

Laugh, Listen, and Learn

If your training suffers because trainees don't always listen to your message and remember it, then laughter may be the best medicine.

The first "Training 101" article this month describes how to use humor for more effective training.

One-liners, inside jokes, and carefully prepared "spontaneous" remarks can help you break the ice and "connect" with trainees. Here are tips on how to give trainees the last laugh, and some specific ways in which humor can make difficult material easier to understand. The author also includes a list of ready-to-use ad libs to help trainers overcome unexpected classroom difficulties.

Of course, you can't knock 'em dead with your wit if you can't get 'em to listen to what you're saying in the first place. When it comes to listening skills, many managers and other employees need a lot of work. The second "Training 101" article describes three levels of listening skills—hearing, analyzing, and empathizing—and what goes into each.

Giving Trainees the Last Laugh

By Michael Iapoco, founder of Michael Iapoco Associates, a humor consulting firm at 180 Los Angeles Boulevard, San Anselmo, CA 94960. Iapoco is also the author of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Boardroom: Using Humor in Business Speaking*, which was published in 1988 by John Wiley & Sons.

"Any joke that makes you feel good is likely to help you think more broadly and creatively," said Alice M. Isen in a *New York Times* article. Isen is a psychologist at the University of Maryland in Baltimore.

"The mind associates more broadly when [a person is] feeling good after hearing a joke. And the more ideas present in your mind, the more ways you see to connect things; you're able to see more solutions."

John Cleese, the comedian, actor, and highly successful creator of corporate training videos, perhaps made the same point more directly to trainers in an article he wrote for the *Wall Street Journal*.

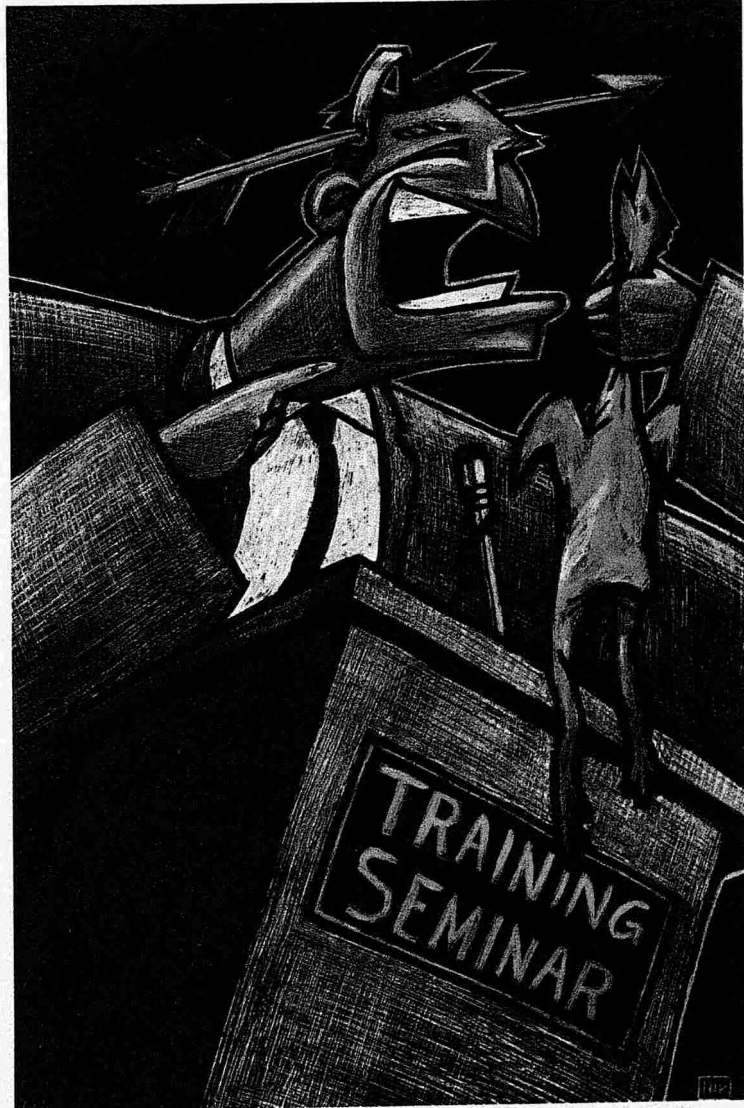
"Our behavior is seldom changed by a simple verbal instruction," said Cleese. "Such instruction goes from one intellect to another and does not affect us at the gut level from which our behavior arises. As the old Chinese proverb has it, 'Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand.' The point of comedy is that it involves an audience."

