

How to be Funny

(How to Interject Appropriate Humor into Any Work Setting)

By Ted Huntington

It was 1972 and the hottest comedian of the day was George Carlin. His AM & FM album was nothing short of inspiring for a skinny nine-year-old boy looking to stand out in the crowd. After all, if you are not a great athlete and the girls think the cutest thing about you is your freakishly large feet, then the best way to get attention is to make people laugh.

Let us not be too critical of the parents who allowed their nine-year-old to memorize every word of an R-rated comedy album. Maybe they, too, recognized the little spark it lit inside their son, who liberally stole lines from that Carlin masterpiece for ... well ... I am still stealing punch lines from it ("I've heard of bad breath, but yours can knock a buzzard off a sh** wagon").

Fast-forward several decades. That boy went to college, landed some decent jobs, and spent thousands of hours toiling in an office, in meetings, in boardrooms and on business trips. Through it all, he used comedy to set himself apart. At every stop throughout his career, he is always the funny guy.

Sometimes being the funny guy has its price.

When you know you are funny and a steady stream of witty one-liners bombards your brain, some are bound to be inappropriate comments best left in one's head. Countless times that zinger flies out of his mouth, followed immediately by remorse and dread, knowing all too well that someone in the room was likely insulted or offended.

After four decades attempting to be the funny guy and learning the hard lessons of what NOT to say in certain situations, it is my duty to impart this wisdom to you, the readers, about how to interject appropriate humor in any work situation.

Why is it so important to learn how to be funny in the workplace? After all, many leaders have virtually zero sense of humor. A good sense of humor is an important element of executive presence. You know executive presence when you see it: that one person who sometimes sits quietly in a meeting, but you know that she is "the one" who everyone else in the room respects. The 10 traits that most often define executive presence are honesty, passion, clarity, intelligence, insight, determination, confidence, humility, courage and humor. Yes, humor.

Some people want to be funny, but they fear they do not make others laugh. Some people think they are funny, but their jokes often crash like a lead balloon. For the purpose of this essay, employees are

broken down into five types. More on that a little later, but for now let us examine the question, “Can someone learn to make others laugh?” In other words, is there a comedy formula?

The quick answer is yes, there is a formula. However, following the formula does not automatically make you the next Carlin. There is timing, and practice, and more practice ... and acknowledging that sometimes your witty remark just is not funny. Even the comedy giants bomb from time to time.

There are seven steps to the comedy formula:

1. Find your comedic strength
2. Gather material
3. Do not try so hard
4. Study funny people
5. Know your audience
6. Be the butt of the joke
7. Learn how to tell a joke

Find your comedic strength:

Learn to stay within your comfort zone. What makes you laugh? How edgy are you? There are nine types of humor: slapstick, deadpan, topical, puns, satire, black/dark comedy, surreal comedy, parody and potty humor. Ruling out potty humor, since that is likely inappropriate in the workplace (unless, maybe, you are a standup comic), figure out your comedy sweet spots.

Gather material:

All comedy needs references and material. That might come from:

- News and current events (NO politics or religion).
- Joke calendars and books.
- Popular TV shows, movies, pop culture.
- Co-workers and friends.

Do not try so hard:

There is nothing more mood killing than bad jokes. Do you give a courtesy laugh? Do you pretend it did not happen? Forcing humor into the room makes you look awkward and it makes others uncomfortable. It can turn a successful meeting into a horror show. Be mindful of nervous laughter. If you are the big cheese in the meeting, you may get some fake laughter, but check out the eye rolling. If that is happening, you did not brighten the atmosphere; you helped to point out your brownnosers.

Study funny people:

Turn on Netflix and YouTube and you will find a slew of comedic masters. Who are your favorites? Study them -- their delivery, their facial expressions and their energy.

Do not limit yourself to paid comedians. There are funny people everywhere. Maybe some of them missed their calling and they should be doing stand-up. Focus on how these people make others laugh.

You can also take a class, read some books or read this article repeatedly as if it is your comedy Bible.

Know your audience:

Eventually you want to accumulate enough funny material in your head to suit a wide variety of situations. After all, what is appropriately funny hanging with your friends over a beer does not necessarily fit in the boardroom, or at Thanksgiving dinner or even alone with your spouse.

