

GAMA

A Practitioner's
Guide To Field
Management

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Life-Long Learning A Journey of Continued Success

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Speak Softly and Carry a Big Schtick

GAVIN JEROME

The most important business survival skill of the 1990s is a sense of humor. Humor used effectively can create rapport, reduce tension, increase cooperation and facilitate communication. Humor used effectively can get your message across in a way that nothing else can. A sense of humor can also help you better manage employees and help you close a sale. As Monty Python's John Cleese said, "It's no coincidence that the man I know who always has the best stock of new jokes is not a comedian, but a salesman." Humor can help connect with both client and colleague.

Humor, however, is a double-edged sword. The reasons so many business professionals fear humor in the workplace are the negative results achieved by using it improperly. Just as humor can bring people together, it can polarize them as well. Humor is a viable business tool if you avoid the pitfalls and problems that are common in workplace humor.

In Brief

- If used properly, humor can be a viable business tool.
- Having a sense of humor helps one gain perspective in stressful situations, which are on the rise in today's constantly changing business environment.
- Nothing defuses anger or manages conflict better than humor.

Use It Wisely

Begin by creating a "professional" sense of humor. As a business professional, you must maintain a sense of humor while still being taken seriously. In the workplace, humor should be used to lighten and enlighten. When joking with colleagues, laugh

"with," not "at," them. This is the most common area of humor abuse. There is a fine line between good-natured ribbing and kidding that goes too far. Joke about things that are not important, not work related, not true or not a sensitive subject.

When joking with colleagues, kid about something that is not important or vital to their overall well-being. Trivial things are often the safest fodder for jokes. Also, never joke about job-related performance issues. Even in jest these barbs are easily misinterpreted as mean-spirited and threaten to undermine the integrity of the business professional.

One of the most effective techniques in joking with colleagues is kidding them about things that are obviously not true. No one can be offended by something that is completely baseless and unfounded.

Never joke about a sensitive subject. Everybody has certain things that he or she is very touchy about. These things can be as varied as the individuals themselves. It is important to take some time to get to know the person you are joking with.

Certain subjects should be automatically off limits—religion, politics and moral issues (RPM). All of these subjects force people to have a definite opinion one way or another. These subjects are private, personal issues that have no place at work. Joking around with colleagues is a quick and easy way to establish rapport, boost morale and improve communication, but only if done correctly.

Excess, big hair, and trickle-down economics defined the 1980s. The trickle-down effect is making a comeback, but not economically speaking. It has been my experience that the companies who are most successful in using humor in the workplace to create rapport and reduce stress are companies who have a management team who are ready and willing to share their sense of humor. Management's actions and expectations develop the company's environment. If management is unwilling to accept humor in any form, the climate is set. This attitude trickles down through the staff. The same is true of managers who not only use humor but also encourage it. This effect will trickle down as well. In essence, if managers are showing their sense of humor, they are giving permission for their employees to show theirs.

There are many ways to initiate this trickle-down effect. The easiest is to just be willing to share your sense of humor. You can do this without having to be the class clown. You can simply laugh when you hear or see something

funny. Not everyone is comfortable telling a joke, but everyone can laugh at one. Laughing at humor is the quickest way to show that you have a sense of humor.

Another way to allow your humor to trickle down to others is to share humor that you have heard from outside sources. Repeat a funny story you heard on the radio on the way to work. Clip a funny cartoon out of the newspaper and share it with your employees. Share any humor that you hear or see that is appropriate and reflects your sense of humor.

Sometimes conveying a sense of humor is as simple as just observing the many humorous happenings inherent in all work environments. Most of us are so focused on our daily problems that we fail to observe the little things that could add humor to our lives.

Self-deprecating humor is a helpful way for manager's to break the ice at business meetings. Poking fun at yourself makes you more human and approachable. Remember, humor trickles



**About
the
Author**

Gavin Jerome is president of Comedy College, a hands-on humor workshop designed to teach people how to use humor effectively in their personal and professional lives. Jerome has worked with such corporate clients as Principal Financial Group, Sears, Norwest Financial and IBM. Before launching his company, Jerome spent 10 years as a professional comedian, performing in comedy clubs and corporate events across the nation.

