

# Humor Works in the Workplace

By Nick Arnette

Now maybe the one place you think humor is not appropriate is the workplace. They hired you to *work*, not goof off, right? But the workplace may be where humor is needed the most.

Chris Robert, a management professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia, says both sharing something funny and enjoying someone else's funny story can boost moods at the office. Maybe you already knew that, or are thinking to yourself, "Well, that makes sense." But it gets even better. Professor Robert's study indicates a strong link between mood and work-place performance and outcomes. That's right: *Funny makes for good business*. It's a new take on the colloquialism "funny business." "Note to self: Try to leave things I need done in the hands of happy people!"

Perhaps one of the most notable examples of a company that incorporates humor into its business model is Southwest Airlines. I travel a lot with my work, and, as a passenger, I've consistently had good experiences with Southwest.

The ticket agents, the pilots, and the flight attendants are typically cheery and often have something funny to say. I remember once on a bumpy landing the flight attendant got on the intercom and said, "Whoa, big fella." What were gasps turned into laughs because the flight attendant defused the situation with humor. On another trip we had to sit on the tarmac for more than an hour due to mechanical problems. The flight attendants led a trivia game until the plane was fixed. The prizes were peanuts (literally), but no one cared. The flight attendants turned an irksome situation into something fun.

Here are a few of my favorite jokes reportedly told by employees during Southwest flights:

"Hello, everyone. We have a first time flyer on board today—and it is also their 50th birthday!" After everybody cheers, the flight attendant continues, "Will everyone please wish the captain a happy birthday."

"Your seat cushions can be used for flotation. In the event of an emergency water landing, please take them with our compliments."

"As you exit the plane, please make sure to gather all of your belongings. Anything left behind will be distributed evenly among the flight attendants. Please do not leave children or spouses."

"Weather at our destination is 50 degrees with some broken clouds, but they'll try to have them fixed before we arrive."

Southwest employees use humor because the airline encourages it. They realize humor = happy employees = happy customers = good business.

This great attitude at Southwest Airlines started at the top, with Herb Kelleher, co-founder and former CEO of Southwest Airlines. He said Southwest looks for a sense of humor in the people they hire. During their interviews, prospective employees are asked to share how they've used their sense of humor to get out of embarrassing situations or to tell the funniest thing that's ever happened to them. Kelleher was asked if managers who encourage a sense of humor run the risk of not being taken seriously. He responded, "That comes from the old hierarchal theory of management, which says you have to show you're in charge by walking around acting like a brick all day. You don't persuade people you're serious by your demeanor. It's what you do that defines whether you're a leader or not, not how you appear."

That's right. *It's what you do that counts, not how you appear.* So not only is humor good for workers, it can be a powerful leadership tool for managers, too. Some of our most loved leaders exhibited a wonderful sense of humor. Lady Nancy Astor said to former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, "If you were my husband, I'd poison your tea." Churchill responded, "Nancy, if I were your husband, I'd drink it."

Former President Ronald Reagan, who had a terrific sense of humor, was known as "The Great Communicator." After being shot during an assassination attempt, he told his wife Nancy, "Honey, I forgot to duck!" This put the entire nation at ease. People's response was, "Ron still has his wits about him. He is still in control of the situation." We had a sense that everything was going to be okay.

The person in charge sets the tone for everyone else. If the boss laughs, everyone laughs. If you're the boss, don't be afraid to poke a little fun at yourself once in a while. It generates trust, builds rapport, and fosters an attitude of teamwork. Using a sense of humor to manage and lead people is a great way to diminish the "us versus them" gap in the workplace.

The preceding article is an excerpt from *Me, We and Glee: How to have a great attitude, work as a team and keep your sense of humor*, by Nick Arnette. Known as *The Feel Good Funny Guy*, Arnette is a popular keynote speaker at business meetings throughout the United States and Canada. You can contact Nick Arnette at [www.NickArnette.com](http://www.NickArnette.com), email: [nick@nickarnette.com](mailto:nick@nickarnette.com)

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