

Humor, Seriously

What's in it for me? Learn how to tap into your funny and use joy to create a more creative and productive workplace.

Imagine you're the founder of an exciting new venture and you've just done a big round of hiring. You're not some stuffy corporate exec – you're a cool boss. So you're throwing a little cocktail evening to introduce yourself and help the team mingle. The drinks start flowing, you get a little extra pep in your step, and all of a sudden you've grabbed the mic . . . “Hello, everyone. Welcome! So, you know, I always tell new hires: Don't think of me as your boss; think of me as a friend who can fire you!” And: crickets. Well, that didn't go well. Many people say that there is no room for humor in the workplace, but the authors of *Humor, Seriously* disagree. And they disagree passionately. Sure, there was probably a better way for you to have navigated that cocktail party, but in these blinks you'll learn why humor is important. Even if you don't consider yourself the next Tina Fey or Seth Meyers, you'll learn, first, how to tap into your own funny, and then how to use those skills to help create an environment of trust, creativity, and success for you and your colleagues. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to talk like a human; when it's appropriate to make a joke; and how to use humor to boost creativity.

Humor is a learned skill, and its benefits are myriad.

Let's start by considering what might be holding us back. Often, it's because we're worried that we're not funny or that our jokes are going to fall flat. Sometimes we don't think we're particularly entertaining and our friends and family don't think we're funny – the author's kids sure didn't. And you can't even learn funny, so what's the point? The point is, none of that is true. You don't need to be a comedian to have levity, to understand the value of humor and bring some sincerity to a situation. And no one is born funny! Except maybe those babies who try lemon for the first time. Humor can be present without comedy and it's a skill that you learn, adapt, and grow over time. According to the results from a Gallup survey of 1.4 million people across 166 countries, the frequency at which we laugh or smile drops significantly once we hit 23. Which is sad, because as kids we laugh all the time! But then as we grow up and enter the workforce, we seem to lose our sense of play. There is the very real pressure to be “professional.” But why should professional mean überserious? The lack of levity and laughter in life and in work is causing us to miss out on so much of the good stuff. The good stuff, you ask? Let's take a look at the science. “Laughter is the best medicine” isn't just a phrase. It's true! Laughter has been scientifically proven to benefit you both physically and emotionally. When we laugh, our brains release a cocktail of hormones. We get endorphins which give us that euphoric feeling we might have after exercise. We get a big release of dopamine that makes us feel happier. Oxytocin, the “love hormone,” is also released, which makes us more trusting. And our cortisol levels are lowered, which means we're a whole lot less stressed. In short, according to the authors,

laughter is like exercising, meditating, and having sex all at once. How great! And it's HR approved!

There are four main types of funny people.

It can be helpful to start by taking a look at what kind of humor is out there. There are traditionally four different types of funny people, the stand-ups, the magnets, the sweethearts and the snipers. The stand-ups are the expressive, thick skinned people who can take as good as they give. If you're edgy, a fan of roasts, and have been known to enjoy darker humor, then this might be for you. Magnets keep things uplifting, happy, and positive. They're the class clown, all silly and full of charisma. If you're someone who laughs before you've even reached the punchline, there's a good chance your humor is more of the magnet style. Then there is the subtle tease of the sweetheart. They're not out to hurt anyone's feelings, just to make people feel good. If you find yourself analyzing the situation, looking for the well-timed but innocent jab, then count yourself a sweetheart. Finally, the sniper. Snipers are an acquired taste for sure. They're pretty aggressive with their humor, and subtly sarcastic. Are you known for your deadly one-liners? Then a sniper style of humor might be yours. While these styles help identify where you could find your comedic strengths, it's incredibly important to note that these styles can be interchanged - and definitely should be - depending on the situation. It's essential to know when a sniper joke is not appropriate or when sweetheart and magnet moments might be the better choice. But remember, this is not about "being funny." It's about being real and approachable. So if you can't quite figure out if you're a stand-up or a magnet, don't stress. There are ways to explore humor in the workplace that will bring these moments out naturally.

Truth is the heart of humor. But tread lightly when joking about pain and anger.

So how exactly does "funny" work? According to the authors and the many professionals they approached, you don't just pull something funny out of thin air. Instead, you make note of and use the absurdities of the world around you, and then point them out. Take a second to look back on the last few days. Did you forget an acquaintance's name? Did you tell the waiter that you hope he enjoys his meal, too? Maybe your kids pointed out that you're the CEO at work but grandma is the boss at home? These are real-life moments that you undoubtedly share with others. The truth creates an opportunity for shared recognition and at the heart of humor lies - you guessed it - truth. Meaning that if you tap into your own life - your likes, dislikes, opinions, feelings, all the things that make you you - you will allow for moments of shared levity where a colleague might say, "Hey, I do that! She's right! I've had that happen to me, too!" Tapping into your emotion is a sure-fire way to have shared moments, and you should use it. Just be careful with anger. You don't want to make anyone feel personally attacked. A quick way around that is to aim your frustrations at some fictional third party. That way people will feel what you feel without bearing the brunt of it. The same goes for pain. We all know that misery loves company, and shared pain can be funny down the line, but don't rush into

it. You don't want the deafening silence of "too soon" to fill the office. It will eventually make for a great story, so save it for later. Another way to highlight the funny is to notice what is contrasting or incongruent about yourself and your life. The entertaining bit lies in the difference. You and your team may have just raised a million in funding - but grandma wants the double thick cream from Whole Foods and you better not forget it! Share that contrast with your colleagues. It will take you from being the unapproachable big boss to a human being with a family, a life outside of work, and a stereotypically demanding mother-in-law.

