

The Value of Humor

*There ain't much fun in medicine, but there's a heck of a lot of
medicine in fun" -- Josh Billings (1818-1885).*

In 1985, an article in National Safety News caught my attention. It was entitled “Laughter could really be the best medicine.” The article quoted psychiatrist Donald W. Black of the Iowa State Research Institute as concluding from research that laughter could be the simplest and surest way to reduce stress and improve our physical and mental health. Around that time I had read similar statements in “Anatomy of an Illness” by the late Norman Cousins, former editor of the Saturday Review. Cousins reported the value of humor in enabling his recovery from a rare disease of the connective tissue. Physicians told him his condition was incurable and possibly fatal, but Dr. Cousins found a way to handle his painful disease. He rented videotapes of his favorite comedies (including numerous clips of “Candid Camera”), and laughed as much as possible for several months. As a result, Dr. Cousins laughed his way to better health.

Now in those days I did not personally believe in the healing power of humor as portrayed in these documents, but these reports did influence me to do something very unusual. I rarely take the elevator to the fifth floor of the university building where my office and research laboratories are, but this memorable day I boarded the first-floor elevator in a special way. I got on the elevator with one of my Ph.D. students and asked him to copy my behavior. Then I turned and faced the back of the elevator. My student, Mike Kalsher, did the same.

When the elevator stopped at the second floor, a young woman got on, and without saying a word, stood right next to us, facing the back of the elevator. Immediately I fought to hold back intense laughter, and Mike did the same. Neither of us wanted to laugh out loud and embarrass this young lady, who presumably was influenced by social conformity (a social

influence principle I discussed in the February 1995 issue of Industrial Safety and Hygiene News, entitled "The urge to conform and obey".

The elevator stopped at the third floor and when the elevator doors opened, two males were apparently very surprised to see three butts facing them. Both of them shouted, "What the heck is going on?" Well, Mike and I couldn't hold back any longer and we proceeded to laugh hysterically. Soon the girl and the new elevator occupants joined in, and we all laughed uncontrollably until the elevator doors opened at the fifth floor.

I'll never forget my special mood that morning. Instead of my usual serious work-focused demeanor, I felt playful and euphoric. I said "good morning" with a smile to everyone I passed in the hall. I even gave a student genuine recognition for excelling on a class research assignment. At the time, these interpersonal behaviors were unusual for me, and occurred because of my mood activated by the humorous elevator experience. And these extra interpersonal communications did not reduce my accomplishments one bit. Actually, they improved my attitude toward work throughout the entire morning.

That day in 1985 showed me the value of humor in improving attitude and mood states, and in turn improving interpersonal behavior. I've learned there is much humor around us everyday for our appreciation and personal benefit, but if we're in the wrong mood (as when we take ourselves too seriously), we miss these opportunities. For example, take the sign at our local fast-food restaurant, "Drive-thru window," or the one in a shopping mall, "Ears pierced while you wait," and the one along the road "Slow men at work." If you're in a good mood, you'll appreciate the humor in these messages; if not, you'll miss an opportunity to give your attitude a boost.

Over the years, I've also realized the value of adding humor to group presentations. I periodically scan magazines and newspapers for comics to illustrate a principle or lesson I teach.

And often I take ideas to my artist friend, George Wills, and we develop humorous sketches to spice up a presentation for university students or safety professionals. My recent safety management books (“The psychology of safety” and “Working safe”) include numerous original cartoons George and I developed to increase reading pleasure and comprehension.

Five Types of Humor

Adding humor to written and oral communication in ways that benefit attention, learning, and mood state is easier said than done. We’ve all had the experience of telling a joke that didn’t work the way we wanted. It’s not enough to have a good, humorous story to illustrate a point. The story needs to be told well and at the right time. Audience reaction (or lack thereof) tells me when my humor worked or flopped. And my students and professional colleagues often give me direct feedback about the appropriateness, frequency, or timing of humor-driven stories or illustrations. While it might not be fun to get corrective feedback, it is certainly useful in improving the integration of quality humor with other material.

Our sense of humor can also be developed by understanding what makes a story or illustration funny. In a 1996 audiotape series, “The secrets of power negotiating,” Roger Dawson explains there are only five different jokes. Although stories told by comedians, teachers, and safety coaches vary widely, each story gets its humor in one of five different ways. Understanding these five approaches to making us laugh will increase your appreciation of humor. Plus, it could facilitate your ability to add good humor to individual and group communication.

Pun

A pun is a word that has more than one meaning, depending on the context. Humor occurs when the context is changed to give the word an alternative meaning. Consider, for example, the OSHA inspector who begins his safety presentation with, “I suppose you all want

the latest dope from Washington, well here I am.” And then there’s the boy who asks his father to make a noise like a frog. When the father asks why, he says, “Because mom said we could all go to Disneyland after you croaked.”

These examples obviously get their humor from the double meaning of the words “dope” and “croak.” Similarly, the double meanings of words make the following statements humorous, “More hay, Trigger?” “No thanks Roy, I’m stuffed.” “I used to have a handle on life, then it broke.” “Where there’s a will, I want to be in it.”

Exaggeration

Many comedians use exaggeration to add humor to common place examples. Bill Cosby, for example, is a master at using this type of humor. Whether talking about raising his kids, boarding an airplane, or performing in grade school, Cosby has used exaggeration to stretch a point and create a visual image we can relate to and laugh at. For example, he talked about his experiences in kindergarten while writing with a pencil “as big as a horse’s hoof” and on paper “with pieces of wood still in it.”

