

Executive Column



Transitional Assistance Department

Humor in the Workplace

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Everybody loves a comedian, right? Well, we all love good humor, but frankly, not all humor is good. The appropriate and timely use of humor in the workplace is a skill that good leaders practice many years to refine. However, as a leader, your job title usually guarantees that your staff will laugh at your jokes... perks of the job. Tasteful humor can bring you and your staff closer, but obnoxious humor is sure to polarize those around you or the staff you supervise.

We are all very busy county employees, and sometimes business people tend to take things pretty seriously, maybe too seriously. Humor in the workplace can reduce stress, enhance leadership, communication, organizational culture and creativity. And let's face it, we've all been to training sessions that are excruciatingly boring, and we also know that appropriate, well-timed humor can make hours of training sessions much more tolerable with a light-hearted delivery that still gets the job done. Much like selecting the most suitable tool from a toolkit, supervisors and managers can use an appropriate style of humor to attain the desired positive organizational outcomes. Key factors in humorous stories and comments are that organizational values and norms are molded, but without negative affect for the audience. Equally, good-natured teasing and humor are also very effective at molding behavior of new personnel and establishing norms by bringing attention to improper conduct in a funny way.

While I don't encourage all employees, supervisors and managers to try their hand at stand-up comedy, I do believe that the tips below can help when attempting to use humor as a teachable moment in the workplace.

1. Don't confuse being a leader with being a comedian - Leadership is your first priority.
2. Unacceptable behavior should never be cloaked in an attempt to be humorous. Racist, sexist, ageist, or other discriminating acts will not be tolerated...ever.
3. Don't laugh at people - Laugh with them.
4. Don't try too hard to be funny. If it's forced, it won't work.
5. Humor in the workplace should be used to make people feel more comfortable. Don't single people out.
6. Saying "I was just joking" is no excuse – Sarcasm is not a license to put anyone down...ever.

Just remember... there is still work to be done. While we all need a daily dose of humor, it's important to remember that you are paid to do a job, not be the class clown. When you know your audience and your timing and delivery are refined, laughter in the workplace can be a real asset to productivity and morale. Remember, humor in the workplace is both a tool AND the end result of working in a great, exciting, "want to" workplace environment where people feel respected, valued and trusted. Now, have you heard the one about the pencil? Oh, never mind, it's pointless.

