



executive development • professional training • learning tools

BUSINESS HUMOR: HOW TO USE IT IN YOUR NEXT PRESENTATION

by Meredith O'Connor

When you think of the terms “humor” and “business” – do they seem incompatible? Do you ever wonder if humor really has a place in your presentations?

Humor not only belongs in business presentations, it's the secret weapon of many successful leaders. Using appropriate humor in meetings creates a more positive atmosphere. No one has ever been arrested in a business meeting for making people laugh.

"Think about the business presentations and meetings you've attended that you remember as 'fantastic'. Chances are those events included some kind of humor," says "Corporate Comedian" David Glickman, author of **Punchline Your Bottom Line: 76 Ways to Get Any Business Audience Laughing** (www.davidglickman.com). "It's what people remember. When people are laughing, they are listening," Glickman adds.

You may not think of yourself as a funny person. You may not be able to remember or tell a joke. You don't have to remember jokes. In fact, jokes don't usually work. What does work is a sense of humor. Find a funny “take” on a painful or difficult business situation. Or, choose an appropriate, self-deprecating remark. If you are really tuned in to what's going on every day in your office, and in your industry, you will find good material.

Humor is a great way to defuse difficult issues or deflect criticism. Writer Mark Katz wrote a line for Al Gore that was priceless. “I know what they say about me – that I'm so stiff, racks buy their suits off of me.” By acknowledging a perceived character flaw, Katz took the edge off and made Gore seem far more like a mortal human.

“Humor actually increases your stature as a leader,” says Suzanne Bates. “Think about it – if you can warm up the room and make people smile, you stand out,” says Suzanne. “You gain the respect of your colleagues, you appear confident and in control.” Who looks like a leader – the person who is stiff and formal, or the one who can help the whole group loosen up?

How do you begin to add humor to your presentations? Here's a great tip from Judy Carter, the author of **The Comedy Bible**, (www.judycarter.com): study comedians. "Stand-up is the most condensed form of comedy, and if you understand the basic principles of the simplest of jokes, you will be able to translate that skill to many different domains," says Carter.

By watching the pros like Letterman and Leno who have mastered standup, you'll notice that they "see" the world a little differently. They find the absurd, ridiculous, weird or uncanny in stuff that happens every day. Remember Jerry Seinfeld? He became a comedy icon by making us laugh about "nothing."

Studying comedians also teaches you about timing and delivery. Business humor is similar to standup comedy, in that to work, it needs to be short and punchy. If your story drags out, people will forget where you started and won't care where you're going by the time you get there.

Comedians will also show you how to be timely and relevant. What's funny to your audience is what is happening right now. What made them laugh last month – like an encounter with a painful person or group, may not be funny at the next quarterly meeting.

Carter advises to learn to "see" comedy all around you, and says that there are "four basic attitudes that are useful (in seeing the humor in situations): weird, scary, hard, or stupid." **The Comedy Bible** has writing exercises that will help anyone who wants to develop their funny bone begin to look at every day situations in a funnier way.

Here are some more tips, from David Glickman:

Tip #1: "Avoid using traditional 'jokes'. Too many speakers think they're supposed to open with a 'joke' and then they make an awkward segue into their material."

Tip #2: "Instead, search for 'relevant humor'. If the humor is relevant to the subjects being discussed, it won't seem phony. I always like to say, "The more specific the humor, the more terrific the humor'. "

Tip #3: "If you can find ways to parody or poke fun of the 'hot buttons' or stressors at work, you'll acknowledge what everyone is already thinking anyway, and you'll gain the respect of your team by showing that it's 'ok to laugh at some of these things that drive us all crazy'."

Don't go overboard. Have you ever watched "The Office"? If so, you'll know what I mean – the perfect example of what not to do as a leader. Nobody wants to hear politically incorrect or potentially offensive jokes in a business setting – it just makes people uncomfortable.

And, know your audience. "What makes one group laugh," says Suzanne Bates, "may leave another puzzled." That doesn't mean you should be afraid to try humor. "As long as the humor is appropriate," says Suzanne, "people will remember you for giving it a go."