



Special Report...

## **"Humor: The Secret Success-Ingredient For Professional Secretaries\*"**

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### **What Makes The New Breed Of Secretary Stand Out?**

- \* Has strong organizational skills; can organize quickly as well as accurately.
- \* Is able to remain calm in the face of deadlines, rush jobs, irate customers.
- \* Can set priorities with little guidance.
- \* Can juggle several assignments at once.
- \* Makes independent decisions.
- \* Writes own correspondence.
- \* Handles travel arrangements.
- \* Purchases office supplies and furnishings.
- \* Understands office politics but does not get involved in power plays.
- \* Is scrupulously discrete--treats work secrets like family secrets.
- \* Works well with employees at all levels and from other departments.
- \* Does not let emotions get in the way of doing the job.
- \* Can spot "gray areas" in issues; does not see everything as black or white.
- \* Asks intelligent questions about the business.
- \* Organizes and arranges meetings.
- \* Manages projects.
- \* Supervises others.
- \* Can communicate well and can prepare own reports without guidance.
- \* Is willing to try new ways of doing things but can make comparisons so that the best of the old and the new can be combined.
- \* Can move past mistakes quietly and with a "Let's correct this and move on" attitude.
- \* Thrives with a fair amount of chaos.
- \* Weighs the business and human sides of a problem before making a decision.
- \* Selects software, computer resources, and some vendors.
- \* Participates in group discussions, meetings, work teams - not as a scribe.
- \* Makes oral and written presentations.
- \* Helps to set and achieve department goals.
- \* Seeks to improve skills by attending courses and seminars.
- \* Can serve as a buffer (between you and irate customers, angry staffers, etc.) and provide a calming influence.
- \* Is never personally rude, but knows when to draw the line with rude customers or workers.

An old joke about secretaries has the boss bragging sarcastically, "My secretary can't type or take shorthand, but she can erase eighty words a minute!" The reference to the secretarial skills of typing and shorthand shows just how old this joke is. There was a time when the most important question for a secretary was, "How fast can you type?" However, the contemporary professional secretary fulfills expanded roles with vastly greater responsibilities, and must meet a set of standards which is far more complex. Middle managers are becoming more self-sufficient, or vanishing altogether from many work scenes, and secretaries are expected to master both hard and soft skills, ranging from high-tech office equipment, office procedures and time management, purchasing, and meeting-planning, to taking more initiative and utilizing the psychology of working effectively with a wide variety of people and personalities.

The impressive list (on page one) of what makes today's professional secretary stand out is on target but, it omits the all-important characteristic of a great sense of humor! With business up to its ears in computers, word processors, voice-mail devices, reprographic and fax machines, downsizing, right-sizing, re-structuring, and you name it, a sense of humor is more important than ever. Humor and laughter are priceless ingredients which bring a balanced perspective that deflects stresses and helps to create and maintain a "positive working environment". Sense of humor has always been, and will continue to be, a significant factor in the careers of successful professionals, including secretaries.

### **Humor Means More Than Joking**

Because 99% of secretaries are women, understanding of the gender issues associated with humor, will enable secretaries to access the benefits of the strategic uses of humor, which have traditionally been available only to men. Women attempting to inject some humor into a situation have not been viewed with the same acceptance as men doing the same thing. Therefore, I offer the following observations and advice on this important subject.

As demands on secretaries have escalated, along with the stresses of the job, the strategic use of humor becomes indispensable. The benefits of putting humor to work at work include relieving stress and tension, defusing hostility, promoting health, reducing absenteeism, improving customer service, effective communications, enhancing rapport, facilitating persuasion, getting people's attention, increasing retention, fostering teamwork, better morale, and more. Remarkably, these benefits are also achieved through a variety of other emotions which, by no coincidence, are associated with positive working environments, and include love, support, nurturance, recognition, appreciation, festivity, celebration, sense of purpose, determination, satisfaction, and even the will to live.

### **Humor Is A Two-Way Street**

One secretary I know, had just changed jobs. She had resigned her previous position because her boss was the all-work-and-no-fun type. She was, understandably, apprehensive about her new boss. During her first day on the new job the new boss handed her a huge stack of orders to process. It was tedious, boring work. When she had slogged halfway through the pile, to her pleasant surprise, she discovered that the new boss had slipped a Hershey bar in among the order forms! She had off-handedly mentioned that she liked them, and the boss took notice. The

thoughtful and fun chocolate "reward" found in the middle of the work, caused her apprehensions to vanish. Her new boss had a great sense of humor, and she knew then, that in taking this position, she had made the right decision.

Strong working teams develop a special form of group humor called "the inside joke". It is humor that bonds a work group together because they understand it, or "get the joke" that others do not. Their common "humor language" unites them and makes the work environment that much more pleasant.

What all this means is that you don't have to tell jokes in order to get the benefits of "humor", just find creative ways to invite any of a number of positive feelings at work, and the organization will profit in many ways.

### **Are Women Capable of Being Funny?**

Here are a few valid generalizations: Men and women have somewhat different senses of humor. Women's humor tends to be kinder than men's. Men will joke about just about anything; women's humor tends to be situational. A man and a woman both telling the same joke, are likely to be perceived differently. Women, more so than men, have greater social freedom, to laugh, giggle, and chuckle at even the smallest amount of humor. In our culture, it is generally expected that the man will initiate the humor and the woman will be passive and receptive; and, men and women have different comfort levels about taking center stage or having power. Men are more expected to be able to take a "practical" joke and dish one out. Although no biological difference can account for it, there are disproportionately more male comedians, humorists, and comedy writers.

