



Use Humor To Ease Workplace Tension

Most business executives aren't trained as improvisational comedians. But they should be.

At least that's John Sweeney's opinion. As owner of Brave New Workshop Theatre in Minneapolis, Sweeney uses improvisational techniques to teach businesspeople to brainstorm more creatively and use humor to persuade.

"Humor works as a communication lubricant," said Sweeney, author of "Innovation at the Speed of Laughter." He added, "It relaxes people and makes a message more acceptable to the receiver."

Deliver a point with humor and it pries open listeners' minds, Sweeney says. They are more apt to consider your idea if they're smiling when they hear it.

Even if you don't think you're naturally funny, you can still lace your comments with gentle humor. The key is putting business issues in perspective and exaggerating to make a point, according to Sweeney.

If you're pushing your staff to work overtime for a product launch, for example, remind the team what matters most. After urging your employees to give 100% for the next

John Sweeney



■ Brave New Workshop Theatre

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two weeks, you might add, "Oh, and I don't want any divorces over this."

"A little humor indicates that business is important, but not more important than seeing your employees as human beings," Sweeney said. "After emphasizing that everyone must hit their sales goals, you might say, 'And one more thing: If anyone misses your kid's soccer game, you're fired.'"

Self-deprecation goes a long way to endear you to others and make your weaknesses less glaring, Sweeney says. If you catch yourself barking orders or fretting too much, say, "I know I'm Type A++."

Poke fun at yourself and you lead others to take themselves less seri-

ously too. Well-timed humor helps you lighten the stress of high-stakes situations. Workers can withstand pressure if their leader adopts a light tone.

"Instead of hammering your team on how it isn't making its goals, make fun of it," Sweeney said. "You can say, 'Because of our slow progress, I've decided to double — no, make that triple — your goals.' People hear that and it's like half-time at a football game: It lets the steam out."

You can also direct your humor at aggressive competitors to acknowledge your employees' efforts in battling a formidable rival. Mock announcements such as "I just heard they're giving a Ferrari to every new customer" can give your hard-charging workers a chance to laugh and catch their breath.

Sweeney prefers "serendipitous humor" over forced jokes. Short, improvised comments work best, especially when something unexpected happens like the lights go out during your speech or a bird keeps squawking outside your window.

"The best humor refers to something everyone has experienced," he said. **Morey Stettner**