

TOPIC/WORKPLACE

He's in funny business

Comic gives humor skills to workers

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West Des Moines, Ia. — Comic Gavin Jerome asked his audience in a hotel conference room here Tuesday for some examples of their "silly human stupid stuff."

Kari McCullough, 28, of Waukee, offered a doozy.

A sales representative, McCullough recently sold a contract for servicing the electronic printers at various branches of Iowa State Bank.

Tuesday morning, she set out to put stickers on all the machines around town under the contract. She deflected questions from bankers at one branch about who she was and what she was doing as she walked through their office, marking their machines.

The questions persisted. Only as McCullough was preparing to leave did she realize she had put stickers on all the machines at a branch of West Bank, not Iowa State Bank.

"I was feeling very stupid," admitted McCullough.

For Jerome, the anecdote provided a teachable moment at a motivational seminar for about 60 people, most of them middle managers or sales people.

Life — particularly the workplace — is replete with funny stuff, says Jerome.

Don't get tense and defensive about harmless mistakes. Loosen up. Laugh at them. That's one of the central messages of Jerome's humor-in-the-workplace presentation, which he has been delivering at business meetings around the country.

Jerome, 33, is a Des Moines-based comic who has abandoned his stand-up career in favor of teaching humor.

"The modern workplace is consumed with stress, and it's getting worse, not better," said Jerome. "We need to find new ways to cope with that stress."

Some of the elements of Jerome's message:

- "No one is born funny," he said. "Comedy is a skill like welding or carpentry or



DOUG WELLS/REGISTER PHOTOS

Part stand-up comic, part motivational speaker, Gavin Jerome works the room at a seminar in West Des Moines on Tuesday.



In addition to giving seminars, funnyman-turned-businessman Gavin Jerome has written a book.

even brain surgery."

- Self-deprecating humor is generally the safest and most effective type for the workplace. But, he said, be careful to "laugh at what you do, not who you are."

- Write jokes down in a log.

"Nobody remembers jokes," he said.

- Humor heals. Jerome said laughter lowers blood pressure, increases oxygen flow, dispels depression and releases endorphins — the brain's feel-good chemicals.

So where did this guy get his Ph.D. in comedy?

Jerome spent his youth in Dubuque trying to crack up a father who he said is "humor impaired."

"He suffers from humor constipation," he said.

Following graduation from the University of Northern Iowa in 1987, Jerome headed to the West Coast, where he landed a job as the doorman at a comedy club in West Hollywood. There, he said, he learned at the knees of the some of the masters, including Jerry Seinfeld.

Maybe it was because McCullough was ready for a light moment after an embarrassing morning, but she gave Jerome's 90-minute presentation a thumbs-up.

"I'm loving it," she said. "Nobody seems to want to laugh any more."