

# Developing Your Sense of Humor

By Amy Carroll

I come from a long line of corporate trainers.

OK, not such a long line, there are just a lot of us now. Part of what makes our businesses successful – my brother, sister and I – is that we are funny.

By no means is this genetic. We weren't a barrel of laughs growing up together, unless of course you include the typical events which naturally occur in a family with seven kids and parents who think 'live and learn' is a useful philosophy to discovering the world around us. Backing the car into the neighbor's bushes while learning to drive was perfectly acceptable. A well-developed sense of humor isn't something everyone is born with, the good news is, it can be learned.

## Guidelines, secrets and tips

For me, my 'funny formula' is triggered by any daily event such as:

- someone making a comment
- observing children playing
- missing the train/tram/bus...

My brain leaps into search mode, scanning a checklist for anything related to the event, however simple or mundane. Almost unconsciously, I ask myself: What is something similar to, different from or the opposite of whatever just happened?

During a recent training session with one of our multinational clients, my sister Pat was making her introduction, I was at the back of the room. She was explaining the power and importance of a specific body of work and its contribution in bringing human communication to the next level of evolution. She spoke passionately about our commitment to this process of human development.

Whoa. Needless to say, it was a bit heavy for corporate America on a Monday at 8:45 am.

Pause.

Even before I had completely formulated my thought, I said, in a loud, nonchalant voice from the back of the room, “And that’s why we wear comfortable shoes.”

The whole room broke up laughing, including Pat and me.

What happened in those seconds as Pat was speaking? My brain went into search mode – rummaging for something completely opposite to what Pat had just said, something trivial or superficial... Shoes popped into my mind... Next, I asked myself how shoes could be connected to our work as corporate trainers in advancing human evolution. Finally, I delivered the comment in a matter-of-fact style, adding to the humor by contrasting the lofty message even more.

## **Return on investment:**

### **The ROI of humor in business and beyond**

#### **1. The power and importance of bonding**

When we laugh at others’ humorous comments, it’s seen as a compliment and a sign of respect which reinforces another’s value. People will be more loyal and committed to a company or relationship where they feel this connection and value.

#### **2. Humor creates a positive physiological response**

It relaxes the body and brings in oxygen via laughter. It has a direct effect on reducing stress. It attaches positive emotions to whatever is said, creating good associations and increasing retention of both information and the employee.

#### **3. Practicing humor develops creativity**

Searching for links, connections, and opposites goes far above and beyond slapstick humor or one-liners. It can force the brain to new creative heights. In the workplace, innovation and creativity can provide a competitive edge.

# Types of Humor

## Reincorporation in action

One of my favorite types of humor and one that is easy to access for novice humorists is 'reincorporation', which simply means referring to something that happened earlier. In order for reincorporation to be funny, the humor recipient(s) must be aware of the primary occurrence. Trust me on this one, I've made that mistake before.

Picture the scene: a five-day leadership training course for a Scandinavian shipping company. On Day 1 we talk about the importance of creating a psychological contract with their direct reports. As usual, in a most professional and convincing manner, I explained the concept and why having a psychological contract is important. Throughout the week, one attendee referred back to the psychological contract whenever possible. Over and over again he wove it into the conversation, whether we were in the classroom or during a meal. I'd say, "We're planning to end at 6:30 tonight, does that work for everyone?", and he'd add, "Can we create a psychological contract about that?". By the end of the week his comment became highly predictable and yet all the more funny. This is one of the cool things about reincorporation, often it gets funnier the more it is repeated. Lasagna tastes better the second day, right?

I learned about reincorporation while studying improvisational theatre. It is a popular humor creation tool in many situation comedy television shows. More importantly, reincorporation creates a connection between people and among groups. It reinforces the collective and illustrates unity, sending the message that we share something in common. It is what we often refer to as 'inside jokes'.

## Positive note

I am a big advocate of positive humor. My advice, avoid pot-shot humor or putting someone else down. When we joke or tease others, it's all too easy to go negative. Positive humor is about lifting the other up, potentially making them feel even better about themselves and the relationship.

## Mine's bigger than yours...

Another typical style of humor, normally just the opposite of positive humor, is one-upmanship. Most people think of this as each side putting the other down, becoming progressively more insulting towards your opponent. Though it is often meant in good fun, unfortunately, it can sometimes cut too close to the truth to avoid leaving a negative mark.

