



How to Promote Humor at Work

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: Here's another offbeat blogletter on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate communications training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

Deborah Williams is in the planning stages of a new business. A certified yoga instructor who has lived on both coasts of the United States, Williams has a fitness idea with a twist. It's stretching your body and laughing hysterically, more or less at the same time. The name of the new venture? Yoga Ha Ha. "Laughter Yoga opens the door to laughing on purpose – without using jokes, comedy routines, or props," Williams notes in her brochure. "It is a practice of intention, that is, we learn to laugh deliberately, for no reason except that it feels good and is good for us."

But the scientific underpinnings go far deeper.

In the early days of psychology, most experts thought that feelings always preceded behavior. If you felt depressed, for example, you might be inclined to spend all day in your pajamas, lumber listlessly around your house, and avoid human contact. Nowadays, psychologists believe that behavior can control feelings – the exact opposite. If you act confident at work, for example, you may come to believe that you are the best thing that ever happened to your organization. I'll certainly support you in that perception.

Laugh first. Feel happy second. Who would have thunk?

During the last few months, Williams has been planting the seeds of Yoga Ha Ha at community centers, senior residences, and other locations near her home in a Philadelphia suburb. She now plans to offer her services to corporate wellness programs and small training companies. Her email address is www.djwill053@hotmail.com

In my opinion, Williams is launching her enterprise at the perfect moment. If there was ever a time when people – particularly at work -- could benefit from a hearty chuckle, this is it. The term "gallows humor" springs to mind. Humor is hot, hot, hot; many of your co-workers, for instance, get most of their news from satirist Jon Stewart on The Daily Show instead of from studiously serious Katie Couric on the CBS Evening News.

Of course, stretching and laughing together is far from the only way to inject good cheer into your workplace. Some other suggestions:

Recognize the healing power of humor. Even if you're unable to see yourself lying on a yoga mat laughing hysterically, you may want to make a habit of watching funny movies and television programs. Why? Research indicates that the resulting chuckles can greatly ease both mental and physical pain. Convinced of this fact, the prestigious Duke University Hospital in North Carolina recently introduced a humor project offering bedside comedy in the form of books, DVDs, and even live performances to desperately ill cancer patients.

Accept the paradox. Unconsciously, you may feel guilty about yukking it up when so much of your world is in turmoil. What's funny, after all, about losing your job and struggling to pay the mortgage? Ponder this quote from director and writer Woody Allen: "Humor is tragedy plus time."



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Incorporate laughter into work meetings. Many managers start routine gatherings by going around the room and asking participants questions such as “What is your sales goal this month?” Why not begin with “What’s the funniest thing you saw, heard, or did since the last meeting?” before segueing into serious matters.

Save cartoons in your desk. Newsweek and Time magazine regularly publish what they consider the best satirical drawings of the past week. A recent example focused on torture – talk about an unfunny subject. The first panel showed a young girl asking her grandfather, identified as former Vice President Dick Cheney, to teach her dog a new trick. The second panel showed Cheney yelling “Speak, Speak” while waterboarding the bug-eyed pet.

Look to comedians for inspiration. In recent years, many news programs have been replaying segments from light-hearted shows featuring Dave Letterman and Jay Leno. And now there’s YouTube. Over this past weekend, none other than President Barack Obama delivered a punchline-packed speech to journalists in Washington, D.C. On your first break today, check out social media to see Obama’s hilarious spins on everything from his first 100 days in office to First Lady Michelle Obama’s right to bare arms.

Start a humor book club. As you probably know, organizations increasingly are looking for ideas to reduce employee illness and health-care costs. Among other benefits, laughing definitely lowers blood pressure and increases feel-good hormones. I’m visualizing you and colleagues becoming hysterical while reading pages from a best-seller such as Dave Barry’s “Money Secrets: Like, Why Is There a Giant Eyeball on the Dollar?”

Spread the mirth. Nowadays, many companies have gift stores carrying a small selection of all-occasion greeting cards. One strikes me as so hilarious that I’ve sent it to several professional associates. On the cover is a pair of eyes peering through a door with the words “Remember when the going gets rough. . .” The inside completes the thought with “You can always come over and hide in the closet with me.”

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