



CHAPTER 11

A Sense of Humor

Did you hear the one about the manager who walked into the bar? No, that's not really what we mean by a sense of humor as key to resolving conflicts. You really don't need to be a standup comic to manage conflict effectively at work. Rather in this chapter, I show how having a sense of humor is essential to creating a positive climate for dealing with difficult issues.

Keeping Things in Perspective

Sometimes all we can do is laugh. Or shrug our shoulders and smile. Sometimes we could jump up and down and scream, but it really wouldn't help anything. So, keeping it all in perspective by maintaining a sense of humor becomes the better choice.

*A person without a sense
of humor is like
a wagon without springs.*

*It's jolted by every
pebble on the road.*

—HENRY WARD BEECHER

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Everything possible had gone wrong that day. I reached into the cabinet for my morning cereal and shook the few remaining flakes into my bowl. The timer on the coffee pot took early retirement, so I had no coffee. Running a few minutes late, I slid into the driver's seat and turned onto the toll road. The day ahead made me nervous. I was working with a new client I had met only once before. I reached over to pull up the address on the navigation system. Nothing came up that matched the street I needed. I called my client to confirm with him that I was headed in the right direction. His cell phone was turned off. I have learned that when I get stressed, I forget what I know. Now that I was on my way and stressed, I could not think clearly about where the office was. I kept driving, following my nose or my instincts. At a red light, I tried calling another number, the client's office. The number written in my file was wrong. All of the technical systems I had put in place to back up my memory had fallen through. How could they all slip at once?

Stepping back from my anxiety, I was able to laugh at the ridiculous pickle I was in. In this moment I had a choice. I could launch into a grumble about "having a bad day," or I could put the situation in perspective and see some humor in it. The laughter was a great release of the tension and helped me to shift my thinking from panic to problem solving. Within minutes I had realigned my internal map, and I pulled into his parking lot with time to spare.

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Tension keeps us off balance, keyed up. We are ready to spring into action, primed for defensive mode, for attack or counterattack. Letting it go, through a sense of humor, actually brings us back into balance, increasing our flexibility and curiosity. Many studies have shown that laughter is an antidote to stress, releasing endorphins in our brains more powerful than morphine.

*At its heart, humor is
a Darwinian tool,
an adaptation of attitude
that helps us tame
the terrors of life.*

—GENE WEINGARTEN

Deborah, a colleague of mine, tells the story of creating a public rela-

tions campaign for her company. A rival actively worked to sabotage her efforts on every front. As Deborah sought employee input regarding a new logo, the rival issued a company-wide e-mail, eviscerating one of the proposed approaches. Not wanting to engage in a very public conflict, Deborah responded to staff and to him with a memo about the various options, written in the voice of Elvis Presley, which had people laughing out loud. Her use of humor diffused the situation. She even received a thank you from her supervisor for managing the incident well.

Angels fly because they take themselves lightly.

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My grandmother used to apply the “one hundred-year rule”: a hundred years from now, what the heck difference will it make? We can choose how we respond to the times when events seem to fall like dominos in the wrong direction. Keeping small things small leaves us with more energy to deal with the bigger problems that are bound to come our way.

Laughing at Your Own Mistakes

It takes a certain self-confidence and comfort with yourself to be able to laugh at your own shortcomings and stumbles. Self-effacing humor shows the ability to recognize that you are not perfect, and you are still okay. You’re still a good manager. It acknowledges that you bring your skills and abilities to the job and do your best, and no one can expect any more from you—or from anyone else. It’s a strategy that builds rapport with others, whether subordinates or co-workers. A manager who can be humanly imperfect is more able to allow others that same grace. This sense of humor, or positive perspective, builds a sense of hopefulness and sends ripples of stress relief across an office. A display of humor can help people like you, and when they like you, they want to work through the hard stuff together with you.

A word of caution, however: a little humor goes a long way. Laugh at yourself too much and you begin to belittle yourself—and that is counterproductive. Again, the key is balance.

Laughter Helps Us Think

Laughter brings oxygen to the brain. More oxygen to the brain helps us

People think of humor as being frivolous. But it's not. It's just a different kind of wisdom.

—LARRY MILLER, COMEDIAN

think more clearly, and that helps us solve problems more effectively. A sense of humor helps us to face conflicts and the people we have those conflicts with in a more positive frame of mind. That

frame of mind also enables us to see more possibilities for solutions.

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Many times the humorous moments in the workplace are difficult to translate to paper. One of those moments occurred several years ago when I was working on an intense project with a team of five. While we were pushing against the deadline, unbeknownst to us, a repair crew came through the office to paint. This was not good timing. Couldn't they see that we had work to do? Amid the drop cloths, ladders, and paint buckets we continued our effort. The painters posted signs everywhere warning about the wet paint. During lunch, one member of the team gathered as many of those signs—PAINT DRY? NOT YET—as she could find and taped them all over a friendly co-worker's cubicle, inside and out. After lunch we had a good laugh at her handiwork. Without saying a word, she had captured our frustrations and expressed them in a funny way, releasing the tension for all of us.

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Humor Helps Break the Tension in Conflict

Perhaps you can remember meetings when someone broke the tension with a light remark. That burst of oxygen affects the brain immediately. Within minutes you are back on task with fresh energy to tackle “intractable” problems. Sometimes these moments happen so fast you cannot recall exactly what was said, but retracing the discussion would reveal the comic relief and its positive result.

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The room was hot and we were all tired. We had been arguing, and each side was holding tightly to its position. In exasperation, one woman loudly declared—again—her view. She was so

worked up about the statement that she made, she banged her hand on the table and said, “The Lord can strike me down if that isn’t true.” Then she leaned back in her chair. She leaned a little too vigorously, and in one motion, she and the chair clattered to the floor. She came up unhurt, laughing at the absurdity of the moment. It broke the tension for all of us.