Overcoming the fear of humor

So why don't more professional trainers make use of such a valuable learning aid? I'm always amazed when an otherwise confident and competent instructor is hesitant to slip in a light touch that could make a lesson easier to understand, make a class more willing to listen, or simply break the ice with a new group. The most common reason?

"I'm just not a comedian."

Of course you're not! And the fact that you're not perceived as a comedian actually works to your advantage. It has to do with your audience's expectations.



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Consider the typical classroom situation. People have attended this training session or seminar because they need the information you have to offer (or because their bosses forced them to come.) They perceive you as being there to deliver a basically serious message. They're not demanding entertainment—they're probably just hoping to wake up refreshed when it's over.

If you choose to attempt a bit of humor, the trainees are usually so relieved (if not grateful) that they're very willing to give you a chuckle just because you made the effort.

And a chuckle is all you need. Some people, basing their ideas on what they see of professional comics, think that if a joke doesn't get a huge laugh, it's a failure. Wrong. You're not a comedian. You aren't trying to get big laughs. Your purpose is simply to connect with your listeners and get your serious points across more effectively.

Ways trainers can use humor

While humor is useful almost any time you want to get a point across, it especially comes in handy when

you're presenting material that's very difficult, technical, or otherwise deadly. Sometimes all it takes is a humorous example to get people to relax and remember.

For instance, a client of mine at a large chemical company was trying to explain bio-engineering. "One aspect of bio-engineering," he said, "involves taking bacteria and turning it into useful substances. Think of it as the opposite of our company cafeteria, where they start with food substances and turn them into bacteria."

Granted, that would not exactly knock 'em dead in Las Vegas, but it served to keep his listeners alert during a lesson in which their undivided attention was essential.

Another effective technique my bio-engineering friend used in that same presentation was to give a humorous example of what could go wrong, if the information or procedure being taught were not followed:

"We were experimenting with using bacteria as a form of anti-freeze, but we didn't follow the process I just described. So in one test, the engine ran smoothly, but the radiator grew mold."

Perhaps the most valuable use of humor is simply in "breaking the ice" and connecting yourself with the group at the beginning of class. One trainer I know opened a particularly difficult lesson by saying, "I want you to hold your questions for a while. For the next 10 minutes I'm going to talk and you're going to listen, but if you finish before I do, please raise your hand."

A simple trick for establishing rapport through humor—without resorting to a one-liner—is to just use the same "catch phrase" in recurring situations so that it becomes an inside joke.

For example, if you wanted to recognize the group's reluctance to start on a difficult section of material, you could look at your watch and say, "Well, it's too late to start anything now"—at 9 a.m. Then, at any time during the duration of the class, a repetition of that phrase will provoke knowing laughter. . . and bring the group closer together.

What if they don't laugh?

What should you do if a joke falls completely flat? Nothing. Just move on to your next point. A non-comedian has a much better chance of pretending it never happened than of "saving" it with a follow-up comment (such as, "What is this, an audience or an oil painting?" or "These are the jokes!").

Such comments will only serve to call attention to the fact that your joke bombed. If you simply continue with your lesson, you'll give the class other things to think about and they'll quickly forget your little mistake and not hold it against you. Leave the "savers" for the pros. They work for Johnny Carson on "The Tonight Show" because he's Johnny Carson and the audience expects it from him.

How to act spontaneous, even if you're not

Any audience shows a greater appreciation for humor that seems to come out of the moment. That's why the most effective way to deliver a funny comment is to make it appear spontaneous. It's particularly helpful when you're faced with a

Prepare To Be Spontaneous

Here are some "ad-libs" to keep in mind if you should need a quick response to an unexpected situation. If you're not comfortable with these, make up your own. Practically anything you say will get a laugh when you appear to be ad-libbing.

Microphone feedback

- "That concludes the musical portion of the program."
- "Don't be alarmed; this is only a test."

Lights go out or flicker

- "I forgot to mention that we have a curfew tonight."
- "I told them not to ignore that final bill."

Lights come back on

- "Everyone stay where you are—I'm taking another head count!"

