Deaf Humor
and Positive Political Skills
in Communication

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Laughter, it has been said, is the shortest distance between two people. This paper will focus mainly on deaf humor and humor in communication. There will also be an in-depth explanation to show how one incorporates deaf humor and humor in general with positive political skills while communicating at work.

First, the focus will be on definitions of communication, deaf humor, humor in general, and positive political skills. Ideas of incorporating humor and positive political skills while communicating at work will then be introduced along with some techniques and tips. Examples will be given to enhance one’s understanding. Deaf jokes and deaf-related experiences or personal anecdotes are given to provide insight into how we perceive things in life and at work. There will be tactics of do’s and don’ts in using humor, both deaf and general, when communicating. I hope this paper will enhance your interest in developing your own humor style and how to incorporate it with positive political skills while communicating. Finally, there will be suggestions for further reading and study.

Introduction to Communication

Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.
Abraham Lincoln

Communication is a complex activity and process between two or more people. Communication allows us to share what we do or think. How we communicate in our daily lives is based on our personal and cultural backgrounds. The process may be verbal and/or nonverbal. (Napier/Gershenfeld, 1989, p. 21). The message must be given and received in order to achieve an efficient communication process.

Introduction to Humor

Humor is one’s ability to perceive, appreciate, or express what is funny, amusing, or ludicrous (Webster, 1994, p. 565). What is the difference between being funny and communicating a sense of humor? One does not
have to tell a joke in order to be funny; instead, one may have behaved absurdly in a situation. Similarly, one does not need to be a comedian or clown to have a sense of humor but rather have an ability to see the light side of a situation or make a funny comparison.

What Is Deaf Humor?

According to Leo C. Jacobs in his foreword to the latest humorous book, Deaf Culture, Our Way:

_This anthology of anecdotes, most of which are humorous, makes possible a new insight into the deaf community and their culture, and also enhances an understanding and empathy of how loss of hearing affects the whole man and shapes his attitude and outlook on the world. This also shows how the hearing majority reacts whenever their paths cross those of deaf persons and how their preconceived beliefs and prejudice influence their reactions to deafness._

Deaf humor is usually based on visual perception, oppression to deafness, sign language/linguistics, hearing loss, hearing dogs, interpreters, and deaf-related experiences. Deaf people share their peculiarities and perceptions, and often hearing people cannot follow the jokes or experiences. Our jokes are usually based on sign-twisting or exaggerations. Some of our jokes require one to understand sign language and/or deaf-related experiences.

Introduction to Positive Political Skills

Positive politics is the pursuit of enlightened self-interest (Block, 1987, p. 105). How we enhance our positive political skills in our services, contributions, and creations depends on our self-driven motivation. To have these particular skills at work, one must be interested in achieving a high level of satisfaction for oneself and others. One advocates one's positive political position at work to have good working relationships with others through two means: the individual choices one adapts in one's environment and the nature of norms and values of the organization one finds oneself in (Block, 1987, p. 7). In other words, one should strive for the best for oneself and others and for the beliefs and values of the organization. One should be able to utilize positive politics at work with pride, decreasing resistance between oneself and others, advocating a healthy and happy working environment, and striving for excellence.

Gallaudet University President I. King Jordan, in his State of the Union address to the Gallaudet community a few years ago, emphasized the need for the campus to commit ourselves to excellence. This is an excellent
example of a positive political skill for us to emulate. A manufacturing company, Levi Strauss & Co., strives for a commitment to excellence in everything they do. They set goals and practices for their employees to follow. One of their goals is to provide a safe, wholesome working environment that is stimulating, pleasant, and supports maximum personal effectiveness (Block, 1987, p. 125). The intention of this paper is to explore ways of maximizing personal and company productivity effectiveness by incorporating humor and positive political skills to create a stimulating and pleasant working environment.

**Introduction to Humor in Communication**

Humor in communication can be a powerful and delightful way to build positive working relationships, to increase motivation, and to improve morale (Borge, 1989). Humor, laughter, and having fun are part of communication whether you do it alone or with others. Humor consultants are showing corporate leaders how laughter can improve employee morale, give a boost to productivity, and nip potential conflicts in the bud (Fassihi, 1990, p. 13). It is crucial to achieve a tasteful sense of humor while communicating. Also, the appropriateness of using humor to build one’s agreement and trust with a person is critical when one needs to negotiate.