Get funnier by using exaggeration, being specific, using analogies, and remembering the rule of three.

It would be great if humor was always as simple as, "I tell you this funny thing that happened in my life, you laugh, and we work together happily ever after." Sometimes, making these simple observations is not quite enough to be funny. So what can you do to be prepared? Through speaking to professional improvisers and coaches from schools like Second City, in Chicago, and The Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, in New York, the authors collected some simple tools to help get you from idea to punchline, successfully. First, use exaggeration to your advantage. Take that life event and embellish and escalate it to surprise the listener. The funny comes when you say something they weren't expecting at all. Consider the example from actor and stand-up comedian, John Mulaney: "Went to a spa to get a massage. I went into the room to get the massage and the woman there told me to undress to my comfort level. So I put on a sweater and a pair of corduroy pants and I felt safe." Were you expecting him to say that he'd be putting on clothes? Probably not, and that is where it becomes funny. Second, be specific. Using precise and vivid language makes it a lot easier for the listener to relate to what you're saying. They're not just pants - they're thick, made-for-winter, corduroy pants that Mullaney will be using to cover himself up at the spa. And just like that we have a hilarious mental image of the absurdity at play. Third, make use of analogies. You can highlight how ridiculous something is by comparing it to something completely different but equally outrageous. One example comes from Hasan Minhaj as he tries to explain how hard it is for him to connect with his father: "Every conversation with my dad is like an M. Night Shyamalan movie. It's just 90 minutes of buildup to no pay off. That's the ending?" To break that down, conversations with Hasan's dad are tedious and difficult, much like Shyamalan's films are never-ending and tough to watch. Analogies are not the easiest to get right, so it's important that you have a solid base. Your base comes down to you and how you feel about your observation. Use specificity to help people understand why you feel the way you do and then try to find something universal to connect it to. If most people can relate, then you've created a successful analogy. Finally, the rule of three is also a good tool to use and practice. It's quite simple, really. List two expected things and then subvert them with an unexpected third element. The human brain is constantly looking for patterns. So when we say A and B, we expect to hear C. But if we say A, B, pineapple, we create surprise, and, in turn, humor. Take Amy Schumer, for example. When greeting her audience at a gig in Denver she said: "I don't know if you guys know this but in the past year I've gotten rich, famous, and humble." If you had to lose the "famous" or put the laugh line, "humble," in the middle, it wouldn't really work, would it? You need to establish the pattern in order for the C element to have impact.

Work on your go-to stories and bring humor to work with “The Bad Idea Brainstorm.”

People like Amy Schumer or Hasan Minhaj spend months and years cultivating their humor: writing, rewriting, and testing their jokes on audiences. But most of us don't have that kind of time, so when we're using humor, in our lives or in the office, we'll need to be able to create moments of levity spontaneously. One good way to go about it is to know your go-to stories, the ones you enjoy telling and have already proven to be funny. Then, as we've already learned, be observant. Use what you see in the here and now to find what's funny to the people around you. Seth Herzog, a comedian who also happens to have the colossal task of warming up the audience for The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon, has some good advice. He suggests that you ask yourself, “What's funny right now, to this group only? That's the fastest way to get a group laughing.” Finally, create safe spaces for others to spontaneously explore their funny sides and build lasting connections in the process. One idea is “The Bad Idea Brainstorm.” Instead of having a serious roundtable meeting where everyone has to come up with viable strategies, tell people to go come up with the silliest, most outlandish ideas possible. Not only will you get laughter but you will also most likely end up with some ideas you hadn't even considered. Humor activates the creativity center of the brain and quite literally encourages mental gymnastics. Which means a humor-driven meeting will get a lot more innovation and visionary ideas out of it than a boring old brainstorming session. Whether you're being strategically or spontaneously funny, always be on the lookout for appropriate moments to get fun and creative with the people around you. But what is appropriate? We'll explore that in the next blink.

Ideas of funny differ - so be sure to use humor responsibly.