You lose your place or pause too long

- "I just wanted to wait a moment in case any of you have lost your place."
- "If any of you have heard me speak before, please go on to my next thought and I'll catch up."

You garble a sentence

- "Later on I'll pass out a printed translation of that sentence."
- "By the way, the rest of my speech will be dubbed in English."

When people are talking during your presentation

- "By the way, feel free to talk among yourselves."
- "Excuse me for talking while you're interrupting."

“cold” audience—such as a classroom group on your first morning together. The key to loosening up an unresponsive group is to gain its respect; a sharp ad lib can often do it best.

I'll be the first to admit that it sounds much easier than it is. Few people are naturally witty ad-libbers, but anyone can learn to appear spontaneous—and that works just as well as the real thing.

Several little tricks can make a funny remark seem spontaneous. For example, look for opportunities to make reference to your physical surroundings: such as the size, decor, or temperature of the room. Visit the classroom before you give the lesson, learn something about the people in the class, or find out what “hot” news people in the company have been talking about lately. Any reference to current company gossip will get you immediately accepted as part of the group—Bob Hope used to do it at every military base he visited.

When you have just a little of that kind of information in advance, it's easy to prepare an ad lib that will convince any audience that you thought of it right on the spot. And remember, an ad lib always impresses listeners more than an obviously planned joke, so it doesn't have to be quite as funny to get a good reaction!

Prepare for the unexpected

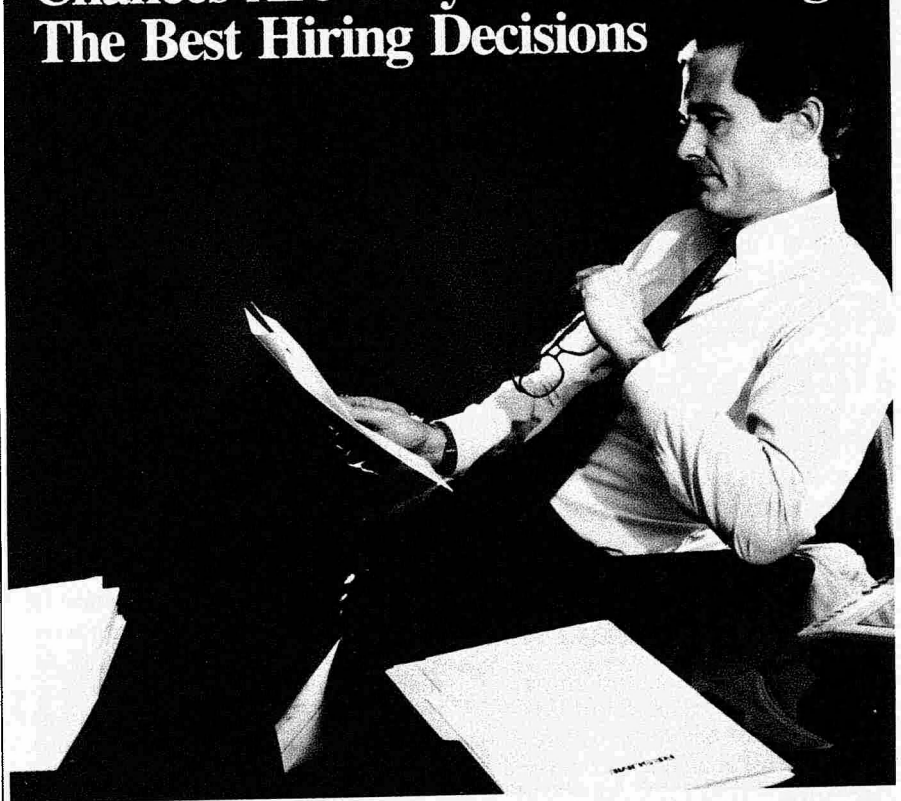
The most dramatic way to impress an audience as a “spontaneous” wit is to have comments ready for unusual circumstances. Anyone who makes presentations on a regular basis knows that things never go just the way we intend. The lights go out, a slide projector jams, a podium topples over—little things like that. Don't ignore such obvious distractions. When something interrupts your presentation, it's up to you to regain people's attention and put them at ease.

A comedian friend of mine took a brilliant approach to that problem. He made a list of everything he could think of that might create a distraction while he was on stage in a nightclub—microphones going dead, glasses breaking, people talk-

ing too loudly, and even buses roaring on the street outside the club. He then sat down and wrote a “spontaneous” comment for each situation. By preparing in that way, he was always able to turn potentially disastrous situations to his advantage, consistently delighting audiences with his “ad libs” for every occasion.

