while some techniques for using humor can be learned, neither the gift of laughter nor the talents for humor are entirely understandable or explainable. Nonetheless, you might give some thought to the following, including a model outlining dimensions of humor, consciousness and competence.

Regarding humor, *unconscious incompetent* refers to a speaker who “knows not, and knows not that he knows not”. (I know, I used the masculine pronoun, but for now, in the interests of readability and getting on to the good stuff, could we not quibble about P.C. language? Thanks.) You recognize these speakers because they don’t appear to have a sense of humor or they use humor in demeaning, racist, ridiculing, and otherwise offensive ways; embarrass members of the audience; mask hostility with sarcasm; or, fill the air with “blue” language. Confronted with their performance, they respond with, “Hey, can’t you take a joke?” or “I was only kidding”.

The term *unconscious competent* refers to a speaker who “knows, but knows not that he knows”. The so-called *natural wit* would be in this category. These speakers’ humor is spontaneous, warm, appropriate and non-offensive. Their natural, easy laugh invites others to join in. Their humor rescues situations gone awry, and set audiences at ease. Their smiles light up the room. They may be appealing, memorable, and *funny*, and it may be quite effortless, but they don’t have a clue as to how they do it. Their humor is positive and works well in the situation, but it is more accidental than intentional and, therefore, lacks two ingredients necessary for mastery: consistency, and predictable results.

It seems to me that the speakers who use humor to best advantage are some combination of the preceding category and the next two, with distinctions between the categories being, at times, not very clear at all.

The *conscious incompetent* is a speaker who “knows not, and knows that he knows not”. These speakers are on the road to mastery of humor because they continually

assess themselves and seek ways to reach higher levels in every competency area, including humor. Knowing that humor is often laughter made from pain, but is never pain inflicted by laughter, they are curious about humor and actively seek personal growth through understanding of their own emotions, including their pain. They may read books and articles about humor, attend humor workshops, study “the greats”, join speakers’ circles, take coaching, and just try to get more fun out of life. They practice telling their stories to get just the right inflection, timing, and choice of words. They browse toy stores and novelty shops looking for new ways to tickle funnybones. They know that they must use only that material which they personally find funny, or it won’t “work” for them. They are keenly aware of their impact on others, and replace any material that might belittle a person, place or product, with uplifting humor that connects people to one another.

The *conscious competent* is a speaker who “knows, and knows that he knows”. These speakers possess both a sense of humor *and* sensitivity to humor. On the platform, their humor ranges from the spontaneous *ad lib* of the moment to the well-planned, well-crafted, *purposeful* vignette. Among their characteristics, these speakers seem to know that, though life is hard at times, joy is a birthright and they don’t feel guilty for having fun. They are playful, intelligent, creative and, at times, zany.

The conscious competent accept that, rather than there being just one sense of humor, there are hundreds of different senses of humor, and they factor that into the challenge they accept when they decide to incorporate humor into their presentations. Their humor style is distinctive and, at its best is good-natured, positive, powerful, creative, expansive, delightful, and personal. The masters seek to elicit laughter by inviting it, but never “demand” it, or take “cheap shots”; and, sometimes their progress requires endless repetitions of the cycle of risk-refine-practice, risk-refine-practice.

Funny Isn’t Enough

To be effective using humor you’ve got to do more than master humorous material, timing and delivery. You must develop emotional depth and range. You must present in a way that the audience feels you are with them, not doing something to them; that you are authentic, not gimmicky.

In a sense, humor is more than a sense of humor. The word *humor* is itself a metaphor for many emotional states that may not involve laughter, but are connected under the rubric of humor because of their physical and mental effects on both the audience and the speaker. It is of special interest to those of us seeking mastery of humor that the physiological *and* psychological changes which accompany laughter (such as changes in heart rate, respiration, and neurochemical components; increased alertness, retention of information, relaxation, optimism, receptivity to new ideas, etc.) also occur in virtually every other emotionally pleasant context (such as hope, joy, warmth, pleasure, fun, love, happiness, enthusiasm, satisfaction, success, confidence, festivity, celebration, appreciation, optimism, sense of purpose, determination, and the will to live).

To achieve masterful results with humor during the course of a presentation, you must be able to use gambits that maneuver the audience (I mean that in a nice way) through a range of emotional responses, and get some laughs, too. Artful speakers portion out humor the way a master chef uses spices: as ingredients necessary to a superb presentation, enhancing flavor and texture, but they are not the main dish. Striking the right balance between serious concepts and humorous illustrations optimizes audience receptivity.

Find Your Way

Mastery of humor means going beyond jokes and beyond learning how to recognize, select, and develop humorous stories, props, and graphics. It includes being emotionally well-rounded, open to room for improvement, and vulnerable; spontaneous as well as practiced; finding balance; and having fun.

Use the consciousness/competence model to gain a deeper understanding of where you are on the humor skill spectrum. You can see how your own consciousness is evolving and where others are. Perhaps you will see more clearly where you would like to be, and thereby decide who is like-minded with you, whom you might want to emulate, and from whom you might like to learn. I wish you well on your journey to conscious competence.

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