

The Business Sense of Humor

By John Wagner

A sense of humor is rated high as an attribute of attractiveness. A well-developed sense of humor will certainly help us enjoy life and attract people to us. But, can it also help us be more successful in our work? Robert Half International surveyed 737 chief executives of large corporations. 98% of the CEOs surveyed said that they would hire a person with a good sense of humor over someone lacking that quality. How does an aspiring executive go about developing that business sense of humor? It all begins with the understanding that humor is a powerful tool that must be used with caution and skill, at the appropriate time and place. Yes, timing is everything and remember the three P's: practice, practice, practice. Never use humor to belittle others or put them down. Never use politically incorrect humor. Doing so will just demonstrate that you are insensitive to others, and that is a sure-fire career stopper.

Learn to laugh at yourself. Learn to take yourself lightly and your job responsibilities seriously. Be quick to laugh at your mistakes, be responsible for them, quick to fix them, and learn the lesson inherent in the failure. Smile more often. Smiling is the most inexpensive way to improve your appearance. It also enhances communication, conveys openness, and sets the stage for pleasant interactions. Smiling has been shown to improve phone conversations. Even when people can't see your smile, they hear it in your tone of voice.

Be a team player that knows how to use humor to enhance productivity. You can create team spirit by laughing with others at the situations or challenges your team faces. Give your group a fun name or ID. Even unofficially changing the Marketing Task Force to the "Bringing in the Bread Bunch" can generate some ah-ha's and ha-ha's. Humor helps the creative process. Playfulness helps generate possibilities and a sense of optimism. Having fun with the group's challenge helps the people involved stay relaxed so that they can do their best and most inspired work.

Learn to use humor to be hard on the problem but easy on the people involved. This helps everyone take the actions and risks necessary to succeed. Humor helps imperfect humans work together better so that we can turn out perfected products and services. We are not talking about goofing off. We are talking about playfulness with the purpose of creating a work environment that is open to new and creative ideas, that is supportive of people, and encourages ambitious effort. The kind of work environment that is required for success in today's highly competitive world.

Maintain a positive mental attitude. Failure and disappointment will occur and you will get frustrated, maybe even mad. We need to learn to accept the resulting bad feelings. It is okay to have negative feelings; it is not okay to "be had" by those feelings. Humor can provide the perspective to help us move beyond those feelings so that we can choose a productive response rather than just react out of frustration. If we take ourselves too seriously we can become arrogant and lose sight of how important it is that we continue to learn and grow and constantly improve. Business success is a journey, not a destination.

Lead with a sense of humor and become less threatening, more believable, and more encouraging. That is why U.S. Presidents and other top leaders have hired humor writers for years. Learn to lead with laughter and energize your followers. Don't wait until you're the boss to be a leader who uses humor effectively. People will follow your lead when you are able to laugh at yourself and with the people around you. Use humor to keep challenges in their proper perspective so creative solutions can be found. Playfully recognize other people and their contributions, to let them know that they are important and appreciated. Lighten up and un-stuff that shirt if you want to lead.

When you demonstrate your business sense of humor by taking yourself lightly and your job responsibilities seriously, you become a person destined for success. You are a lot more fun to be with - which doesn't hurt your social life either.

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