Management consultant, Dr. Barbara Mackoff, concludes that women in business need to show a good sense of humor, suggesting that, humor-wise, it's time to reconsider some of our beliefs about successful women. For example, there is the faulty belief that a woman can't risk being funny or she won't be taken seriously. In reality, "a woman can be funny and still maintain her credibility." You do, however, need to learn how to use the right humor at the right time.

When you get "into humor" you do not stop being serious. What happens, when you do it right, is that you remain serious about your responsibilities, your values, your goals and your beliefs, but you show that you can take yourself lightly, instead of becoming a walking case of "terminal seriousness". Slowly but surely, good humored women are coming out of hiding.

Another faulty belief is that all humor about or toward women is sexist. There is a difference between sexual heckling which, if you learn a few techniques, can be well managed with humor, and sexual harassment, which is serious and may require formal action. Successful women stop personalizing a man's patronizing comments. Confident women stop generalizing about men. The secretary should learn to respond to certain kinds of male humor, which is often cruel and aggressive, without imitating it.

### **Vive La Difference!**

Although gender differences in the use of humor are apparent from an early age, gender role-training, rather than biology, accounts for most of the differences between men and women.

Simply stated, in our culture little boys are taught to be the source of humor while little girls are taught to be audience. Comedy writer Anne Beatty, points out one resulting double standard. "If you were a boy," she says, "having a sense of humor meant pouring salt on the head of the girl who sat in front of you to make it look as though she has dandruff. If you were a girl, having a sense of humor meant laughing when someone poured salt on your head."

Many women have been made timid about humor and laughter by Victorian ideas such as: women should always be able to take a joke but not get a certain innuendo; and, women should laugh along with the laugh track, smile perpetually, and not laugh with their mouths open.

Much joking fits in with a competitive style that is more comfortable for men. Certainly, women do tell jokes, and many can do it well. However, according to professor Deborah Tannen, "Since they are not driven to seek and hold center stage in a group, they do not need a store of jokes to whip out for this purpose." She also reported, "there are fewer such (story-telling) personalities among women than among men. Many women who do tell jokes to large groups of people come from ethnic backgrounds in which verbal performance is highly valued. Many women are less likely than men to tell jokes in large groups, especially groups including men."

Sense of humor is about appreciating the absurd or non-serious element in a situation; telling jokes has to do with memory, delivery, and timing. You may know people who are great at telling jokes but don't have a very good sense of humor. Likewise, you may be terrible at telling jokes, and still have a terrific sense of humor.

### **Why Bother With Humor?**

In addition to the benefits already mentioned, there is recent evidence that your good sense of humor can benefit your career. You should know that eighty-four percent of personnel directors stated that employees with a sense of humor seem to do a better job; and, ninety-eight percent of CEO's stated a preference for job candidates with a sense of humor. When 200 executives were asked to name the qualities that kept women from succeeding, lack of a sense of humor was near the top of the list. Employees with a sense of humor are viewed as more flexible, creative, and adaptable to change. These are highly desirable qualities, especially for executives, managers and supervisors, so why not professional secretaries? Donna Couper, a business consultant, says, "Even in a job interview, assuming you're qualified for the position, showing that you have a sense of humor will make your prospective employer feel more comfortable with you."

### **Taking Humor Seriously**

Not only is a good sense of humor the hallmark of a pleasant personality, it rounds out the already impressive list of the roles, traits, and challenges required of today's professional secretary. In spite of advances in automation, secretaries will remain the key to inter-office communications. This means is that professional secretaries, in order to reap the benefits of their new challenges -- including greater job satisfaction and promotability-- need to strategically react to and initiate humor. But doing so constitutes a role-reversal that will often be met with backlash. Rather than inviting resistance and derision, a degree of awareness combined with mastery of the ways to use humor strategically, improves a woman's chances of attracting power and credibility.

### Tips For Women Using Humor At Work

1. Don't merely imitate men's humor. Women's humor tends to be more personal and situational. Tell about funny things from everyday life.
2. You do not need to tell jokes: a warm smile, a true story, or words of appreciation can bring the same benefits. Beverly Sills said, "I can't be happy every day, but at least I can be cheerful."
3. Use only humor that fits you.
4. Use only humor that fits the occasion.
5. Use only humor that fits the audience.
6. Promote the use of humor in company newsletters and on bulletin boards.
7. Encourage "humor breaks" or times when everyone can lighten up for a few minutes.
8. If the joke has to be "on" someone, make it yourself, but NEVER belittle yourself with a joke.
9. Don't poke fun at anything that another person couldn't change in the next five minutes.
10. Eliminate sarcasm, ridicule and taboo language.
11. If you insist on telling jokes, practice privately until you can do it well.
12. CAUTION: When it comes to humor, everyone must be sensitive and sensible. There is no place in the work place for humor that is sexist or sexual, racist, age-ist or otherwise puts people down. Use humor that lifts people up, and draws them together.

\*In the few years since this was written, the term "secretary" even "professional secretary" has fallen into disuse because it has been determined to NOT be PC (Politically Correct). The author realizes that a more favorable term might be "Office Professional" or "Administrative Assistant" but did not change the terminology for this revision. The meaning and content are as true as ever. An office professional by any other name...

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