

FUNNY BUSINESS

Managers learn to use humor to get their messages across



The Dallas Morning News: David Leeson

Gavin Jerome laughs as April Young tells a joke at the end of a seminar Mr. Jerome held to teach the importance of comedy in the workplace. The seminar was sponsored by the Greater Dallas Chamber of Commerce and Principal Financial Group.

It's 8:15 in the morning, and Gavin Jerome is already sweating. The former stand-up comedian is doing his gig in front of about 100 corporate men and women who've had to battle the construction around Central Expressway in Dallas to get to a seminar about applying humor at work. And, OK, they're taking a little time to warm up.

Not to worry. By the end of the session sponsored by the Greater Dallas Chamber of Commerce and Principal Financial Group, about a dozen of them will be in front of the group themselves, microphones in hand. They'll be delivering jokes and anecdotes they've crafted in small groups.

"Humor is the quickest way to make a connection," Mr. Jerome said later. "In today's business world, the critical factor is creating a friendly environment, whether in sales or in relationships with colleagues. Humor can ease communications."

Consultants are peddling a lot of ideas these days to managers and other professionals hungry for a way to stand

Please see HUMOR on Page 4D.



DIANA KUNDE

CAREER STRATEGIES

HUMOR: TIPS THAT WORK

Former stand-up comedian Gavin Jerome trains businesspeople to employ more humor at work. Here are his tips, in the form of an acronym that spells the word *trouble*, for effective use and for avoiding pitfalls.



Targeting. Every joke has a target. Your best bet is self-deprecating humor. Never pick on the little guy.

Realism. The best humor contains some truth. A good joke is like a rubber band that stretches reality, but not too far.

Obtuse. Don't be.

Understand the joke. That means appreciating the timing, as in Henry Youngman's famous line, "Take my wife . . . please." Don't stumble over the punch line.

Blue humor. It's big trouble at work.

Long jokes. They make listeners impatient.

Expected punch lines. They can kill a joke, because surprise is one of the most important elements of humor.

SOURCE: Gavin Jerome's Comedy College, Des Moines, Iowa

Humor helps corporate managers get their messages across

DIANA KUNDE

Continued from Page 1D.
out in the crowd, improve productivity or enhance teamwork.

Increasingly, humor is being considered part of the toolbox.

In fact, humor is serious business, said Joel Goodman, director of The Humor Project in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., which consults, runs conferences and disseminates materials — all dedicated to the notion that humor can ease stress, spur creativity and even help heal the body's ills.

"Everyone faces stress at work these days. Stress is inevitable. The negative effects don't have to be. Humor can be the white horse that helps us save ourselves," Mr. Goodman said.

The 22-year-old Humor Project has helped train 800,000 businesspeople, educators and health professionals at its annual conferences, said Mr. Goodman, who estimates that hundreds of other consultants and trainers are now conducting humor workshops.

Mr. Jerome, for instance, has been doing his Comedy College seminars for corporations and professional groups for five years. The four-part Dallas session, which cost \$100 per person for Chamber of Commerce firms, was one of the more popular seminars the organization has sponsored, officials said. Attendance averaged about 80, and evaluations were good, said Brent Thomas, manager for Principal in Dallas.

Among those at the session was Mark Walker, a senior design engineer for Titus, which makes air distribution equipment.

"I would have been skeptical about how you'd teach" the use of humor, he said. "But I was pretty pleased with the level of practical how-to's. I have a pretty high standard for that, coming from an engineering background."

Most people who work together already have a storehouse of funny tales and anecdotes, said Dr. Terry Deal, a Vanderbilt University professor and leadership consultant. "I think it just needs to be encouraged," he said.

Some corporations do that very well. The use of humor at Southwest Airlines, whose chief executive officer Herbert D. Kelleher does Elvis impersonations and once arm-wrestled a business rival, helps consistently land the Dallas-based carrier on lists of top places to work. Quad Graphics in Wisconsin and Ben & Jerry's in Vermont also stand out for consciously supporting a sense of workplace playfulness.

But they're in the minority, Dr. Deal said. The recurring complaint in the leadership classes he teaches across the country is that work "just isn't fun anymore," he said.

Laughter is a bonding force as well as a healer, Dr. Deal said. At one workshop, he recalled asking school administrators to work up a short presentation on their organization's culture.

"This one group sat there and argued. People would walk off. Then someone said, 'Wait a minute. This is us. This is our culture.'" The educators then put together a humorous skit about the time they ruined a centennial celebration with infighting. "People were rolling in the aisles. The event healed those scars," Dr. Deal said.

Dallas consultant Ann McGee-Cooper, an expert in creativity, said there's also a link between humor and innovation. "Without question, it's the heartbeat of creativity. Humor is a tool that helps you see things from a different perspective," she said.

But she cautions that humor must be humane to be effective. "Some of the funniest people are people like the late Erma Bombeck who laugh at themselves. Laugh at yourself, at your own frailties."

It's one of the first lessons the Comedy College's Mr. Jerome offers at the Dallas session. He does it by making fun of his hair — cut long in

the back, short in front, brushed high.

"My hair dryer has three speeds: medium, high and fission," he tells the class.

Soon attendees are in small groups, trying to find an amusing way to talk about their own foibles. Catherine Collins, for instance, decides she's a "virtual cook." She collects scores of cookbooks that she reads avidly but often settles on cereal for dinner. Another woman acknowledges that, when alone, she frequently sings the Munchkin song, in Munchkin falsetto, from *The Wizard of Oz*.

The idea, Mr. Jerome said, is for people to draw on their own funny experiences to break the ice at work or to enliven a speech.

Before the session ends, Mr. Jerome will demystify the process of writing and editing humor, explaining standard joke formulas, passing on tips about delivery and timing, generally getting the group laughing.

For Sara Klaasen, client relations manager at Delta Dallas Staffing, laughter is the most important message. "I'm chronically serious about everything by nature," she said. "This increased my awareness of trying to relax and lighten up, that

people will remember you better if you make them feel good."

Mr. Walker, the engineer, agreed. "I believe you've got to start flexing the humor muscle," he said. "I'm not going to be Jerry Seinfeld ... but I've been repeating a few of his jokes around here."

Joking helped set a more relaxed tone at some of Mr. Walker's recent brainstorming meetings, intended to foster innovation by letting ideas flow freely. Although the ideas would later be tested for practicality, technical people are prone to nitpicking right off the bat, thus undermining the creative process, Mr. Walker said.

During one session, Mr. Walker brought in a toy Star Wars "blaster" and put it in the middle of the table. "I told them: 'If you can't stand it any longer, and you have to shoot down someone's idea, you're going to go public with it.'"

The ploy worked, he said. Everyone lightened up.

Career Strategies appears weekly. If there is a career issue you would like to see addressed in this column, write Diana Kunde at The Dallas Morning News, P.O. Box 655237, Dallas, Texas 75265; or fax to (214) 977-8776. Send e-mail to diKunde@aol.com.