

HUMOUR

What is humour?

Humour refers to the consistent demonstration of the ability to “lighten up”, have a bit of fun and laugh.

Why is it important to be able to demonstrate humour as a professional skill?

High Ideals focuses on the ability to lighten up, have a bit of fun and laugh as a professional skill because stresses in the workplace are often cited as one of the biggest contributors to the increase in sick days, stress leave, attrition and even performance issues. Often exit interviews conducted with employees who’ve left a business contain feedback that management don’t have the necessary humanistic leadership skills and/or behaviours that would have made the workplace a more engaging environment for them.

Now imagine if the employees are saying that, what are the customers saying?

The message here isn’t that you need to become a stand-up comic in order to be good in business. The point is more to explore if you’re enjoying yourself in what you do? Are your customers enjoying themselves?

When things are dull, maybe even boring, it can have a negative impact not just on the professional environment, but also in who we are as people and how we live our lives.

It’s interesting that most of the major religions and philosophical movements have discussed how in the moment of abandonment to laughter, we are the most at peace, the most true to who we really are, and the most open to new ideas.

Why?

Because when we’re laughing at that level, the little negative voices in our head stops talking. We are not able to both laugh deeply and have a negative internal conversation at the same time. It’s just not possible.

So you can probably begin to imagine how humour, when used appropriately as a professional skill, could potentially completely change an emotional environment and therefore get a different result than the one that is being experienced now.

One of the most common uses of humour in a professional context is to create a sense of informality in order to support more rapport in the relationship. Often it is used in meetings to try to liven up content which otherwise might be deemed boring, although important and necessary to discuss. Sometimes humour is used to reduce the impression of one person having a power position over another, using the humour as a way of levelling the playing field.

Michael Bayer, a Canadian speaker and motivator writes in his article *Motivating with Mirth* (<http://www.humourintheworkplace.com/mirth.html>) "Motivation in an office has everything to do with the mood in the office and the attitude of the people in it. Humour in the workplace is far more than practical jokes and belly laughs. It's the attitude we bring to work that creates that mood of playfulness, the gift we give one another that makes the day a little easier to get through. Sometimes that gift is a laugh, sometimes it's a smile, and sometimes it's getting a coffee for someone who just can't get away for a break."

Therefore, consider that humour as a professional skill is about setting a mood and possibly changing the mood of a person or group of people and their environment in order to get better outcomes, which could include just simply feeling "lighter" than before. Maybe the mood to start focusing on with a bit of humour is your own? Then you can see the impact it has on others for yourself.

The first chapter of their book *The Levity Effect*, Adrian Gostic and Scott Christopher have a very funny opening and key message:

"Two guys walk into a bar...

Whoa, whoa, whoa. You can't start a serious business management book with a line like that. That flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Harrumph, grumble, grumble.

Well, you can relax. This is no joke.

Two guys walk into a bar. They're both leaders at the same company. One has a big, infectious smile and is laughing as he opens the door. The guy at his side hasn't actually cracked a smile since *Laugh-In* (70's TV comedy show). Quick test of your judgement skills: Which one's better at his job?

You're going to need a little more info, right? Nope. It's a simple call and current research backs it up: The guy who's laughing and enjoying himself is better. He's considerably more likely to be more productive, inspiring, engaging, committed, efficient, secure and trusted – overall a better leader."

You don't have to be laughing or cracking jokes to be having a good time, but it is very helpful that when you're having a good time and enjoying life and/or work, that it's observable to others.

Recent research talks about happiness as being infectious. Although there is a fair amount of debate surrounding that research, just consider if it's true.

What impact could you have on others if you operate both personally and professionally from a state of happiness, fun and/or just having a bit of a cheeky sense of humour?

Why is it so easy to slip up in the area of humour at a professional level?

Possibly the most critical way of not getting this right is when one tries to force humour into a situation versus letting it happen organically and from simply lightening up in the first place.

Imagine someone who is about to give a speech and they're nervous and they think they "should" open their speech with a joke. Ever experience one of those situations? The joke typically falls flat and then often so does the presenter. So forcing humour isn't the best way to go.

There can also be times when it's an inappropriate time to interject some humour and/or the humour itself is quite inappropriate. It's too big of an area to fully define here the "dos and don'ts" of humour; so let's leave it up to your common sense.

Then again it's been said that common sense isn't that common anymore.

So with that in mind, it's important to ensure that your humour doesn't degrade or demean anyone else and that it doesn't stray into any sort of cultural, gender, sexual or political areas as these are almost always inappropriate.

Also be sure that the brunt of the humour is not your colleagues, competitors, customers or other stakeholders. If you think you wouldn't want to have to explain yourself to that person if they ever found out you told a joke about them, then don't tell the joke in the first place. It's not respectful and when there's no respect, it's not likely to be funny anyway. And besides, you never have control over who repeats anything you say.