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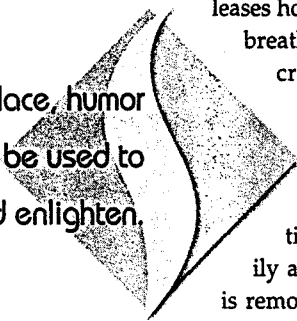
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ally, when stress occurs, your body releases hormones that accelerate your breathing and heart rate and increase your blood pressure.

Your body gets into a survival mode, readying itself for a physical emergency. As stress continues, your body temporarily adjusts to the stress. If stress is removed during this adjustment period, your body returns to normal.

However, if stress goes on for prolonged periods of time, your body fails to adjust and wears out, weakening your defense to disease. A body cannot run on high speed forever. This can lead to burnout.

"Nowadays, stress is not caused by the situation itself, but by how we perceive that situation," says Allen Elkin, program director of Manhattan's Stress Management and Counseling Centers. Gaining a new perspective is what humor is all about. By laughing at your predicament, you are able to keep it in perspective. We have all heard people say, "Some day we will look back on this and laugh." Dr. Joel Goodman, director of the Humor Project, asks, "Why wait?" Being able to take a step back and laugh at a stressful situation while it is happening will go a long way in helping you get a handle on workplace stress.

Rising stress levels are a by-product of the corporate climate of the 1990s when downsizing and mergers are common and change can occur swiftly and without warning. According to a Johns Hopkins University study of 12,000 workers, the highest stress job categories include sales personnel, secretaries, data entry and computer operators. All do demanding work for which others set the rules. "The idea that if you have a stressful environment you're better off is nonsense," says Larry Bassidy, CEO of AlliedSignal. "You're better off if you don't have a stressful

environment in terms of people's ideas coming forward."

A common source of stress in the workplace is conflict situations that inevitably arise. Anytime people meet to conduct business, conflict is the norm. Conflicts of interest, ideologies and personalities are commonplace in today's corporate America. Humor can help manage conflict. Behind every angry person is usually a problem that needs to be addressed. Humor can help defuse the anger and initiate problem solving.

In the book, *Humor At Work*, by Blumenfeld and Alpern, they share this story. "Investigating a family disturbance call, San Francisco police officer Adelle Roberts saw a television set crash through the front window. She rang the doorbell while hearing the sounds of a heated argument. A gruff voice demanded, 'Who is it?' Instead of answering, 'Police,' she said, 'TV repairman.' The shouts dissolved into laughter and set the scene for a peaceful solution.

Humor can also be used to prevent tension before it occurs. In his book, *The Light Touch*, Malcolm Kushner says, "As a manager you have to tell people what to do, yet there is an inherent conflict between you and your staff every time you do. A direct order often creates resistance and resentment. Humor provides a velvet glove around the fist of authority. A request for cooperation phrased in a humorous way can cushion the blow."

For managers in the workplace, I am a firm believer in humorous hints. I was working with a manager of a huge medical clinic. Their best cardiologist was extremely slow with his dictation. Mountains and mountains of charts were collecting dust in his office. Many times other physicians needed these important records to adequately treat their patients. This manager realized that this was a huge problem and needed to rectify the situation right away. Instead of

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down, it does not trickle up. Offices with the best rapport among colleagues usually have the same thing in common, a manager with a good sense of humor. Employing trickle-down humor simply means employing one or all of the following four techniques:

- ◆ Share.
- ◆ Observe.
- ◆ Laugh.
- ◆ Develop.

Staggering Stress

Humor can also help combat one of the most dangerous problems in the workplace today—stress.

The research done on the fiscal effects of stress on companies is staggering. In fact, recent studies have shown:

- ◆ Up to 90 percent of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress-related complaints.
- ◆ Up to 80 percent of industrial accidents result from stress.
- ◆ More than 50 percent of lost work days are stress related.
- ◆ Fourteen percent of all workers say stress caused them to quit or change jobs in the previous two years.
- ◆ Stress on or off the job costs U.S. workplaces an estimated \$200 billion a year in reduced productivity, accidents, compensation claims, turnover, health insurance and medical expenses.

"Employers are being increasingly held liable for job stress," says Paul Rosch, president of the American Institute of Stress. "From a financial perspective, employers are finding they have to do something."