**WHY Incorporating Humor and Positive Politics at Work Is Important**

It is salient when incorporating humor and positive political skills at work with certain types of employers and employees to maintain their trust, cooperation, and integrity. Peter Block (1987) explained how political skills and coalition and support building influences one’s ability to negotiate agreement and trust. The two dimensions, agreement and trust, help one to develop a positive political strategy in dealing with different types of people. There are five different types of workers described by Block: opponents, allies, adversaries, bedfellows, and fence sitters. Using humor in a positive political way can also help one identify with whom one deals. If trust and agreement are high, then humor may be easily used with allies. If trust and agreement are low, then humor may not be appropriate. We need to use humor carefully with certain types of employees.

To use humor in communication, one must be experienced in communicating with honesty and straightforwardness to build trust and agreement. In other words, it is all right to laugh with workers and still have respect from them, create funny stories about one’s work if it is not demeaning, and tell funny personal anecdotes without belittling one another.
HOW One Incorporates Humor and Positive Politics at Work

People who enjoy their work have been shown to be more creative. And everyone knows that fun is contagious.

How do we go about incorporating humor and positive political skills at work? First, one needs to have cheerful motivational skills to capitalize on the positive connection between the employee’s welfare and productivity (Fassihi, 1990). Employers should want their employees to have fun and to become productive at work without intimidating them or jeopardizing the employer’s authority. Employees can have some fun at work, but they should not overdo it. Employers or managers ought to treat employees or subordinates with dignity and respect if the fun is appropriate and positive (Garland, 1991, p. 2). Misplaced humor can be counterproductive and distracting (Paulson, 1989, p. 2). Employees and their employers need to be flexible, creative, and effective communicators. These qualities are crucial for cultivating the assimilation of a skillful sense of humor and positive political skills. We should get enjoyment from life and from our work (Garland, 1991, p. 5).

To enjoy one’s working life, one should consider humor as a way to increase morale, reduce stress and boredom, stimulate creativity, and establish a positive work environment. Humor is an art. A skillful humorist, like a painter or sculptor, practices and polishes his or her skills before displaying them. One must practice and polish one’s humor style and positive political skills before using them with an audience. It is important to match your humor style to that of others if you want to sell, win, persuade, motivate, encourage, or entertain (Goodman, 1988, p. 29).

Buddy Hackett (in Goodman, Ed., 1988, p. 87), a famous comedian, once said “Comedy is a distraction, not an action. Humor takes your mind off the negative and turns it into laughter that’s positive.” This indicates that it is important to have some humor in one’s life to maintain a positive view of things. Anyone who enjoys laughter at work tends to be happy and wants to stay longer. Laughter is the least expensive benefit of any job (Goodman, 1988).

To have “fun” at work, one must have the ability to create amusing working environments and relationships. How does one obtain a sense of humor? According to Robert Half’s International Survey of Vice Presidents and Personnel Directors at 100 of America’s corporations, 84% thought employees with a sense of humor do a better job than people with little or no sense of humor (Kushner, 1990, p. 14). Mr. Half interpreted the survey as follows: “People with a sense of humor tend to be more creative, less rigid and more willing to consider and embrace new ideas and methods” (Twidale, 1986). In order to enhance productivity, better working relation-
ships, and higher employee morale, one needs to epitomize humor and positive political skills at work. In other words, by having a sense of humor, one enhances one’s ability to be creative, flexible, and open-minded.

As we all know, laughter is the best medicine. Based on a series of medical studies, Bob Orben, a comedy writer and humor consultant, confirmed that a sense of humor made people healthier and helped them fight illness by reducing stress (Fasshii, 1990). It is beneficial for companies to allow laughter, jokes, and other comic relief at work. Having humor at work is not a crime. Using humor at work does not cost a penny. The use of humor unlocks others’ receptivity and helps to enhance communication (Paulson, 1989, p. 1). Often stress interferes with one’s objectivity and clouds work productivity, whereas humor helps one’s maintenance of perspective for better decision-making processes (Kushner, 1990, p. 25). In other words, one needs to reduce stress by smiling or accepting smiles from others, laughing or responding to funny remarks, and using humor productively rather than destructively in work. If you are capable of smiling, laughing, or responding to funny remarks, then you will have no problem incorporating humor and positive political skills at work.

