

Laugh it off

Poor Linda. Our new Senior Corporate Account Executive has to be wondering what the heck she's gotten into. Ms. Bidgood started in our St. John's office a week and a half ago, which was coincidentally a week and a half before the press date for this, our biggest issue of the year. During the few times she's seen me since her arrival (I've been cowering in my office most of the time), I've managed to wave my arms in crazed cheerleader fashion, burst forth in a decidedly poor impression of Mahalia Jackson, dance an exceedingly uncoordinated flamenco and laugh long and hard at the slightest provocation.

Yes, I'm all in favour of spontaneous workplace silliness. It's what gets me get through the day after all. That, and a good shot of dark rum, but I generally save that for after hours (except for that one time.... just kidding boss!). Seriously, the busier I am and the more pressure there is, the more likely I am to lead an office rumba. As both the engine and caboose. Some people might think I'm being childish, but not Simon Cotter.

Cotter, an award-winning corporate comedian, was brought to Newfoundland recently by Mackenzie Investments to talk about humour in the workplace – to a bunch of accountants and banker-types no less. Talk about your tough crowd.

After warming them up with a few introductory funnies, Cotter revealed the highly unscientific, completely subjective lessons learned from his own successful career in sales and comic relief. This former top selling realtor said he had noticed that the more approachable and entertaining he was, the more his sales went up. The reason, he determined, was that he was building lines of communication. In revealing quaint and quirky thoughts and habits, he was able to make a personal connection to the client while inherently signaling that his was an open-minded, creative environment. "By sharing embarrassing moments, you're making yourself vulnerable. That makes it harder for your client to turn you down, to say no to what you are offering. Essentially, the person who has the laughs," he said, "has the control."

It was at this point that Cotter walked his audience through the different types of comedy: physical (ideal

for the naturally clumsy like me); self-deprecating (just don't make fun of something you're sensitive about because you've just given people permission to ridicule it too); observational (the smaller the observation, the stronger the emotional connection); storytelling (offers numerous elements and opportunities to bond with your audience); natural wit (those lucky dogs who somehow get a laugh just by raising their eyebrows); and, of course, jokes (provided they're never racist or sexist, even if racy tickles the client's funny bone).

The good news for those of us who aren't natural comedians is that wit is a skill that can be learned. First, learn some jokes. Now, practice them. Don't know any? Do your research, revise an existing joke or invent your own. "Politicians," says Cotter, "are great fodder for jokes." Tell stories. As you tell and retell tall tales, your mind recognizes those points that generated laughter so you naturally improve with each repetition. And, if you make a joke that pokes fun at your own A-type personality (such as excessive organization), you are inherently emphasizing that trait to the client. You are saying, "I am an organized person".

Laughter produces endorphins. The more you make people laugh, the more they want to be around you. They get a high from being in your presence. Essentially, they become addicted to you. But be warned: therein lies the risk.

Not so long ago, we had a consultant in our office to give a presentation. Having heard he was a good story teller, but without knowing what those stories were (except that they were reportedly funny), I invited him to start the morning with a good yarn. He was reluctant; I was insistent. Suffice to say, I soon learned that what's amusing from a white water rafting guide is not so hilarious from a tech consultant speaking to a mixed-generation business audience. Except to me, warped as I admittedly am. The more the boss' lips thinned, and the redder the consultant burned, the funnier the whole situation seemed. It was my fault, and I knew it. It was a case of laugh or cry, so I laughed – uproariously.

That particular mistake won't happen again, though I'm sure I'll do something equally mortifying at some point in the future. Poor Linda! **I ABM**



Dawn Chafe

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