



NAC Executive Insights

Humor's Place in the Work Environment and How to be More Effective in Comic Relief Communication

Key Points:

- Telling a joke or story that can alienate some of its intended audience is a mistake that can be avoided, but planning ahead is essential.
- A humorous story is composed of five parts: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution or conclusion.
- Jokes at work should carry a warning for the teller. These could be hurtful and carry the wrong message.
- Best approaches to storytelling are: Look for opportunities to use work-oriented stories where the surprise is on the storyteller. Use word play, where two ordinary words used routinely sound the same yet have different meanings. Emphasis should be on a story with a point that is both endearing and makes you smile, for example, a human-interest story that can be applied to the current situation.
- Several leadership principles apply to this insight: Moral adherence is a crucial part of how to conduct all activity. Be flexible—people do not like change. Distractions are always at hand, therefore do not lose focus on what you are aiming to do. Change team dynamics and approaches with changing conditions. Know your team well.
- Classic business literature can be used as a guide, such as *Who Moved My Cheese* by Dr. Spencer Johnson, which demonstrates humor with a learning edge.

Introduction

I experienced the following situation on a project where I was a stakeholder:

I was sitting in a room of project stakeholders. The meeting was called to resolve issues with the project schedule, where a delay in equipment delivery was on the critical path and had consequences for other activities affecting a variety of constituents, including subcontractors and their cost. The project manager was

confident and began to speak, but in an effort to alleviate tension in the room he told a joke. In the room were seasoned professionals, but also more junior personnel. There were both men and women in attendance with a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The joke was both off color and nationality slighting. A tepid laughter was noted, and a new tension filled the room.

Does humor have a place in the work environment? We would all say, "Of course." Without levity and humor, the workplace could be sullen and not welcoming. We want our work environment to be fun. Research shows higher productivity occurs when people are happy.

We also know that many times humor can be offensive and could lead to a classic legal definition of harassment: "Workplace harassment occurs when a person is put down, shown hostility, or the recipient of unwanted conduct from a fellow employee or supervisor."

As members of a team, or even more importantly the leader of an organization, how do we know what is appropriate for the workplace. Are we sure our intention of comic relief will translate into a comfortable and noncontroversial experience for everyone?

We should be reminded that not everyone has the same beliefs, experiences, and backgrounds. The rule is not "treat everyone like I would want to be treated," but instead "treat everyone the way they want to be treated." We don't know background information about everyone without being familiar with each person hearing or being influenced by the humor we are telling, performing, or allowing. Therefore, in this situation it could be difficult to navigate telling an off-hand joke in the spur of the moment. It inevitably will be ill-planned and perhaps unwanted while not being funny at all to someone.

Therefore, how can we accomplish the comfort of humor without the risk of simply having the experience be a put-off or even more damaging?

The Anatomy of a Humorous Story

A humorous story is composed of five parts, namely: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution or conclusion.

Exposition – The setting or social and cultural context is revealed in this part. The protagonist and antagonist are used to introduce the characters. The protagonist is the main character of the story, the one with whom the reader identifies. This person is not necessarily good. The antagonist is the force in opposition to the protagonist; this person may not be bad but

opposes the protagonist in a significant way. Thus, we are introduced to the main conflict.

The juxtaposition of the two opposing forces might provide someone a new insight into their view of a familiar situation. In addition, much of the enjoyment of humor will arise from being transported from the familiar into a new awareness.

Rising Action – This is when the tension of the story is developed, and where timing and exaggeration are explicitly added to the tale.

Climax – Of course, shock and surprise are fundamental elements of a good humorous story. We need these elements to allow the listener to become aware of the repositioning the story has abruptly forced upon them.

Falling Action – This is when the listener is drawn into their own intellect and emotion based upon past experience or knowledge.

Resolution and Conclusion – Suspense builds as the story is told and an ultimate surprise ending trips the listener into amusement.

“Humor permeates every aspect of society and has done so for thousands of years. People experience it daily through television, newspapers, literature, and contact with others. The types of jokes a person enjoys contributes significantly to the definition of that person as well as to the character of a given society,” writes Arthur Asa Berger.

What is So Dangerous about a Joke?

The essence of a joke’s premise is essential to the various elements of a humorous story. Here are a few elements that might cause pause:

- Very specific people, those in the room, will find themselves relating either to the protagonist or the antagonist. You as the storyteller cannot predetermine their tendency and relatability. It is not the storyteller’s choice.
- Using another person’s culture as part of the exposition of the story may not be well understood by all people involved. Religion, politics, and sex

are naturally sensitive subjects and fall into inappropriate topics for a workplace humorous story. Even diversity is not a safe subject in most settings.

- Power dynamics are difficult. Someone may see themselves as the one getting hurt or having the weakness being taken advantage of.

If you don't know the other persons well enough to understand their concerns or condition, how can you be sure you are telling a joke that won't offend someone? Tension, shock, and exaggeration are not norms to jobsite practice. People want their work location to be safe and without improper language or innuendo.

Jokes at work should carry a warning for the teller. These could be hurtful and carry the wrong message. Here are examples from real companies:

"Don't be the reason for the safety video."

"I don't insult people; I just describe them."

"I don't always tolerate people, but when I do, I'm probably at work."

