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Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. Its mission is to Partner with Clients for Success in Leadership Succession. For more information, contact peabody@stybelpeabody.com

Are You Funny Enough to Be an Effective Leader?

A New Way of Looking at Sense of Humor.

It is a Washington, D.C., tradition: Once a year, journalists and politicians dine together and take turns poking fun at each other. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Democratic President Joe Biden's attendance at the 2022 White House Correspondents' Association dinner. The article noted that Donald Trump, Jimmy Carter, and Richard Nixon refused to attend these events. Republican President Ronald Regan, on the other hand, was so committed to the event, that he phoned in to trade jokes while recovering from an assassination attempt. (2022).

We view humor as an important leadership tool. Indeed, we have a system for evaluating sense of humor when we are doing retained searches or Talent Scouting for client companies.

Humor as a Leadership Tool

Priest and Swain researched the impact of humor on subordinate perception of leadership. In two studies at the United States Military Academy, students were asked to recollect particularly effective or ineffective leaders and then rate them according to their perceived sense of humor.

In the first study, they found that leaders who expressed warm humor were rated most highly. In the second study, participants were asked to recall particularly good or bad leaders. Good leaders were rated higher in humor when controlling for intelligence and physical ability, (2002).

Romero and Pescosolido (2008) described research showing that humor at work produces greater psychological and physiological energy among team members. Smith and Kojashteh (2014) reviewed the research on humor in the workplace and concluded:

“Humor is an organizational tool that when used appropriately can be effective in facilitating a better working environment. Organizational benefits include increased group cohesion, reduced conflict, and increased leadership effectiveness.”

An Ordinal Approach to Looking at Humor.

Most people look at the sense of humor from a binary perspective: “This person has (does not have) a sense of humor.

We look at the sense of humor from an ordinal perspective. When we evaluate job candidates, we examine their humor on a scale of 0 (cold) to 10 (warm).

A 0 sense of humor means that candidates and references cannot recall any time when the candidate demonstrated a sense of humor. A 1 sense of humor would be

described with terms like “biting,” “sarcastic,” and “caustic.” It pokes fun at others and invites contemptuous laughter. The comedian Chris Rock would be on the 1 side of humor.

A 10 would be the highest level of warm humor. This type of humor invites listeners to laugh with the speaker.

Abraham Lincoln was famous for his 10-level humor. As a rising young politician, he used to pepper speeches with sarcastic remarks about opponents. This colder approach got the audience laughing but enraged his targets. After being challenged by one opponent to a duel, Lincoln decided to raise the warmth level of his humor.

Gentle Self-Deprecation.

For example, Lincoln was once accused of being two-faced about an issue. His response was, “If I were two-faced, would I be wearing *this* one?” This is a 10-level sense of humor in that it invites the audience to laugh WITH the speaker and not AT someone. (Carwardine, 2017)

What Is 5 Humor?

A 5 level is simultaneously warm and cold. Smith & Kojashteh (2014) demonstrated that 5-level humor rapidly increases team cohesiveness. It is simultaneously sarcastic and warm. Here's an example:

“Susan! I’m both delighted and surprised to see you back at work from your vacation in Hawaii. Delighted because you add value so much value to our team. Surprised because I thought you might have the good sense to give up on our Minneapolis winters.”

Selecting Leaders with the “Right” Sense of Humor

In our retained search work, we ask candidates an open-ended question: “How would you describe your sense of humor, and would you tell me a favorite piece of humor you enjoy using at work?”

The candidate’s reaction to the question often gives an indication of what side of the humor scale they are on.

We also ask references to comment upon the candidate’s sense of humor and to think about a joke he/she made.

Summary and Conclusions.

Humor is an important leadership issue. Is a sense of humor innate or can one be trained to have a 10-level sense of humor?

Using your mobile device, create a file of humor that appeals to you. For inspiration, look for books about the wit of famous men and women you admire.

Corporate culture can also be placed on a humor continuum.

References

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Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. partners with companies for success in leadership succession.

Core services revolve around retained search limited to Board Directors, CEOs, CFOs, and COOs; leadership coaching at this level; and C-Suite Outplacement.

Stybel Peabody also provides Talent Scout services to help companies create a pipeline of valued people for the future.

Business leaders wishing a free 30-minute consult can contact:

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