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# DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE LEADERS

## PARTICIPANT'S PACKET

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# USING HUMOR EFFECTIVELY



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## Introduction

When we think of effective leaders, we usually think of personality traits, such as integrity, creativity, and honesty, as well as skills like public speaking and decision making. Using humor effectively is just as important. When humor is used properly, a leader has the opportunity to connect with others and contribute to their happiness in a variety of ways.

It is said that the ancient poet Horace once remarked:

“Mix a little foolishness with your prudence – it’s good to be silly at the right moment.”

Horace was right – humor most definitely plays a role in leadership, and the way we use it can have a positive or negative effect.

The purpose of this lesson is to help you understand how to use humor effectively in your organizations and your lives. This module deals with humor as it relates to leadership. Humor is not a common concept usually discussed by leaders and textbooks. However, it is very effective when used appropriately. This module is designed to increase your knowledge about this concept. Its focus is to show you how to connect with people, accomplish goals, and contribute ideas by using your sense of humor effectively.

## Objectives

As a result of participating in this module, you will:

- Recognize the “Humor Paradox.”
- Identify your serious messages.
- Recognize which types of humor can do more damage than good.
- Use strategies to find your inner comedian.

*A leader without a sense of humor is apt to be like the grass mower at the cemetery – he has lots of people under him, but nobody is paying him any attention.*

Bob Ross

*If I can get you to laugh with me, you like me better, which makes you more open to my ideas.*

John Cleese

*Among those whom I like, I can find no common denominator; but among those whom I love I can; all of them make me laugh.*

Wystan Auden

*Anyone who has had the job I've had and didn't have a sense of humor wouldn't still be here.*

Harry Truman

*If you are going to tell people the truth, you'd better make them laugh. Otherwise they'll kill you.*

George Bernard Shaw

*Humor is a way of creating inverse paranoids - people who think the world is out to do them good.*

Joel Goodman

*Humor and creativity are intimately related - there is a connection between HAHA and AHA.*

Joel Goodman

*It is bad to suppress laughter. It goes back down and spreads to your hips.*

Fred Allen

## The Role of Humor in Leadership

We enjoy seeing people with a good sense of humor. Generally, people with a sense of humor are people we want to be around. We want to work with them, we want to listen to them, and, what's more, we tend to feel more comfortable following a leader who uses humor effectively.

The role humor plays in leadership can have a positive or negative effect, depending on how it is used. People who have studied and written about American humor have identified what's called the **Humor Paradox**. We generally tend to discourage humor in the workplace and other important situations, such as community decision-making sessions, saying things like "this is serious and important and we should treat it that way." Yet, we tend to respect people who use humor effectively in serious situations. This is the Humor Paradox.

Let's examine some experiences you might have had with the Humor Paradox by identifying your "serious messages," messages you have heard or thought that suppressed your sense of humor in your personal life and in your organization.

**Activity: Identify Your Serious Messages**

"Wipe that smile off your face."

"You think that's funny, don't you."

What things have you heard in your personal life that may have suppressed your sense of humor?

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

"Stop fooling around and get back to work!"

"You're not here to socialize."

What has been said in community leadership situations or in your organization that stifled humor and laughter?

4. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

By identifying the serious messages you have received, it will be easier to analyze your own "mental block" on displaying humor in serious situations. Once you understand your personal feelings about humor, you can better determine when serious messages are actually appropriate or when a little humor might be called for.

## When Humor Isn't Appropriate

While positive humor can be productive in serious settings, inappropriately timed humor can detract from serious discussion. For example, in a serious setting, humor can have a positive effect when it's used to defuse tension or to reinforce the topic under discussion. Humor can have a negative effect and detract from serious discussion when it's used just for humor's sake without relating to the topic. Balance is the key word here. Humor can disarm anger, but it works only when it goes beyond the laughter to solve the problem that produced the anger.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, pointed out that jokes can be a way of expressing emotions that we are not allowed to express directly. His observation leads us into talking specifically about what some people call "negative humor."

### Negative Humor

Negative humor involves a negative attitude toward people and has a negative effect on them. Some humor may do physical harm, such as practical jokes. More often, negative humor can do psychological harm, as with wisecracks that focus on mistakes in a humiliating, discouraging way. Negative humor can have the veneer of fun, but underneath are feelings of distrust, fear, and envy.

Negative humor can also detract from valid criticism. The negative humor can be used by the person giving the valid criticism OR by the person receiving the valid criticism.

Negative humor can reflect a negative attitude. If a leader uses negative humor, the followers may interpret that to mean that the leader has a negative attitude about the project, the followers, or about being a leader in general, whether or not the leader actually feels that way. The reverse can be true as well – if followers use negative humor, the leader can interpret this to reflect negative attitudes. If you see another person use negative humor, try to deflect or defuse the situation using what you learn from this lesson.

## Some Examples of Negative Humor

One of the more common examples of humor with a negative effect is **sarcasm**. Sarcastic humor goes beyond the more gentle humor of kidding by being bitter and caustic. It is humor at the expense of others, and this kind of humor tends to divide and keep people apart. Not only does sarcastic humor hurt personal feelings, but it also undermines enthusiasm, morale, and productivity.

