

Why leaders need to lighten the mood

Everyone has a sense of humour. Some people just aren't funny, surely? But I'm not talking about telling jokes - rather those impromptu moments, where we share our human frailty or laugh at life's absurdities or see another perspective. Laughing with people is an ancient way to connect.

Temps de lecture : minute

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I teach leaders the improv skills that I use every Sunday onstage with the Comedy Store Players in London - active listening, accepting the contributions of others and using them, navigating uncertainty together, making our colleagues look good, being curious - which are directly applicable to creativity, collaboration and communication in business.

At the end of a workshop, often people whisper to me, 'You know, we so rarely have chance to laugh together'. I step back and think that if I have achieved nothing more than providing some shared moments of humour for the group, then I have achieved something truly worthwhile.

There are four types of humour.

Good Humour

- Affiliative humour - used in social situations, strengthening group cohesion, reducing tension by telling humorous anecdotes or 'riffing' to put others at ease.
- Self-enhancing humour - a way of coping with unpleasant moments, smiling in adversity, finding humour when something bad has

happened. It's a way of coping with stress.

'Bad' Humour

- Aggressive humour - involves ridiculing others.
- Self-defeating humour - is overly self-disparaging, perhaps in order to ingratiate oneself or avoid serious underlying concerns.

I wouldn't even call these last two humour. The first is bullying, the second is self-sabotage. The laughter is hollow.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is now taken more seriously, especially since 2020. A karaoke night once a year won't suffice. Laughter is well known to be related to a recent buzz-word - *resilience*. Why isn't humour recognised as vital to an individual's and an organisation's health? Laughter is good for your body in the short and long term. It increases the release of endorphins (natural pain killers) by the brain. Your blood pressure rises when you start to laugh, then dips below normal, so your heart grows stronger. A good belly laugh relieves muscle tension and increases oxygen intake. All this together improves your immune system, relieving pain and improving self-esteem.

Lots of research shows that humour can have financial benefits:

- when CEOs use humour during the earnings announcements of publicly listed companies, the stock price increases by more after the call and analysts become more positive about the stock.
- there is a positive correlation between bonuses and 'humour utterances' (at work in general and in the recruitment interview).

We need more shared laughter at work

Sarcasm can be painful but research shows that where there is spirit of embracing irony in a team, discouraging a static 'mono' view of the world, allowing different perspectives to emerge on problems or opportunities, then you will be more productive. Your brain is thinking more creatively when it has to understand the difference between the literal and the intended meaning.

How do we make our remote meetings more fun?

With the spread of remote working, humour should be taken even more seriously. The lack of it is so often cited as a major shortcoming for virtual interactions. Everyone is in back-to-back meetings, stressed about the task and unable to connect, in more ways than one. When you are physically disconnected, here is a tool available to encourage engagement, psychological safety and wellbeing. When we laugh together, we are all experiencing dopamine and endorphins. When we share the same state, we trust each other. Even in two dimensions we can find something very human that slices through the screen.

Some simple tips to bring more humour to virtual meetings

- Invite people to bring an object. Looking at something 3D relaxes our brain which might have been staring at 2D images all day, if not all week. It could be a hat, an object that means something to us, even a pet, which never fails to lighten the mood.
- Have a smiley face just above your camera. Just draw it on a Post-It note. Look at it frequently. Not only does it lift your eyes (meaning they are more visible) but you feel an emotional lift too.

Leadership and humour

Laughter may be the only competitive advantage we have over robots. For our ancestors to prosper, to share food and resources, they needed a leader who had good relational skills and could bring people together - often through humour.

Funny doesn't equal frivolous

It's a leader's job (and the whole team's) to cultivate a culture that is productive and connected, so why not prioritise creating joy? Laughter helps engagement and wellbeing and collaboration. Humour is a 'technology' that costs nothing and has a proven track record. Life is serious, business is serious, many organisations are doing powerful, life-enhancing things. That's no reason to reject something that is essential to our humanity - humour and the ability (the necessity?) to look at life from different angles.

You don't have to be a brilliant joke-teller

In fact, maybe it's better you're not. Just be a great *laugher*. Enjoy giggling, acknowledging when you've got something wrong and putting on a silly hat once in a while. Give permission to others to laugh with you. Find the funny in the ordinary. Make time for sharing small moments of humour on Teams. It might just be the mug you're drinking from or the socks you're wearing (or not wearing).

Ensure your processes and rituals aren't actively mitigating against humour

When I run a virtual session, people tell me that they have never

experienced Zoom used like it. But I'm just a needy improv comedian - I thrive on interaction. Can you build something like that into your gatherings? Explicitly allowing humour, an investment in group cohesion for the next moment when the 'task' is undertaken. Don't just hope for the best, think of it as something just as important as your team's 'five a day' or ten thousand steps. Don't be afraid to laugh at work. Happier workers are more productive.

Neil Mullarkey is the author of new book *In The Moment: Build Your Confidence, Communication and Creativity at Work*, published by Kogan Page, priced £12.99.



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