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Humor in the Workplace: How to Be Funny at Work Without Crossing the Line

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UPDATED: AUGUST 21, 2024
PUBLISHED: APRIL 16, 2024

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▼ If laughter truly is the best medicine, then shouldn't we all be laughing more at work, where

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humor strategist and author of the forthcoming book, ***The Humor Habit*** (<https://www.paulosincup.com/thehumorhabit>), we are all suffering from a condition he refers to as “chronic seriousness.”

Whether the reasons for this humdrum mindset result from fear of getting fired, fear of rejection or embarrassment, epidemics of isolation and incivility, or new social norms around sensitivity and inclusiveness, humor can still have a positive role in the workplace if used correctly. Below we’ll talk more about how to be funny at work without crossing any lines.

Benefits of humor in the workplace

Humor not only lightens the mood, but it can bring numerous benefits—to those who both initiate and receive comical exchanges. “When we find something funny or when we laugh, our brains are flooded with a dose of feel-good chemicals,” Osincup explains.

What are those feel-good chemicals and what do they do? Dopamine helps us feel pleasure, and it makes us feel rewarded and motivated. Oxytocin helps us connect, feel empathy and trust; serotonin regulates anxiety, happiness and well-being (<https://www.success.com/simple-daily-choices-that-prioritize-your-well-being/>); and endorphins reduce pain and stress while boosting mood and self-esteem (<https://www.success.com/youve-been-conditioned-into-low-self-esteem-heres-how-to-get-it-back/>).

The fact that something as simple and enjoyable as laughter can help us feel happier, calmer and more connected is an untapped resource that deserves greater attention, even at work. Research has shown (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-14292-001>) that workplace stress costs the U.S. economy up to \$187 billion every year between lost productivity and health care and medical costs. That’s no laughing matter—but laughing can help address this problem.

Some of the benefits of humor in the workplace include:

- Increased productivity



- Decreased burnout
- More job satisfaction and less complaining
- Employees taking fewer sick days

Humor can even boost chances of getting hired and promoted

(<https://www.roberthalf.com/au/en/insights/career-development/sense-humour-workplace-good-your-career>). A 2017 survey

(<https://www.roberthalf.com/au/en/insights/career-development/sense-humour-workplace-good-your-career>) found that 91% of executives believe that a sense of humor is important for career advancement, and 84% feel that people with a good sense of humor do a better job.

Tip: Make yourself laugh first

Humor doesn't come naturally to everyone, so before doing a standup routine at a company meeting, it's a good idea to build up your humor muscle. "I always encourage people to start with themselves," Osincup advises. "Even if your boss or colleagues have a terrible case of chronic seriousness, you're in charge of your own happiness and you can rewire your brain to see the humor in life more often."

Humor is a mindset that can be developed by forming new habits. Start by collecting and consuming funny books, podcasts, movies, YouTube videos, etc. "Think about the small things you can do to make your own day and your own productivity better using humor that nobody else needs to even know about," Osincup suggests.

How to safely spread humor in the workplace

Osincup believes that there is a place for humor at work if it's delivered with a few guidelines in mind.



1. Recognize that humor is subjective

“There might be things that are funny to you that are not funny to other people or appropriate at the workplace. Have professional awareness so you know if it makes your colleagues laugh and smile, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s appropriate.”

2. Take time to understand the company culture

This is critical, especially for new employees. “Feel out the landscape and do a lot of listening so that you know where you fit in and what’s normal and appropriate. It doesn’t mean you can’t be yourself and bring your own vibe, but I’m sure my sense of humor evolved and changed based on who I was working with,” explains Osincup. Using the comedy principle of “heightening” is an effective approach, which involves paying attention to what’s being shared and then adding to it with some of your own humor.

3. Lead with your own humorous experiences

When choosing the types of jokes to tell, prioritize talking about your own experiences since that’s the easiest and safest type of humor. On the other hand, discussing shared experiences and joking about other people is riskier. “The safest and the least risky approach is talking about what happened to me today,” Osincup advises. “However, when you focus on self-directed humor, don’t kill your skills, meaning don’t make jokes about specific skills that are necessary for you to do your job.”

4. Maintain your confidence and don’t go fishing for compliments

“We can find humor in our pain points and struggles. It endears people to us as long as we do it right. If I’m not confident enough in the thing I’m making fun of and I’m still really self-conscious about it, my self-deprecating humor might come across as if I’m searching for compliments,” Osincup warns. “If I keep making jokes, people may start to feel awkward. But when done right, others see that you don’t take yourself too seriously, and it bridges the gap between people.”



Put humor into action

There are endless ways to weave fun and humor into the workday for everyone's benefit. Make meetings more enjoyable by adding amusing quotes or memes to the agenda, asking the group to say a funny word or phrase when the discussion gets off track or showing silly props to make points.

For virtual meetings, use an engaging app, such as [Funtivity \(https://www.funtivity.co/\)](https://www.funtivity.co/), that has online escape rooms, brain teasers, games and creative challenges. Instigate laughter around the office by hanging a joke-of-the-day calendar in a common area or having a contest to name office equipment in humorous ways. "I asked my supervisor if I could change the wash your hands signs by the bathrooms to a picture of Han Solo from Star Wars and a note that said, 'Wash Your Hans,' which everyone thought was hilarious," Osincup recalls.

Finally, adding comedy to otherwise mundane presentations can really make a difference. Look for areas where you can add humor, particularly through personal stories and anecdotes. Insert funny memes and videos into the presentation. "I always say, if they're laughing, they're listening," Osincup advises.

Signs you've crossed the line

While testing out new ways to get your colleagues laughing, stay attuned to their reactions to know if the joke landed as intended. Osincup suggests keeping an eye out for the following signs that your workplace humor may be inappropriate:

- You use disclaimers like "I'm not sexist or anything but..."
- You look over your shoulder or close the door before telling a joke.
- People's reactions include "Anyways..." (trying to quickly change the subject), their laughs turn to groans, it gets quiet or people look like they want to hide.
- You often say things like: "It was just a joke, where's your sense of humor?" "Lighten



Doing humor right can enhance everyone's workday and overall well-being, so it's worth the effort. Osincup adds: "My ultimate goal is that humor be looked at as a legitimate wellness or mindfulness strategy just as much as meditation, yoga, breathwork and exercise since our sense of humor provides us a lot of benefits and needed perspective."

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