According to DNR Safety News, stress is a physical or mental response to the pressures of an event. Biologi-

confronting the doctor in an adversarial manner, I suggested she try a humorous hint. She printed up a sign on her computer that read, "Medical Records Auxiliary Storage Facility," and placed it on the door to the cardiologist's office. The next day upon arriving to work the cardiologist saw the sign and burst out laughing. He also got the message. Within 48 hours he caught up all his dictation, and every chart was back in place.

A sense of humor is the most important skill a business professional can possess. Never has this been more true

than in today's competitive corporate climate. Executives on the cutting edge see humor as a way to out-sell, out-manage and out-market the competition. Humor used effectively can boost employee morale, facilitate communication, reduce stress and improve the bottom line. A cohesive team spirit is essential these days in order to increase productivity.

"A good sense of humor helps build personal rapport and a greater spirit of cooperation," said Max Messmer, chairman of Accountemps. "When the pressure mounts and deadlines

loom, humor helps defuse tension. Individuals with a healthy sense of humor tend to work well with others, which is a critical management skill."

Mark Twain said, "The human race has only one effective weapon and that is laughter." Arm yourself and your employees so they can be successful on today's competitive corporate battleground. Learn to speak softly and carry a big schtick.

I/R Code: 9900.00 Agency Management—General

Be Faithful to What Is Helpful

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imately \$1.3 million in first-year commissions (FYC). Surprisingly, the average age of this group is 25 years old, and these associates will generate more than \$1 million in FYC.

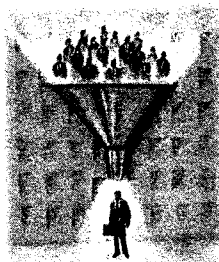
Target Marketing

In sales, target marketing allows you to market your product effectively to a specific group of people. One becomes known as the "expert" to that group and specializes in serving the group's needs. I encourage organizations to target market when they recruit.

Our firm targets recent college graduates. Our main message to that group is, "We specialize in you." We specialize in developing 21- to 25-year-olds who just graduated from college and helping them build successful financial planning practice. This group's future in the business is promising; MDRT reports that 37 percent of its members started their careers in this industry before age 25.

Whenever a recent college graduate interviews with us, we emphasize our strong track record in assisting them. Of the 200 associates affiliated with our firm, more than 100 started their careers with us right after college. Twenty of our top 25 producers last year began their careers with us immediately upon graduation. Two of Minnesota Mutual's top 10 associates are products of our college target-recruiting program.

We use the following strategy with every finalist in our interviewing process. Rather than telling them how great our firm is or how wonderful our training is, we have them get that information directly from the source. I have each finalist visit at least six associates who have been out of college anywhere from three months to two years and may have attended the same university or college. They meet with associates who had the same major or even belonged to the same clubs or athletic teams. Imagine the bonding and relationship building that occurs between the finalists and our recently hired associates.



It is imperative that a relationship be established with the candidates, because competition is fierce. In 1997, of the 25 associates who joined our firm, 22 received an offer to sell insurance elsewhere. That is encouraging to us because

it indicates that we hired focused individuals. It also tells us that if we didn't have the activity, recommendations and target marketing that ultimately made the candidates feel comfortable with us, we might have had three acceptances instead of 25.

We can learn a great deal from our sales practices when recruiting. The acronym REPS has served us well. We believe that recruiting emulates the process of selling. Just as in sales, recruiting is a relationship business. To ensure that those relationships endure, we must be truthful up front. When delivering the message of this great career, we must underpromise and overdeliver, just as we do in our successful sales practices. I want each candidate to be able to look me in the eye a year later and think, "Ed, this wasn't as difficult as you made it out to be. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to make a difference." After all, making a difference in people's lives is why we do all the wonderful things we do. ♦

The Recruiter's Creed

Nothing happens until someone recruits somebody. An organization stands still; there is no culture, no vision, no opportunity and no future. An organization builds upon people or it builds upon nothing at all. With every new candidate comes potential, with every new recruit comes hope, with every additional person comes a new perspective, a new mind and a new heart. What happens when you recruit someone? You give them an opportunity, a future and a reason to live life to the fullest each and every day—a chance to do something few can do in life, to truly make a difference in touching the lives of others. We are fishers of people; we are making a difference.

I/R Code: 9963.00 Recruiting