You can do the same. Think of all the things you dread having happen during a presentation. You can turn any of them into a positive thing if you're prepared to be spontaneous. To start you off, the sidebar (“Prepare To Be Spontaneous”) lists a few situations that might occur and some comments that might be appropriate.

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Hearing, Analyzing, Empathizing, and Succeeding in Management

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"Didn't you hear what I said to you?"

Does that sound familiar? Listening is one of the most important communication skills we have; studies show that about 50 percent of our communicating time is spent listening. But despite all that practice, most people's listening skills are underdeveloped.

Success as a manager depends in part on the ability to listen effectively and to provide accurate information to customers and staff. Managers' faulty listening behaviors fall into five categories:

- The manager totally misses what is being said.
- The manager hears what is being said but does not understand.
- The manager hears what is said but interprets a different meaning than was originally intended.
- The manager listens accurately but later changes the original meaning.
- The manager listens accurately but then forgets.

Hearing, analyzing, and empathizing are three related but different types of listening. All are important for managers to master. They build upon each other and use somewhat different skills, skills that are imperative for the success of any organization. Managers must take the lead in demonstrating effective listening skills and in helping their employees to develop them as well.

Do you hear what I hear?

Hearing is the most fundamental type of listening, the type upon which analyzing and empathizing are built. Hearing may be defined as the ability to receive a message exactly as it was sent.

The most important quality of

hearing is accuracy. Hearing effectively involves receiving and comprehending a message just as it was sent, without distortion. Hearing is a relatively simple skill, but people still make mistakes at this level.

To hear accurately, a manager has to perform several complex behaviors almost instantaneously:

- receive the sounds as transmitted
- translate the sounds into the words and meanings that were intended
- understand the relationship of those words in the sentences spoken
- note the relevant nonverbal cues that reinforce the message.

Let's get analytical

The second type of listening is analyzing. To analyze is to discern the purpose of the speaker; analyzing uses critical or creative judgment. This is a difficult type of listening, because it involves a cluster of high-order intellectual skills.

Suppose someone at the office makes this complaint: "I have noticed that several of the secretaries are getting back late from lunch. Do you think you could send out a memorandum reminding them that lunch is an hour, not an hour and a half?"

The manager who knows how to analyze critically would respond in this way: "I'm afraid the memorandum might create a problem. How many secretaries are late? Who are they? Let's do some more thinking about the situation before we send out a memorandum."

In contrast, a manager who has heard but who has not analyzed critically might respond in this way: "Good idea. I'll get it out today. I can't stand people who waste company time."

The most essential quality of analyzing is analytical judgment—understanding the real purpose of the message and responding critically or creatively, as the purpose requires. Analyzing involves these five steps:

- hearing the message accurately
- identifying the stated purpose
- inferring the unstated purpose
- determining if a critical or

creative judgment is required

- responding accordingly.

Note that analyzing begins with hearing but moves far beyond that basic level. Analyzing focuses on the purpose of the message. The understanding that results is deeper and more complex than the comprehension gained through hearing.

Putting yourself in their shoes

The most complex type of listening is empathizing. Empathizing is being fully present to the other person, knowing what was said and what was left unsaid, and responding with supportive acceptance. It is an art as well as a skill.

Suppose a co-worker from another department makes this comment at a coffee break: "That boss of mine is impossible."

One who knows how to empathize might respond like this: "You sound frustrated. Care to talk about it?"

Contrast that supportive response with this insensitive turn-off: "They are all the same. Have a martini at lunch and forget all about her."

As an art, empathizing is difficult to analyze and dissect, but it does seem to involve these stages:

- hearing the message accurately
- listening to sense the unstated purpose
- withholding judgment
- seeing the world from the perspective of the speaker
- sensing the unspoken words
- responding with acceptance.

Empathizing builds upon hearing and listening, but extends significantly beyond them in its nature and impact. The focus of empathizing is on the person, not the message or purpose. The understanding that comes from empathizing is at the deepest level of insight. By being fully present to the other, the manager has deepened his or her awareness of the speaker.

"Training 101" is edited by **Catherine M. Petrini**. Send your short articles for consideration to *Training 101*, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.