If So Many Subjects are Off Limits, What is Appropriate?

Here is a short list of examples that will serve you well over time:

- Look for opportunities to use a work-oriented story where the surprise is on the storyteller.
- Word play, where two ordinary words used routinely with anyone sound the same yet have different meanings.
- A story with a point that is both endearing and makes you smile.
- A human interest story that can be applied to the current situation.
- Caution and guidance for the jokester and humorous storyteller: Never use inappropriate language. Find a safer and more urbane way to express yourself. Rapier wit, the ability to deliver witty and cutting remarks, is not a workplace positive.

“If you see a whale’s tail in the Caribbean, it’s a fluke.” Why is this play on words funny? There are no whales in the Caribbean so a whale in that body of water is a fluke and of course, the whale’s tail is called a fluke.

The Huffington Post story from a few years ago describes an endearing tale that makes us smile. “I was standing in line to buy tickets at Disneyland with my three friends. We could hardly wait to get in. The man standing in front of us suddenly turned around and handed us each a ticket to the park. Enjoy the park today the tickets are on me! It was so unexpected and so wonderful. I can only hope to pay it forward someday.”

This English for Students story provides insight and hope with a surprise ending for learning. “One hot day, a thirsty crow flew everywhere looking for water. For a long time, she could not find any and felt so weak that she almost gave up hope. Suddenly, she saw a water jug and flew straight down to find there was water inside. The crow tried to push her head into the jug, but sadly, she found that the neck of the jug was too narrow. Then she tried to tip the jug over but found that the jug was too heavy. The crow thought for a while and looked around to see some pebbles. She started picking up the pebbles one by one, dropping each into the jug. As the pebbles filled the jug, the water level rose. Soon it was high enough for the crow to drink. If you try hard enough, you may soon find an answer to your problem.”

What Are the Leadership Principles at Work?

- *Moral adherence is a crucial part of how to conduct all activity.* The word moral is derived from the Latin term *moralis*, meaning “a message conveyed or a lesson learned from a story, a poem, or an event.”
- *Be flexible—people don’t like change.* They especially don’t like change that comes as a surprise or is not well understood. Change that befits others, and not the affected person, is not accepted. To be flexible means that as things change, concerns are mitigated, and you are the catalyst.
- *Distractions are always at hand, therefore do not lose focus on what you are aiming to do.* There is never enough time. Nothing is easy. You will never have enough information to make a sure bet decision. The urgent will tend to get in the way of doing the strategic.

- *Change team dynamics and approaches. Know your team well.* Determine each person's likes and dislikes. Find their weaknesses and strengths. Allow the team to meld, work their differences, and be accountable. Not every decision is made by the leader nor by consensus.

Wiz Khalifa writes, "Never make a permanent decision on temporary feelings."

Classic Business Literature as a Guide to Humorous Storytelling

In his book, *Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life*, Dr. Spencer Johnson writes a humorous story. It provides insight into all of the leadership principles referenced above and definitely provides change learning.

The four characters in the story live in a maze: The two mice are Scurry and Sniff, and the two little people are Hem and Haw. By all measures everything is progressing beautifully because they have found a huge source of their favorite food, cheese.

Hem and Haw have even moved to houses near the cheese source and it has become the center of their lives. However, they do not notice that the abundant stockpile of cheese is getting smaller, and later they are both devastated when they arrive at the site one morning and find the cheese is gone!

This is where the story splits into two distinctly deferring parts:

Scurry and Sniff, the mice, quickly accept the loss of the cheese source and go off into the maze in search of other cheese resources. The mice move on and find a new cheese location for their use and indeed, for their pleasure.

The two little people, because they have built their lives around the original huge source of cheese, feel they are the victims of some kind of fraud or theft. Yet this only makes things worse, as their insistent clinging to the past situation ensures that they go hungry.

This is an example of the kind of story that is so impactful for a stressful moment. The earlier situation in this Executive Insight, where a meeting was called to resolve issues with the project schedule, is emblematic of a stressful situation. Could a story of overcoming adversity such as Shackleton's

Expedition to the South Pole be a good approach or application for learning? Can it provide goodness and hope? Plan ahead for the opportunity that might present itself.

Lessons from Dr. Spencer Johnson's cheese story can be summarized with change at its core:

Change Happens

Anticipate Change

Monitor Change

Adapt Quickly To Change

Enjoy Change

Again and Again, Be Ready To Change Quickly and Enjoy It

Conclusion

Our value system is at the core of all we do. It is easy to take a shortcut in communication and tell a joke or story that forces someone to take the brunt of the surprise. This is probably done out of ignorance about the audience, your own style gaps, and perhaps not being aware of effective alternatives.

Learn the capability of telling a good story and the structures behind its effectiveness. Practice storytelling and have a few at the ready for when the time arises. You will be known for your graciousness and humor. The alternative can be off-putting and derive estrangement from some you really want in support of your vision.

About the Author

Ron May was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2020. He is a retired executive from DTE Energy. He remains involved with the engineering advisory board for Oakland University and is an Executive in Residence at the University of Michigan Ross Business School Center for Positive Organizations. He is an innovator, change agent, teacher, mentor, and leader in technology and business with extraordinary contributions to lifelong education and knowledge sharing.

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