

Humor Handout for NASCO Institute

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Are you funny? Are you *sure*? As a facilitator, you need to know if you're funny (by which I mean *others* find you funny; it doesn't count if *you* think you're funny). If you aren't and you know it, good for you. Leave the jokes to others. At a minimum, ham-handed humor will disrupt the meeting energy; if you really botch it, you'll undress someone and lose their trust.

However, whether you're the one introducing humor or not, you'll need to know how to work with it, as there's no way you can keep it out of the room...

Just like cops, there's good humor and bad humor. Learning how to encourage the former and limit the latter can go a long way toward improving group dynamics.

Everyone's been at meetings where a well-timed joke cleared the energy and lifted the mood productively. (There isn't, after all, any requirement that meetings have to be grim.) Levity leavens, and who wants a steady diet of low-calorie, flat meetings?

Humor works to the group's advantage when it's gentle, widely accessible, and doesn't interrupt a delicate moment. Laughter can be a terrific antidote for tension or boredom... but it can also be alienating and infuriating. Let's go over some of the warning signs.

It can be awkward when someone is not in on the joke, or worse—someone in the room *is* the joke. Even if the speaker didn't mean it that way, you've got a problem whenever someone feels they are being made fun of. The key here is watching the reactions of the people who spoke just prior to the joke. Do they look amused... or like they have gas? Good humor brings everyone along casually; problematic humor leaves casualties.

If someone looks injured, I think the best thing is to ask them how they're doing. For one thing, you may have misread their reaction. However, assuming you're right about their upset, a follow-up dialog with the Will Rogers wannabe can accomplish a lot. First, you can make sure that the humorist understands what was difficult about their joke. Second, the humorist can explain their intent. Perhaps an apology is in order. (**Trap:** don't get hung up on deciding what was intended. If one says green and the other red, believe them both—explaining to green that red was intended; and explaining to red that it looked like green, which hurts.)

Once, in the course of a weekend workshop, I facilitated a community meeting on the topic of work priorities. All was proceeding smoothly until tension entered the side door with a seemingly innocuous comment about the unattractive look of a screen that had been built to hide the compost pile.

Aesthetics were known to matter greatly to the speaker, and there was a backlog of resentment that surfaced about the perception that this person held a sense of aesthetic superiority. Indeed, the speaker declaimed passionately about the enjoyment she derived from being in the presence of a well-arrayed room, claiming, "It's better than sex." In the silence that followed in the wake of that proclamation, I thought to myself, "I'd like to see your living room," But I didn't say that. Instead, after a pause, I deadpanned, "That's a different workshop."

While I felt the first line was funnier, my alternate still got laughs and gave the group a break in the tension. My first response was dangerous: it could have been heard as mocking the speaker's aesthetic discernment, or a jab at the quality of her love life. Instead, I played my joke off the predictably titillating topic of sex, and proceeded smoothly onto my main task: making sure that the speaker understood the difference between stating their aesthetic preference (the group readily agreed that taste was a legitimate criteria for judging design) and implying that their aesthetic judgment should be deferred to (which some in the group, not surprisingly, were unwilling to do).

At its most devious, jokes are sometimes launched with indirect barbs of negativity. Left unexamined, this kind of comment can poison the atmosphere faster than a stink bomb. If such zingers are allowed, people will learn to be cautious in their comments, lest they become the next target. If, however, the joker is asked if they intended a criticism, either it will be disavowed ("I was only joking"), or it will be brought into the open where it can be dealt with cleanly. Either way, the group will be better positioned to maintain a trusting and productive atmosphere.

Guidelines: stay away from sarcasm and put-down humor (unless you're making fun of yourself). *Especially* if you're the facilitator. During a recent workshop, a volunteer was facilitating a role play about pet policy when someone whined (per their role) that their concerns about pets' feelings had been ignored in the summary. Though the facilitator had done a credible job of capturing most input, they had in fact missed the piece named. Because the whiner had been assigned that personality and given a position known to be difficult for others to embrace, they were not easy to hold energetically. The facilitator let some of their frustration leak through in a sarcastic reply: "I'm sorry you feel that we left out your *important* comments about doggie feelings." This was met by roars of laughter from all who agreed that this was taking canine sensitivity too far. However, the whiner did not laugh. They had been made the mutt of the joke.

Speaking of which, word play—alliteration, puns, comic juxtaposition—is generally safe, though even here you can misstep. Making a light comment (regardless of how clever) right after someone's heartfelt statement is typically a poor choice. The speaker may feel their tender words were upstaged by the joke. Even if the group is eager for a mood shift, it's unwise to offer it until you're confident that the prior comments have found a safe place to land.

As a facilitator, it's important to know your capacity with humor. If you aren't funny, don't use your moments in front of the group for attempts at stand-up comedy. Save it for a mirror, where you can reflect on the facilitator's prime directive—only doing things that help the group's work go more easily. Sometimes your best line is the joke you didn't tell.