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As Simple as a Smile

Something as simple as a smile can make a big difference to your sense of well-being. Smiling has been shown to reduce stress and lower blood pressure. Like laughter, it can release endorphins, changing the chemistry of your brain.

A sincere, warm smile makes you more approachable. People tend to think better of you. A smile won’t make the conflict go away, but it can make the communication you need to resolve it easier to initiate and work through. A smile—an honest smile, that is—communicates, “I want to work with you, to find a way through any difficulty we might be having. I like you. I value you. I want to work this out with you.”

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A union local vice president related this experience: The team had engaged in a grueling negotiation with management. Finally there was a little light peeking through. Management had put forward a proposal that could unlock the stalemate. The vice president was feeling quite positive about the deal. He was startled when the chief spokesperson for the union called a break, pulled him aside, and told him, “Lighten up!” He was baffled.

“What are you talking about?”

The spokesperson then said, “From the look on your face they think you disagree with them. They are about to pull the offer off the table. You are about to kill the whole deal.”

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Sometimes we can become so absorbed in our own thinking that we have no idea how others may be seeing us. Employees are watching and

Whenever you're in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude.

—WILLIAM JAMES

interpreting the boss's every move—and his facial expression. The face you wear to work does send a loud message, whether you are aware of it or not. Whenever possible, make the message a positive one.

I'm not suggesting that you should go around all the time with a phony smile plastered on your face. This is not about faking feelings. However, there is a lot to be gained by finding bright spots and focusing on them throughout your day. When you can create an atmosphere through your own attitude in which people feel more comfortable, it is easier to raise those concerns that divide us. On the other hand, when people feel like they are walking on eggshells all the time, fearful of what might break if conflicts are exposed, the problems are less likely to get addressed, and they get bigger instead.

Consider This

- As a start to finding those bright spots, list five things you like about your job. For some people, the list may start with "I get paid," and move to "health insurance" and "vacation days." Start wherever you are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

To Deliver Messages More Easily

A sense of humor can help you deliver a message that will go down more easily. "I only have one nerve left, and you are standing on it" is a message that is easy to hear, respect, and respond to. A grumbled, "Can't you see I'm busy?" gets a totally different response. A manager in a large corporation I worked with was famous for his line, "Let's go get a cookie."

He explained that whenever he needed to give an employee negative feedback. On their way back from the cafeteria, he would deliver his message. Yes, they soon learned what was coming, but the cookie and conversation sweetened the moment.

Your moods and emotions have a measurable effect on the people you work with—think of it as “emotional contagion.” Your *negative* mood can have a negative effect and your *positive* mood can have a positive effect on the people you work with. Several years ago, Sigal Barsade conducted studies of “emotional contagion” through a series of carefully controlled experiments with senior management teams.¹

The human race has only one really effective weapon, and that is laughter.

The moment it arises, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place.

—MARK TWAIN

Using a paid actor within the group, she videotaped people working together. When the actor was positive and friendly, others on the team began to experience those emotions themselves. Their positive mood then had a direct effect on the cooperativeness of the group and their constructive conflict-resolution skills. The research demonstrated that group members put in more effort and engaged in more complex reasoning and problem solving. On the other hand, the actor’s negative emotions produced a negative spiral within the group. As the teams’ negative moods spread, their willingness and ability to work together productively also fell.

Books have been written about the success of Southwest Airlines—and the role that expressing a sense of humor has played in that company’s success. A flight with Southwest becomes memorable because of the lighthearted jokes that the flight attendants sometimes engage in during the trip. Humor is a part of the corporate culture. Even in the interview process, people may be asked to give an example of how a sense of humor has helped them. This pays off for the company in customer satisfaction. It also pays off in the workplace. Named as one of the best places to work in America, Southwest Airlines is known for its low turnover and high employee morale.

Cautions on the Use of Humor

There are good ways to use humor, and some not-so-good ways. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- ▶ Avoid being flippant. You wouldn't try to lighten the moment when you fire an employee by saying, "So, Charlie, it looks like you'll have plenty of time for that family vacation now."
- ▶ Dirty jokes or sexist or racist "humor" have no place in the workplace. There is a lot that is funny about our humanity that is clean and respectful. Keeping the workplace safe for everyone means keeping the fun dirt-free.
- ▶ Making fun of others is not funny. Mocking people, knocking them down with "humor" to try to make yourself look smarter or better, actually makes you look worse.
- ▶ Sarcasm isn't funny. Sarcastic remarks belittle or verbally attack another person or group. Sarcasm may seem funny to the speaker, but often it is hostile and mean. Remarks like these make differences, disagreements, and conflicts harder to resolve because of the damage they do to working relationships.

Here are examples of sarcastic remarks that may have seemed funny to the sender but to the receiver they carried a destructive sting:

- ▶ He never slows down to think; it's too painful to spend time with his own thoughts.
- ▶ Anyone who told you to be yourself couldn't have given you worse advice.
- ▶ Keep talking, someday you'll say something intelligent!
- ▶ Perhaps your whole purpose in life is simply to serve as a warning to others.
- ▶ Thinking isn't your strong suit, is it?

These types of remarks, especially coming from a manager, can be particularly negative and inappropriate to employees.

Consider This

- What mind-set do you bring to work every day?
- How do the moods of others affect you?
- Are you able to laugh at your own shortcomings?
- How often do you smile at people with whom you work?
- What habit do you want to change to lighten the mood in the office?

Note

1. Sigal G. Barsade, "The Ripple Effect: Emotional Contagion and Its Influence on Group Behavior," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 47, no. 4 (December 2002), pp. 644–675.