Be the butt of the joke:

In other words, learn to take a joke. Do not take offense or feel targeted every time a joke hits home. In fact, being the butt of the joke is a good social skill. It shows you do not take yourself too seriously, and it is much preferred over poking fun at others. Just do not overdo it, or you start to look insecure.

Learn how to tell a joke:

Timing is the most critical aspect of joke telling. Have you ever seen Don Rickles? He was another classic comic legend, for sure. Rickles made fun of everyone. No one was immune, from U.S. Presidents to Frank Sinatra. Yet, if you listen to Rickles, his comments rarely made sense. You knew he was poking fun at others, but the words were often nonsensical. It was Rickles' timing and energy that made him a genius.

In addition to practicing your timing, learn to:

- Relax. If you feel awkward, so will those listening to you.
- Vary your voice. Monotone speech makes the joke boring (unless you are Steven Wright).
- Signal your punch line. A little pause adds to the suspense.
- Stop trying – for now. If they do not laugh, give yourself a break. Hone your skills a little more ... try other jokes before a smaller group ... read this essay a few more times.
- Believe in the joke. If you truly buy into your joke with confidence, others will likely agree.

Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower (a man not exactly known for his stand-up prowess) said, "A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done." A workplace with humor is beneficial because:

- People will enjoy working with each other.
- Humor is humanizing. It tears down the walls and ivory towers and creates equals.
- Humor puts others at ease.
- Humor evokes creative thinking.
- Humor helps to build trust.
- Humor helps to build morale.
- Humorous people appear more approachable.

- Humor helps your organization to stand out -- to become an employer of choice.
- In addition, humor creates an upbeat atmosphere that leads to increased productivity.

What is a “sense of humor”?

A sense of humor is an attitude. It shows your willingness to find and enjoy the fun in your life.

A sense of humor is a tool you can use to reduce stress and anxiety, helping to cope with life’s serious challenges.

A sense of humor is a release to help relieve tension, relax, let down your guard, open up, connect with others and improve relationships.

A sense of humor is NOT a competition. You do not have to win every comedy battle. Let the others have their turn, as well.

A sense of humor does NOT require you to be the funniest person in the room. You already have the reputation as a witty person, so do not feel the need to bring new comedy material to every meeting. Let it happen organically.

A sense of humor is NOT a mandate to laugh at everything, especially if it offends you or if you are the brunt of a cruel joke.

A sense of humor does NOT give you permission to hurt others’ feelings, ridicule, intimidate, alienate, patronize, degrade, belittle or embarrass.

Now let us get back to the five types of employees, categorized as:

- Alan Allbusiness: Alan will rarely crack a joke – or a smile. If he does, it is probably accidental. It is also difficult to make Alan laugh. He focuses on the business at hand, and spends more time responding to email during the meeting than actually offering feedback on the agenda.
- Lucy Laughalot: It is great to have Lucy on any project team. She laughs at every joke and always has a smile. She rarely offers any humor of her own, but she is great for your comedy ego.
- Sue Sometimesfunny: Alas, Sue is that co-worker who thinks she is very witty, but she is not. She gets an “A” for effort, but her timing is off, her material is dated and she often repeats the same lame one-liners.
- Carl Clown: Carl is a hoot. Almost everyone loves Carl and his quick wit – except those employees who took offense to that off-color remark he made at last month’s project meeting. Carl was the class clown and the life of the party. He has not yet learned that the jokes that floored ‘em at the football party are not necessarily appropriate in the office.
- Polly Perfect: Polly gets it. She has that executive presence and a deep arsenal of perfectly timed one-liners for any situation. She does not overdo it, and she knows her jokes are not as important as getting through the work agenda. She expertly interjects humor to enhance the atmosphere.

Who are you? You are likely a combination of these employees, or you take on different roles in different situations. Which role do you want to assume? Maybe you are “Alan Allbusiness” but you want to change your reputation. Maybe you are really “Sue Sometimesfunny” or “Carl Clown” but you thought you were Polly Perfect. Take stock in yourself. When you become more self-aware of how others see you, then you take great strides toward acquiring that elusive executive presence.

It is critical to note that no matter how rip-roaring funny that comment is in your head, teach yourself to take a beat before you speak. Ask yourself if that joke might possibly offend anyone in the room. If so, then just keep quiet. You will have plenty of other opportunities to make your coworkers smile. This bit of advice is more critical than ever in this era of hypersensitivity. You want to avoid a trip to the HR department due to that slip of the tongue.