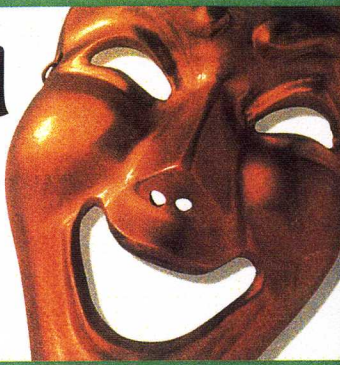


Humor In A Time Of Tension



Fun is always an important element of any meeting, according to Joel Zeff, a comedian and speaker based in Dallas. In these times, however, with the memories of terrorist attacks lingering, the fear of layoffs ever-present and war under way, humor is needed more than ever, he said.

"We all have a lot of serious issues to deal with right now, but we need to laugh, too," he explained. "Humor brings people together, it is very humanizing, and it helps us share our fears and anxieties in a way that allows us to relax for a little while."

Corporations are facing especially trying times as they deal with mergers, layoffs, slumping profits and other issues while also trying to fight low morale, malaise and low energy, Zeff said. Through his speaking engagements for such firms as Radio Shack, Sprint, First Data and Alcon Laboratories, he works to energize and motivate employees. But, most important of all, he said, is getting them to laugh.

"It's not always easy," he admitted. "One time, I spoke to a group right after the president of the company had just found out that they had lost their biggest client. He announced this to the group, and you could definitely feel the tension in the room. I knew I had to relieve that stress level before I went into my keynote address, so I made some jokes about the situation that allowed everyone to laugh and take a deep breath."

He explained that humor has to be done right to be effective, however. "A lot of people don't know when they are going over the line with remarks intended to be humorous," he said. "You have to be careful how you handle these tense situations; the jokes have to be positive and supportive."

Although the laughter often starts with the opening jokes that are on-topic, the humor gets most intense when meeting participants are able to laugh at themselves or with their fellow workers. Using improvisational exer-

cises that usually involve bringing top-level executives, managers and employees on stage, Zeff is able to get them to focus on issues involving communication, productivity, teamwork and creativity.

A key element to the success of Zeff's programs is getting the people at the highest levels of the company to show that they are good sports. He has gotten CEOs to imitate giraffes and vice presidents to do belly dances in front of their employees, all in good fun.

"It's very interactive," he said. "I use improvisational techniques that are great teaching tools. Getting people up on the stage and involved in the performance is very energizing for the group. It's great for the employees to see their managers or the company owner having fun—it humanizes these people and helps create a powerful bond. When you see your manager take a risk up in front of a room full of people, it can't help but bring you closer."

Even when companies are doing well, the need to motivate remains high. That's why firms like Stampin Up!, a manufacturer and distributor of decorative rubber stamps and scrapbooking supplies based in Salt Lake City, brought Zeff in as a speaker for the annual leadership meeting in January. The business has been doing very well, with sales increasing since Sept. 11, 2001, as people have become more focused on preserving family histories. But continued success is dependant on an energetic direct sales force.

"We had a very intense first-day program involving about 800 of our distributors in the morning, and he spoke in the afternoon," said Linda Hansen, training facilitator. "He brought about 15 of our leaders on the stage, including the CEO and the vice president of one of our companies, and he really got people moving and laughing. He was absolutely delightful, and he was just what we needed."

Zeff said the ultimate best result he can

Photo Courtesy Stampin Up! Leadership Convention



achieve is to have the audience leave the room happy and ready to get back to work. "There's nothing better than to see people walking out of a meeting room laughing or having a smile on their face," he remarked.

§ M.B.

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