I came across a great example of one-upmanship with a twist of positive humor while working at a school with an Irish couple. One day they were eating lunch in the cafeteria by themselves.

Sitting across the room, I overheard this exchange:

*Her: "Oh darling you're the best."*

*Him: "No, my love, you're the best."*

*Her: "Nooooooooooooo, darling, you're the best."*

*Him: "Oh, my love, you're REALLY the best."*

And so it went on. Part of what made it funny was that they were using this one-upmanship with a positive twist. And it wasn't just about the words. They used their voices, intonation, inflection and body language to exaggerate their simple back and forth 'retorts'.

## **Advanced humor**

Sexual humor may be inappropriate in most professional and some social environments; best to avoid it. I encourage what I call 'advanced humor'. Remember advanced math in school? Now there can be advanced humor in life.

A key element of advanced humor is knowing what is appropriate for a range of settings and participants. That range can be tremendously broad.

## **Letting the loser out**

When you put yourself down, you can endear yourself to others. Using self-deprecating humor occasionally, when you're in a position of power, is an effective way to build rapport and trust.

## **Getting physical**

People use a full range of expressions and tools for humor. It's not just about the words we use, it is also the delivery – how and when something is said. Physical humor is another category which, needless to say, doesn't even need words.

The well-known American comedian, Ellen DeGeneres, has an amazing talent for physical comedy.<sup>(1)</sup> I realized my own skills at physical humor were improving recently when my Beatles song mime got tons of laughter around the table. I achieved this after viewing mime John Lipowitz's<sup>(2)</sup> Utube video several times.

## That sarcastic §#@?...

What about sarcasm? Sarcasm is tricky and can be hurtful or caustic. People who don't know me often have no idea how to respond to my use of sarcasm. This is unfortunate, as it is a waste of a perfectly humorous comment. In the right situation, sarcasm can be incredibly funny. Emphasis or tone on certain words or phrases can turn an innocent comment into a hilarious one-liner.

## What works for you?

Decide what types of humor work best for you and your environment. Broadly, one can distinguish between what I call male 'slapstick' humor and female 'subtle' humor (eg. play on words). There are, of course, exceptions to both styles. I have a girlfriend, Libby, who loves the 3 Stooges and a brother Joe, with such dry and subtle one-liners you would miss if you weren't paying attention. One of my family's funniest 'inside jokes' from which we have gotten tremendous mileage, happened many years ago. Eyebrows are raised and laughter creeps in whenever we see a rubber band, thanks to my grandmother accidentally baking the offending object into one of her famous apple sauce cakes some time back in the 1970s. Reincorporation at its finest!

## Word games

Those who naturally love to play with words use a lot of 'double entendre' and funny puns. Other people are great at bantering, tossing comments back and forth.

Games can be used to bring fun and laughter to nearly any situation. My brother Kevin created games such as 'one point for the name of the song, two points for the singer' while listening to the car radio. Laughter always followed challenges such as: 'Whoever gets to the bottom of the hill first without pedaling is the winner!'

He also uses brain teasers or mental agility games. Following a long career in advertising, his book *Think Outside Your Blocks*<sup>(3)</sup> helps people develop their creative thinking and can easily be applied to developing your sense of humor.

## One last tip

Developing a sense of humor can be aided by improvisational theatre, to which we were introduced by our sister, Sheila. To be successful at improv, you need to be paying attention and present. Surprisingly, it's less about being funny and more about using whatever is there, literally taking the first thing that comes into your mind. Often the simplest, most obvious things are the most humorous.

## Check list

So if you want to increase your sense of humor, start by noticing what style of humor you find funny. Next pay attention to simple daily occurrences and comments around you. Then go through the checklist to find the connection:

- What is it similar to?
- Different from?
- The opposite of?
- Is a self-deprecating or sarcastic comment just the thing?
- What can you reincorporate?
- Is there a play on words to be had?
- What physical humor would work?

With practice, you can train your brain so these humorous responses become automatic.

*A colleague said recently, "You Carrolls, you're all just so funny." Well we weren't always like that. It just helps in our line of work.*

## References

- (1) Watch Ellen DeGeneres in action here:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBI9HixeWf4&feature=related>
- (2) Watch John Lipowitz in action here:  
[www.carrollcoaching.com/video](http://www.carrollcoaching.com/video)
- (3) The book, *Thinking Outside Your Blocks* is available here:  
[www.kevincarroll.com](http://www.kevincarroll.com)

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