**In-group humor** is humor that can be positive within a group, such as a profession or religion, that would seem negative to people outside that group. We've all experienced examples of in-group humor. You've probably been part of a group where such humor was acceptable when shared among the group, but that humor remained within the group to keep from offending others. For example, people in medical professions and law enforcement cope with gruesome experiences as well as life-and-death situations. Such experiences could easily overwhelm them if they didn't have humorous ways of dealing with disgust, panic, and sadness. While humor unique to those groups works well for them, persons outside those groups might take it the wrong way.

**Ethnic and sexist humor** almost always has a negative effect. This type of humor is dangerous because bias is so easy to ignite. Once inflamed, bias can be divisive, unproductive, and harmful to community leadership situations. If leaders use this type of humor, they should do so with extreme care, using their own race, ethnic group, or gender as the brunt of the joke.

We've all heard the expression that it is better to laugh at ourselves than to laugh at others, and there is a lot of truth to that. **Laughing at others** can border on sarcasm, and can quickly turn bitter and caustic whether the persons being laughed at are present or not. If you find yourself in the situation of laughing at others, you can defuse things by turning the humor around to laughing at yourself or at a common situation by saying something like, "I'm sorry. I can't help laughing because I'm reminded of the time that I . . ." By becoming part of the situation, you can turn a potentially bruised ego into a warm smile.

## Humor and Older Adults

Some research has shown that older adults comprehend humor differently than younger adults. The reason is that as people get older, they have more difficulty with abstract reasoning, short-term memory, and other cognitive processes. While this doesn't mean that older people won't get your jokes, it may require you to perfect your humor strategies when communicating with them. For example, try telling jokes that are more straightforward, rather than those that cause even younger people to stare confusedly at you for a moment before exclaiming, "OH! I get it."

## Finding Your Inner Comedian

So far, you have learned some facts about humor from people who study humor and its effects. You have also had a chance to reflect upon your own experiences with humor and serious messages. What does all this mean for you personally and your ability to be a leader?

Well, you can start by finding your inner comedian. Here are five tips to get you started:

- **Remember to laugh at yourself first.** Making fun of others can alienate people, but when you gently poke fun at yourself, they want to come to your rescue and lift you up. However, be cautious about putting yourself down too much. If you are always giving evidence to your own inadequacy, others might start to believe you are, in fact, inadequate. Find the right balance by laughingly pointing out your own quirks without making others feel like they are always having to affirm your worth for you.
- **Look beyond the obvious.** Find the funny things that are right out in the open in everyday life. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld has made millions of people laugh by finding what's funny in everyday objects and experiences, such as peanuts on the airplane and pencil sharpeners.
- **Build relationships with people.** The funniest people don't hog the spotlight – they deflect it. They remember that humor is partly about relationships with people, and they share the limelight. They make people feel comfortable, and it pays off.
- **Use surprise.** Sometimes you have to sneak up on people to get them to laugh. Once a wealthy real estate mogul hired a motorcycle gang to “crash” her barbeque. Her guests were outraged – until they realized the joke was on them. Then they hopped on the motorcycles, went for rides, and had a great time.
- **Turn the negative around.** The next time something embarrassing or horrible happens, take heart – someday it could be funny. As Carol Burnett said, “Comedy is tragedy plus time.”

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## Final Thought

Now you have a better understanding of using humor effectively to help make connections with others. It is important to remember that whether or not you're a person of serious messages, make a commitment to yourself to find your inner comedian.

As you go out into your communities, remember this: *If you can unlock your sense of humor, you'll likely unlock others.* Humor is an important tool that leaders can use develop effective and congenial relationships with community members to get things done.

## References

- Paulson, T. L. (1989) *Making humor work: Take your job seriously and yourself lightly.* Los Altos, CA: Crisp Publications Inc.
- Morreall, J. (1997) *Humor Works.* Amherst, Massachusetts: HRD Press, Inc.
- Mak, W. & Carpenter, B. (2007) Humor comprehension in older adults. *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society*, 13, 1-9.

1. Overall, how would you rate this module?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
I learned something new	1	2	3	4	5
I learned something I can use	1	2	3	4	5
Materials were clear	1	2	3	4	5
The module met my needs	1	2	3	4	5

2. What did you get from the module? (Check any that apply)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Answers to questions    | <input type="checkbox"/> Insight and support from others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Resource materials      | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify) _____           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Help in decision making | _____  |

3. As a result of this module, I	Not At All	Slight Extent	Fair Extent	Great Extent
Gained respect for how to use humor in leadership.	1	2	3	4
Understand the negative consequences that some types of humor can have on others.	1	2	3	4
Understand that humor, when used appropriately, makes others feel comfortable.	1	2	3	4
Appreciate the effects humor has on individuals to come together so resolutions may be reached.	1	2	3	4
Can identify serious messages that could possibly stifle productivity.	1	2	3	4
Learned techniques for using humor appropriately.	1	2	3	4

4. As a result of this module, I plan to use the tips to find my inner comedian.

- |                |              |           |               |            |
|----------------|--------------|-----------|---------------|------------|
| Definitely Not | Probably Not | Undecided | Probably Will | Definitely |
| 1              | 2            | 3         | 4             | 5          |

Please Explain:

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5. Further needs or comments (Use the back if necessary):

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