People have different ideas of what is funny. Our humor varies depending on everything from our upbringing and personal experiences, to political views, hangriness, and more. Your long-term colleague may be a fan of “your mom” jokes - but the new guy in sales might think they're distasteful. So, it's critical to know what to do when these different ideas of funny arise. The most important thing to keep in mind is that in all instances, you need to use humor responsibly. And have sensitivity, empathy, and hilarity all working together. It's a matter of reading the room. And that's not just about knowing what will make the audience laugh but how it will make them feel. Are there any cultural differences to take into account? Will it offend anyone? First, determine how appropriate the joke is. If you remove the humor and examine the truth, does the comment still feel appropriate? So, for example, if we remove the humor from “Don't think of me as your boss; think of me as a friend who can fire you,” what are we left with? An employer who has no issue with axing you no matter how friendly she pretends to be - maybe an inappropriate joke. Next, consider what professor Anne Libera, of Columbia College Chicago, refers to as the “spectrum of truth, pain and distance.” Does the joke hit a little too close to home? Do you have enough experience with this topic to joke about it? And are you close enough to the group to make these jokes? If the answer to any of those questions is no, then you should probably rethink your approach. It can

be difficult to know how everyone is going to react all of the time. Mistakes happen, and it can be tempting to always play like everything is fine. That's how you planned it! No mistakes here! But there is so much more power in being vulnerable. Owning up to your mistake not only shows your team that you see where you've gone wrong, but also makes them feel safe to make mistakes of their own. Spanx founder and CEO Sara Blakely has a great way of doing it. She holds regular company-wide "Oops Meetings" where she addresses a recent mistake she's made and plays music that fits the situation. For example, after Blakely tried to compete in a product category for longer than she should have, she played "Mr. Roboto" - a great song, but it goes on for almost six minutes! Employees were able to join Blakely in dancing along and made light of the situation.

Improve your humor by embracing your personality.

Often, it's as simple as talking like a human being. Stiff talk, be it in the boardroom or over email, doesn't leave much room for connection. Like the authors put it, "If we write like corporate drones, then pretty soon we'll start acting like them, too." So, whether you're talking face-to-face or writing an email, stop trying to rid yourself of a personality. What may seem like essential formalities can actually prevent you from showcasing the type of person you are. See emails as an opportunity to invite genuine connection. If you know that a CEO just had a child, maybe start your email or conversation by asking how mom and baby are doing. If you know you and your client are suffering through the same heat wave, try signing off with a little joke acknowledging your shared experience. Little things like a quippy sign off or a fun personal story also help to make an impression. Our brains make judgments incredibly quickly and first impressions play a crucial role in how your relationship with a colleague or client moves forward. So, if the big boss you're going to meet loves dad jokes, then lean into that! It's also important that your online presence reflects your personality. Nowadays, you'll be sussed out on LinkedIn or Twitter before you even enter the HR office, so consider something like a fun bio. When you're one of thousands of applicants, it's the little things that help you stand out. But make sure to strike a balance of clever and lighthearted while still reflecting your achievements. Take Steve for example. Steve's bio included primary information like "is an executive manager" and "is currently the CEO of ASG MarTech," both of which were impressive. But it was the inclusion of his family's opinion of his podcast that caught the hiring manager's attention: "described by his wife and two daughters as 'long, boring, and utterly devoid of substance.'" That last line got him an interview and ultimately helped land him the gig. Why? Because it showed that Steve had wit, confidence, and humility, on top of being qualified for the job.

Become a better leader by bringing humor to the workplace.

The leaders of old were a rare breed. All intelligence, bravery, moral superiority, and cunning resolve. Consider Ernest Shackleton drifting on sheets of ice in the Antarctic to rescue his crew. Or Marco Polo, who traveled across mountains to inspire generations of children . . . to play blindly in their swimming pools. But those days are behind us. In

the wake of multiple wars, nuclear disasters, financial crises and more, we now share a collective lack of trust in our leaders. A 2019 Harvard Business School study found that 58 percent of employees trust a stranger more than they trust their own boss. And because they don't trust their employers, they don't work well. But have faith. While general trust in leadership is taking a nosedive - the organizations that are maintaining a high-trust environment are thriving! By channeling your unique sense of humor, you can become a leader who can better unite, persuade, and motivate the people around you. Humor in business improves many things, including your power. Don't confuse this with power over people. Rather, it's the power to control how people view you and how you are remembered. You're the one who sets the tone, so showcase your funny, or at least your understanding of humor. And play along when you see others enjoying moments of levity at the office - this helps build trust and support! Of course, you are still a leader so make sure to find a balance between being authoritative and approachable. Self-deprecating humor, or silly, humble moments can help with that. Humor creates bonds, and the closeness that forms in a moment of shared mirth lasts much longer than some awkward team-building activity. Employees simply want to feel safe, seen, and heard. Even unexpected playful moments of praise can be more effective than official ones because they feel real. Sometimes, being a leader means knowing when to take a step back. It's important to know what you are comfortable with. If you'd prefer not to be the one in the spotlight pulling the company culture toward you, look to find and support a charismatic coworker who might be able to build the safe and fun space you had envisaged.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Humour in the workplace helps build trust and forges true connections. Look for those everyday moments of levity, and for the signals to engage and play. These will allow you to create a culture of fun for you and your employees where they feel safe to communicate, make mistakes and grow. And use these tools you've acquired to bring more joy into your life outside of work as you tap into your funny to live a bolder, more authentic and love filled life with the people around you. Here's another piece of actionable advice: Leave no room for derogatory humor. No joke should make someone feel victimized or discriminated against - even if you are a sniper at heart. There is absolutely no place for racism, sexism or any other prejudiced humour at work, or anywhere. So, if a story or joke involves offensive humour, then make sure to recognize it in yourself or your employees, and address it immediately.