Even an infrequent viewer of the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson can recall laughing at Johnny’s use of exaggeration in an opening monologue. In fact, his use of exaggeration to describe everyday events became so well known his audiences would prompt him to use this type of humor. He would say, for example, that it was hot in Burbank, and the audience would shout, “How hot was it?” and then Johnny would say something like, “It was so hot that a flock of birds burst into flames from spontaneous combustion.” Can you think of a humorous exaggeration to safety-related questions like, “How little involvement was demonstrated at the last safety meeting?” or “How safety-aware were the associates?” or “How fast was the forklift traveling when it rounded the corner?”

Surprise

A third type of humor is based on the element of surprise. When we are surprised by something, the fight or flight reaction of our autonomic system is activated. Our pulse quickens, but when we see there is no danger, laughter often occurs. The surprise joke works well when you present your audience with a simple story description that stimulates thought and imagery. Then you wreck the image by adding surprise to the end. The more you catch the audience off guard, the greater the laughter.

I have often told the following story to my students at Virginia Tech to explain “modeling” or how we learn by watching others. When the father tucked his little six-year old daughter in bed, she asked, “Daddy, would you tuck me in tonight like you do mommy every night?” “Sure,” he said, as he pulled the covers up and underneath his daughter’s chin. As he began to walk away, his daughter said, “Wait, daddy! Would you give me a goodnight kiss like you do mommy every night.” “Sure, honey,” said dad, and he leaned down and kissed his daughter on the cheek. As he turned to leave once again, his daughter called after him again with one more request. “Daddy, would you now whisper in my ear like you do mommy every night?” He replied, “Sure honey,” leaned down and went “buzz, buzz, buzz” in his daughter’s ear. She immediately popped up her little head and said, “Not tonight, daddy, I have a terrible headache.”

I once witnessed a group facilitator use surprise to break tension and slow down an overpaced safety meeting. He announced, “We must pause a moment for a spot announcement.” Immediately, a coworker barked, “Arf, arf,” and the facilitator responded with “Thank you, Spot.” This is not only surprise, but is also a pun as explained earlier, and silliness which is described next.

Silliness

Most of the humor in British sitcoms (as in “Mr. Bean”) is based on silliness. Of course, there have probably been no American comedian more silly than the three stooges -- Curly, Moe, and Larry. Perhaps readers have experienced the silliness of “Gallager.” He would take a large watermelon, put it on a large slab of wood, and then proceed to smash the melon so that pieces of fruit rained over the audience. And audiences laughed hysterically, even those whose clothes were soiled by flying food.

The following statements get much of their humor from silliness. “Suicidal twin kills sister by mistake,” “He who laughs last thinks slowest,” “Criminal lawyer is a redundancy,” “Women who seek to be equal to men lack ambition,” “Save a tree: Eat a beaver,” “I don’t suffer from insanity, I enjoy every minute of it.” This last line derives some humor from the personal put-down contained in the statement. And, the put-down is the fifth type of humor.

The Put-Down

The put-down is usually used to insult other people for a laugh. Many comedy teams derived their humor from one person putting down another. For example, the put-downs between Abbot and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, and Burns and Allen are well known. More recently, comedians derive their humor by putting down themselves instead of other people. For example, consider these following statements I found on the internet. “I went to a freak show and they let me in for nothing.” “My psychiatrist told me I’m going crazy.” I told him, “If you don’t mind I’d like a second opinion.” He said, “Alright, you’re ugly too!” And, “When I played in the sandbox the cat kept covering me up.” This latter put-down statement is also funny because it seems ridiculous or silly. And as I described above, that’s another form of humor.

I once heard a humorous put-down excuse given when hardly anyone showed up for a special safety meeting. The invited speaker for the poorly-attended meeting asked at the start,

“Did you tell them I was coming?” “No,” was the reply from the safety coordinator, “It must have leaked out.” To those readers wondering if I was that invited speaker, let me just say I’ve frequently been disappointed by low turnout for a safety meeting. And, a smaller-than-expected audience has often created the mood for a less-than-optimal meeting. But, the laughter that resulted from the put-down humor at the start of this particular meeting set the stage for a very enjoyable and memorable session.

In Conclusion

I hope you have enjoyed reading this article half as much as I’ve enjoyed writing it. Perhaps some of the stories or punch lines influenced a smile, a giggle, or even complete laughter. If so, I bet your mood improved, at least briefly. And when people are in a good mood, they are more apt to actively care for the safety or health of another person. This illustrates the power of humor to benefit both attitude and behavior and to help cultivate a Total Safety Culture.

If you’ve heard many or most of the humorous punch lines in this article, you have obviously experienced the advantages of humor. Understanding the five types of humor -- pun, exaggeration, surprise, silliness, and put-down -- can facilitate the creative application of humor for group presentations or one-on-one interaction. It’s not easy to select and use the right amount of humor at the right time. But the reciprocal payoff of humor for both the giver and the receiver makes the development of a good sense of humor well worth the effort.

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NOTE: Dr. Geller uses much humor in his popular seminar “Actively Caring for a Total Safety Culture,” and his newly-released audiotape series. For more information, please call Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-7233.

