



Kindly Use Humor...Kindly

By Steve Wilson

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Humor Can Help And Humor Can Hurt

Anyone who has had their spirits lifted by humor knows that humor is an important tool. I teach this concept to employees and managers and people facing serious and difficult medical situations. Bringing the power of humor to the workplace is a way of keeping employees healthy and on the job, improving morale, and increasing productivity. (It has been said that a fifteen percent increase in morale can account for a forty percent increase in productivity.) There is now quite a bit of scientific and anecdotal evidence for the healing power of humor, too. As the spiritual teacher, Alan Cohen, tells us, "Find your source and live from it. Keep your heart open, and laugh generously. These are the maxims of the peaceful teacher, the tools of the gentle healer."

However, just as humor can lift people up, it can slam them down. Anyone who has been the butt of a joke, or who has been part of a group that has been made fun of, knows that humor can also be a destructive weapon. When joking is used to tease or ridicule children, they may be emotionally scarred for life (a situation I call 'humor abuse'). Adults are no less susceptible to the pain of unkind and insensitive humor. In fact, it has been estimated that the majority of sexual harassment complaints in the United States originate from inappropriate joking. (Adults have ways to respond in strong terms not available to children.)

Racial jokes, ethnic jokes, sexist jokes, put-downs, zingers, embarrassment, sarcasm and ridicule have no place in the work place or any other place where human happiness is important.

Golden Rules

Here are The Golden Rules For Keeping Humor Kindly, the most effective guidelines for keeping humor powerfully positive.

1. When in doubt, leave it out. Always be aware of your audience and your position. Humor that is incongruent with your position may be confusing and may reduce your credibility. The humor that works well with your close friends may not be acceptable to your customers; the "inside" jokes from your workplace may not go over well with your family. When you are about to lay some humor on someone ask yourself whether, from their perspective, the humor might be inappropriate or distasteful. Keep in mind this African proverb: The axe forgets, but the tree remembers.

2. Timing is everything. Humor is not always welcome as a means to lighten up a situation...at least not right away. Humor has been described as "tragedy plus time," which means if you try to be funny with someone too soon following their hurt, it will backfire. An example of bad timing is when my son was recuperating from his emergency appendectomy and my joking brought tears to eyes. Unfortunately, it was because his belly laughter pulled at the fresh stitches and caused far more physical pain than mental relief.

3. Eliminate sarcasm and ridicule. Sarcasm is the form of communication which is most easily misinterpreted because you say exactly what you do not mean. Sarcasm is a frequently a mask for anger, too. Ridicule is unacceptable for obvious reasons, therefore, just don't belittle anyone for anything. After all, "The richest laugh is at no one's expense."

4. Erase taboo language. Words mean different things to different people, and their acceptability varies from person to person and from group to group. If you offend people by using taboo language (in their terms) you not only risk harming their self-esteem but you turn them off to the rest of your message. Once that happens, you can't sell them anything or teach them anything or persuade them of anything.

5. Be very careful when making humorous comments about serious subject, especially around children. Humor and joking are useful defense mechanisms and may even be useful for helping us cope with horrendous situations. The most grisly tragedies in the today's news may well become the subject of tomorrow's jokes, but taken in the wrong context, it gives a mixed message and may be taken the wrong way. Joel Goodman, EdD, says, "Humor should be laughter made from pain, not pain inflicted by laughter."

6. "The Five Minute Rule": Don't poke fun of anything that another person could not change in the next five minutes. We are all stuck with some permanent characteristics that we aren't thrilled about. It may be our height or weight, or our hair, ears, nose or toes. If you want to be kind with your humor, leave those parts alone.

7. Make fun of situations rather than making fun of people. We can all relate to misunderstandings, frustrations, and accidents, so situational humor is good way of drawing us together whereas, wise-cracks about personal short-comings make us uneasy and can be divisive. Invoke Murphy's Laws but don't make fun of Murphy. If the situation allows, take the joke on yourself, but do it in a way that demonstrates your comfortable self-acceptance.

Use humor. Use it often, but use it wisely. It is just as important for you to develop your sensitivity to humor as it for you to develop your sense of humor. This adage says it all: "A kind word often goes unspoken, but never goes unheard."

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