Tips for using humour effectively as a professional skill

- Having fun theme days at work.
- Run fun contests for customers.
- Have a "Humour Wall" in the office, or even in the customer area of your business, and encourage people to post things up there. You may have to monitor it though for appropriateness.
- Find funny business stories from the internet and/or business humour books and include them in business meetings from time to time where appropriate.
- Keep toys on your desk that you and/or others can play with. Examples include stress balls, animals/mascots, puzzles, a yo-yo even just a humour desk calendar with one joke per day page. Sometimes you'll find that employees or customers will absentmindedly pick up the toys and play with them, either to reduce stress or just because it looks like fun.
- Keep board games in the break room.
- Wear a smile pin, every day.
- Arrange a laughter workshop to be run at your business. www.laughterworksaustralia.com/

Characteristics and/or Behaviours of a person who uses humour as a professional skill

- They generally have a good attitude most of the time.
- They consider the impact their attitude has on others.
- They recognise that when they demonstrate happiness, lightness, informality, fun and laughter that it can have a positive influence on those around them, creating often the same emotional states for them.
- They are often more productive and effective leaders.
- They establish and maintain rapport easily.
- They relate to customers more as the pressure of “the sale” is removed from both the customer’s conscious mind and their own.
- They are typically less stressed and have less time off work due to illness.
- They typically are more engaged and invite others to engage with them.
- They’re typically better communicators.

Evaluate your own perspective on humour as a professional skill

- How do you define humour as a professional skill in your own words?
- What do you see as the benefits to humour as a professional skill?
- How well do you think you demonstrate humour generally?
- How have you used humour specifically in a professional context, and what were the outcomes?
- What feedback, if any, have you received about your humour? How have you acted on that feedback?
- Think of someone you know who demonstrates humour as a professional skill exceptionally well. How would you rate yourself in comparison to this person (if they were a 10, what would you be)?
 - What’s one thing you could do to improve how you’d rate yourself?
- Think of the least humorous person you have come across in a professional context. How would you rate yourself in comparison to this person (if they were a 1, what would you be)?
 - What’s the lesson you’ve learned from this comparison that has benefited you in your professional life?

- How did you ensure you wouldn't be measured the same way as that person?

Improve your degree of demonstrating humour as a professional skill

After you have completed your evaluation, if you have noticed some room for improvement, you might like to try some of the following strategies:

- Seek feedback from your six of your clients/colleagues – your two largest/most important, two medium/moderately important and two lower priority business partners – asking them to compare you with others they work with and tell you honestly how humour and/or fun plays a part of the relationship you have with them. Honesty is important, so create a very safe environment to seek this feedback and tell them you welcome constructive comments.
- Consider researching laughter workshops in your area. Laughter workshops have become a world-wide phenomenon in the past decade and have helped thousands of people learn how to laugh and how to use laughter to alter their own moods and to improve the moods of others in their business environments.
- Consider reading *The Levity Effect* mentioned in the resources section of this document. While doing that, keep a journal or notes of various strategies which may be relevant for your business environment.
- Consider interviewing people who you believe demonstrate humour as a professional skill very well. Look on it as doing some field research; get curious and explore how humour can have a positive business impact.

Further resources

If you would like to develop further in the area of humour, the following resources may be worth considering.

Please note that High Ideals does not endorse or receive any direct benefit from recommending the following resources. The list is simply a suggestive collection of materials that members of the High Ideals management team have found useful in their own development.

- **The Levity Effect** by Adrian Gostic and Scott Christopher – This is a great little book with numerous real case studies of how businesses and business professionals have used humour to spice up the relationships they have with their staff, customers and other stakeholders.
- **The Power of Humour at the Workplace** by K. Sathyanarayana – This interesting book highlights the benefits and value of humour in the workplace and other situations. There are a number of examples and step-by-step guidelines on how to make the most of this skill in managing people and relationships.
- <http://www.selfgrowth.com/> is a site High Ideals often refers people to as it offers both personal and professional self-development information and resources. You can type in any search word you want, such as “humour in the workplace” and you’ll get a list of articles, blogs, resources and links to other sites which could assist you in your own development.
- <http://www.high-ideals.com> – Check out the Member Directory section for High Ideals members who offer services which could support you, such as coaching, mentoring or consulting on High Ideals criteria/values.

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High Ideals would like to acknowledge and thank Noel Posus for his work on this document. Noel Posus is the Director of Training, Research and Development for High Ideals as well as a professional coach, educator and author. To find out more about Noel, please visit his profile on the High Ideals directory by clicking [here](#) and search by name.

This document is part of the **High Ideals** Criteria Information Series, edited by Claire Stretch. For more information on Claire please visit her profile on the High Ideals directory by clicking [here](#) and search by name.

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