



THE LEADERSHIP QUICKBRIEF™

Helping You Succeed with the Total Leadership Framework™ (TLF)

Need to Ease the Tension? Don't Underestimate the Power of Humor

When Shakespeare wrote his tragedies, he used a technique that later came to be known as comic relief ... a brief humorous scene, suddenly thrust into the drama that gave the audience an unexpected and welcome break from the tension of the play. He used it in *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*. The humor to our twenty-first century ears is sometimes lost, but it was always relevant, and it served its purpose well: it relieved tension, and it helped the audience absorb the greater tension still to follow.

Shakespeare teaches us something important: just as comic relief is integral to great drama, so comic relief is present in great leadership. Humor didn't dominate Shakespeare's dramas, but it was vital, and in your leadership, it is an important tool.

Humor isn't necessarily indispensable to great leadership, but it is an enormous asset. By relieving tension, it lubricates sound thinking and creative problem-solving ... and *that* is indispensable.

Next time you watch *Hamlet*, watch for the gravediggers' scene; the comic relief is so important that the lead gravedigger is usually played by a well-known actor or comedian – Billy Crystal played it in the 1996 film version.

Why does humor matter?

Humor in leadership suggests several qualities:

- The ability to laugh at oneself. Leaders who don't take themselves too seriously are easier to be around.
- The ability to retain a positive outlook, despite the gloominess of the circumstances ... injecting humor is perhaps the surest indication that you haven't given in to the gloominess.
- The ability to change moods with levity.

A sign of your authenticity

The ability to laugh at oneself may well be the greatest sign of authenticity. There's something appealing about someone whose humor is mostly directed at himself or herself, and not at others. This self-deprecating humor is actually a sign of strength and confidence: it takes a secure leader to acknowledge mistakes, foibles and weaknesses, and it takes an even more secure leader to laugh about them. There's a reason we put humor alongside communication in the Character side of the Total Leadership Framework™: the kind of humor you espouse reflects the kind of character that shapes your leadership.

A mood changer

A sense of humor changes moods. "Among those whom I like or admire," the poet W.H. Auden once said, "I can find no common denominator; but among those whom I love, I can: all of them made me laugh." And perhaps that's the difference between the great leaders we admire and the ones we love: the ones we love, we love because they make us laugh, and because they make us laugh, we want

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to be around them. When Republican President Ronald Reagan was wounded during an assassination attempt, as he was lying on the operating table, he quipped to the surgeons surrounding him, “I sure hope you all are Republicans.” We are endeared to someone who in the heat of the moment can lighten our emotions.

Abraham Lincoln

The historian Doris Kearns Goodwin describes Abraham Lincoln as possessing “a remarkable sense of humor and a gift for storytelling that allowed him to defuse tensions and relax his colleagues at difficult moments.

Many of his stories, taken from his seemingly limitless stock, were directly applicable to a point being argued. Many were self-deprecatory, all were hilarious. When he began one of them, his ‘eyes would sparkle with fun,’ one old-timer remembered, ‘and when he reached the point in his narrative which invariably evoked the laughter of the crowd, nobody’s enjoyment was greater than his.’”

Even his instructions were humorous. Exasperated with General George McClellan’s paralysis and indecisiveness in engaging the Confederate forces, he sent him a letter that read: “My dear McClellan: If you are not using the army, I should like to borrow it for a short while. Yours respectfully, Abraham Lincoln.”

How to cultivate a sense of humor

You may not think of yourself of as a particularly humorous person, but we assure you that it is a skill you can develop. Think of it in terms of **pitfalls to avoid** and **habits to develop**.

Avoid these pitfalls:

- Avoid jokes that have any sexual innuendoes. They are invariably demeaning to women.
- Avoid making jokes on others; make them on yourself. Lincoln’s humor was self-deprecatory. Humor that makes fun of others is not endearing; it’s intimidating. It destroys trust. If you make a joke on someone and others hear you, they will wonder when their turn will come. There’s a fine line between friendly teasing and cutting humor; if you’re in doubt, don’t cross it.

Develop these habits:

- Collect good jokes, especially those you can use to illustrate something you want them to remember. Be systematic about it. Create an electronic and hardcopy folder to store them.
- Practice telling them, especially if they are relevant. That was Lincoln’s technique. If they bomb, make a joke of it (“This is when you are supposed to laugh!”), and your ability to laugh at yourself will itself be endearing.
- Practice the art of one-liners that were so much the hallmark of leaders like Reagan and Churchill. These one-liners can be just as effective as a humorous story. When Lady Astor, a nemesis of Churchill’s, said to him at a dinner party, “Winston, if I were married to you,

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I'd put poison in your soup," he shot back with, "Nancy, if I were married to you, I would drink it!" That has as much power as fully drawn-out joke.

- Most of all, have fun with it! Be intentional about it. You'll find yourself smiling a lot more, and that can only be good for your leadership—and for the people you lead.

Antony Bell

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