Using a sense of humor when solving problems, such as developing reward systems, can give one a new perspective on things. One can look at things from an offbeat angle, such as the reward system a supervisor at a Virginia optical company received from her work: “A Screw Up of the Month” recognition for the “baddest” idea of the month. One bank has created “Worst Customer of the Week Award” for its employees. The employees share their horror stories about their customers every week to find the winner of this award (Washington Post, March 4, 1986, p. B5). This will give an incentive and arouse one’s self-interest to become creative and motivated to get an award.

It is important to develop ways of using humor to help workers be more motivated and productive. The use of humor at work is one of the best and safest ways to achieve high levels of productivity. Remember to use humor as a tool rather than a weapon. One should laugh with others rather than laugh at others, because it builds confidence, brings people together, and pokes fun at our common dilemmas. If one laughs at others, it will destroy confidence, reduce the potential of teamwork, and hurt one’s credibility. It is important to use humor as a positive political tool. It is also good to laugh at oneself to set the tone at work that one should take one’s job seriously but oneself lightly (Paulson, 1989, p. 1). For example, one should share funny (perhaps not so funny when they happened) experiences related to one’s successes and failures. Laughing at ourselves is the best way to show that we are not perfect all the time; we are human beings. If we make mistakes, not

Deaf Studies IV
at the company’s expense, we ought to laugh at them. A sense of humor can add an important touch of humanity to one’s life and work.

**How to Incorporate Humor and Positive Political Skills: Tactics, Techniques, and Tips**

Some tactics, techniques, and tips related to humor in the workplace have already been mentioned; however, there are more ways to cultivate one’s sense of humor, humor style, choices of humor, and appropriate use of humor. In order to achieve a humorous style, one must practice and develop self-confidence. One needs to make sense of one’s sense of humor. One needs to explore the nature and nurture of humor by helping oneself learn, practice, and apply skills for tapping that sense of humor. (The HUMOR Project has three goals. This is one of them.) It takes time to develop and integrate humor and positive political skills at work. One needs to have a self-interest when developing a humorous style. It is one’s self-driven motivation, creativity, and focus on these particular skills that help develop them, and no one can enhance them except oneself.

There are tactics we need to follow to prevent malicious feelings or resistance among workers. Following are some do’s and don’ts: The appropriate and timely use of humor is crucial. Unfortunately, not all humor works at all times. Sarcastic humor may work with close friends but not with workers. It can exacerbate anxiety among employees when an employer makes sarcastic remarks about one’s work. It does not establish trust.

The use of ethnic humor has never been kind and is especially untenable nowadays. Using such “humor,” whether intentionally or unintentionally, reflects one’s bias or prejudice, unless one uses one’s own ethnic background to make fun. Oftentimes I give presentations on humor to other organizations. I usually forewarn my audiences that I do make fun of my own religion and nationality. For instance, I tell them about how I became deaf:

*When I got spinal meningitis at 8 months old, I got very sick.*
*Most Jewish mothers give a sick person “Jewish Penicillin,” which is otherwise known as chicken soup. My mother panicked and forgot to give me some chicken soup. That’s how I became deaf.*

At one time I used the ethnic joke:

*Why does a Polish audiologist use two head phones on a deaf person? Answer: The Polish audiologist wants a second opinion.*

But, I have been criticized about my Polish jokes because they offended many Polish people. So I eliminated the word “Polish.”
The use of obscene or profane jokes at work can diminish one’s credibility or provoke thoughts about sexual harassment. On one occasion, I was highly criticized by several friends when I used a vulgar, highly graphic joke at a deaf Jewish convention. The joke was tasteless for this particular audience even though its punchline was based on sign language.

It is important for one to be sensitive to one’s audience when using humor. Humor can be funny if you and others are having fun. It is more important to have fun than it is to be funny. We need to draw the line on humor when talking to certain groups.

There are several ways to cultivate one’s sense of humor. One needs to be sincere. One should be honest and frank about oneself when making remarks or telling jokes or other personal anecdotes. One needs to be comfortable when using humor at work. It is important to know to whom you are talking when using humor. It helps to become aware of one’s surroundings before making any remarks or jokes. Becoming humorous is like taking that first swim of the season: big toe first, then submerge oneself up to the ankle, then the thigh, and, when comfortable, dive in (Ross, 1992, p. 80).

One can use self-ridiculing humor to enhance others’ attraction and confidence. For example, one admits mistakes at work and makes fun of oneself to lighten up others’ mistakes. It helps to laugh with someone who makes a mistake rather than to laugh at them. For example, if someone signs poorly, you can help this person’s signing by laughing together about the poor signs, but do not ridicule the person.

A charismatic person can attract others. Charismatic leaders are often well-liked and respected by others. It builds one’s charisma when one jokes about things to put them in perspective. Former President Ronald Reagan was a charismatic leader, and people loved his humor when he made fun of his age, his memory, and his Hollywood background. During his second debate with his opponent, Walter Mondale, Reagan was asked whether his age was an issue in the campaign (Helitzer, 1987, p. 27). His response was long remembered and venerated by those of us who advocate the use of humor. He replied, “Well, I am not going to make age an issue in this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent’s youth and inexperience” (Ross, 1992, p. 81). Reagan won because Mondale could not top his remark. Charismatic leaders are good communicators; they create rapport with those they need to reach, and they have a well-developed sense of humor (Ross, 1992, p. 80). We need to cultivate our inner skill, our charisma.

Comedy is a mysterious and unexplored art (Klein, 1988, p. 86). In comedy, to make something funny to others, one must think it’s funny.
can cut out cartoons that are related to one's occupation, favorite pastime, interests, etc., then personalize the cartoon by inserting a friend's name or initials. I have used cartoons to make fun of some health food products, whose company I work for part time. I've put them in my business newsletter to all of my clients and distributors.

When I end my presentation, "Wit and Humor in the Deaf Community," I use the "I LOVE YOU" handshape along with this picture (Appendix A).

Share a joke with a friend first before trying it at work to save embarrassment or a blunder. Your friends will not belittle or intimidate you, but let you know whether your attempt at humor was funny or not. We need to remember the AT&T rule: Humor should be Appropriate, Timely, & Tasteful (Ross, 1992, p. 83). There are a variety of ways to express humor; one will lose nothing but gain a lot by leaving tasteless humor out of the workplace.

Some people use humor to relieve their high-tech anxiety. One commercial on television made by IBM used Charlie Chaplin to ridicule machines, not to promote them. Some use humor to cope with their insecurities or inabilities to help one rationalize the working environment. For instance, if one generally has problems with a computer, a poster of a duck hitting the computer keys might ease one's anxiety (Appendix B).

Conclusion: Further Readings and Suggestions

It is in your own self-interest to be able to incorporate humor and positive political skills to achieve a happy working environment. As previously recommended, one should use the AT&T rule to avoid embarrassment, self-deprecation, loss of confidence of others, and credibility. It takes practice and a sense of timing to have an appropriate and effective humor style. Also, one should be able to integrate humor and positive political skills while communicating with particular people. One may keep a record of all their jokes, funny anecdotes, cartoons, etc. for future use. One should be comfortable and skillful when exercising humor and positive political skills. One should be able to reorganize the work place to a fun place!

Further readings and suggestions include: a subscription to the HUMOR Project's newsletter, Laughing Matters; reading comic books or cartoons in newspapers or books; attending workshops on communication, humor, and positive political skill development; and continue practicing jokes, personal anecdotes, and funny stories with friends before presenting them to work. There are no shortcuts to having fun, being funny, or creating humor at work. It is a deadly seriously funny business.
Resources

1. The HUMOR Project
   Saratoga Institute
   110 Spring Street
   Saratoga Springs, NY 12866
   (518) 587-8770
   (They host “The Positive Power of Humor and Creativity Conference” annually.)

2. World of Comedy and Humor
   The New School for Social Research
   Hunter College
   Charles Lindner
   5 Tudor City Place
   New York, NY 10017

3. Robert Orben
   1200 North Nash Street #1122
   Arlington, VA 22209
   (703) 522-3666

4. Comedy Magazine
   5444 Bay Center Drive
   Suite 215
   Tampa, FL 33609

5. Humor and Cartoon Markets
   Writer’s Digest Books
   F & W Publications
   1507 Dana Avenue
   Cincinnati, OH 45207
   (This 1993 edition can be found in any Crown Books store.)
Appendix B

"HIT ANY KEY TO CONTINUE"
References


