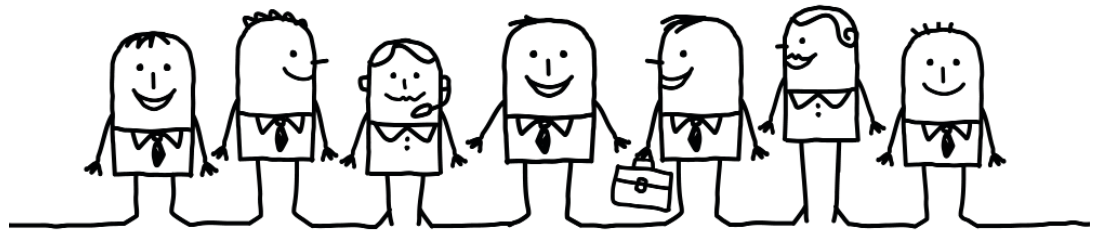


Humor as a Strategic Tool in a Frightening Economy

By Jim Haudan



How can you increase employee trust and engagement when employees' emotions are quickly deteriorating from sanity to fear and even terror? How does any leader or manager make an authentic connection with a "hostile crowd" when this hostility is driven by a sense of insecurity about the future?

Maybe it's time to consider an unprecedented approach in a time of unprecedented economic turbulence – humor.

“Standing Up” to a Crisis

Consider a profession where humor, relevance, and connection with an audience immediately translate into success or failure – standup comedy. When an audience believes that a comedian and his material are relevant to them, they're engaged, they laugh, they're animated, and their energy engulfs the room. Compare this with the unlucky guy who bombs and gets booted off the stage because what he's saying isn't relevant or funny because he fails to create a meaningful connection.

Here's an example. Many of us know comedian Bill Cosby and his ability to captivate audiences with no props, no PowerPoints, and no pep rallies. Cosby's

essential skill, like all great comedians, is his ability to convey to an audience that he understands their predicament before they have to express it. It's as if he knows what they are thinking and feeling, and he mirrors their reality back to them in a way that instantly creates a connection so powerful that it ignites spontaneous laughter. In one of his classic routines, Cosby pretends that he's in a dentist's chair. After numbing his mouth, the dentist asks Cosby to take a drink of water, rinse out his mouth, and spit into a bowl. For the next hour, Cosby demonstrates how difficult it is to drink with a numb mouth and how drool just won't easily come off your lip. Anyone who has had a similar experience before the introduction of the suction tube (that's anyone over 35) wants to jump up and scream, "He knows what it's like to be me!" or "Yeah, that happens to me all the time!" Because of this empathetic connection, people are open to whatever Cosby suggests next. They'll follow him wherever the story takes them. In comedy, this empathetic connection is called "being funny." In leadership, this skill is often called "emotional intelligence."

Relevance and Emotional Intelligence

As defined by authors Cherniss and Goleman, emotional intelligence is a "conscious management of our own emotions, which includes perceiving emotion, facilitating

through emotion, and understanding emotions." Rarely has it been more important to tap into employees' emotions and garner their trust, support, and commitment than in this truly frightening economic environment. It's never been more important for leaders to understand the emotions of their people. Or in terms of Bill Cosby, to empathetically convey that you fully understand and comprehend your people's predicament in a way that creates a profound connection.

Researchers have found that emotionally intelligent managers are better able to lead their people through the challenge of extraordinary instability. By showing empathy and understanding of how people actually feel in the face of salary cuts, downsizing, and job losses, successful leaders establish a rapport (not unlike Cosby) that gets them engaged to execute the difficult decisions that must be made during an economic downturn. The key in this economy is to ensure that you are having the critical conversations that everyone is thinking about, but few know how to have!

Visual Humor Opens the Door to Critical Conversations

It's possible for leaders to fuse the research of emotional intelligence with the artful skill of a master comedian so you can empathetically connect with your people to engage their inventiveness, creativity, and big-picture thinking. This sounds difficult, but it's really not. One good way to create this engagement is to use the informality of humor to deal with the paralyzing fear of the current economic environment.

In a similar way, the cartoonist Scott Adams, creator of the *Dilbert* comic strip, has been doing this for almost twenty years. He's been doing it so well that since its debut in 1989, *Dilbert* has been published in 1,900 newspapers in 57 countries. Adams' ability to sketch the misadventures of the hapless victims of the cubicle way of life captures the relevance of "how people feel" (emotional intelligence) as effectively as Cosby does on stage when he engages his audience around the

dentist "asking you to rinse." Both Adams and Cosby gain credibility, energy, trust, and fellowship because they are experts at empathetic engagement ... one through comedy, the other through cartooning. In simple terms, they are both experts at understanding and managing people's emotions.

So how can you use humor as a strategic engagement tool in a frightening economy?

Capture How People Feel

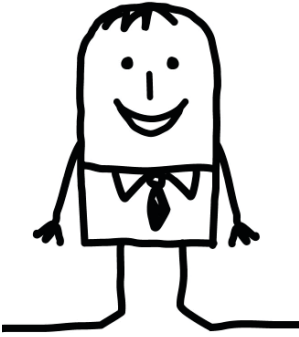
An interviewer once asked the great nature photographer Ansel Adams what was unique to his photography. He responded, "I didn't just shoot what I saw. I tried to capture 'how it felt' in my pictures."

In these unprecedented times, it is vital to start by capturing how people feel. The informality of humor

allows us to tell a light, candid, and approachable story of reality that invites dialogue and discussion. If you have the least bit of artistic ability, grab a pencil and paper. If you are hopelessly unartistic, "picture" this in your mind:

Use humor to deal with the paralyzing fear of a volatile environment.

There's a train station with dozens of people pushing and shoving to get on "the Freakout Train." There are cars marked "Anxiety," "Fear," and "Terror." The conductor is shouting, "All aboard for...I'm not sure where...but we're outta here!" In the distance is dense fog – no one can see what's ahead. Speech bubbles above the heads of the people say things like, "Do I still have a seat?" "Where are we going?" and "This is crazy...we can't control our future!" Maybe one person could be saying, "This is the scariest time I have ever experienced" and another could be responding, "I no longer feel like I am participating in my own destination."



Discuss the “Undiscussables”

There are few people in today's business world who would fail to relate to a picture like that! When you can show or describe this scene, you are conveying to your people that you understand how they feel

and opening the door to talk about what everybody is thinking, but nobody really feels safe to discuss out loud.

Now that you have captured your people's attention, the conversation starts with you practicing the characteristics of an emotionally intelligent leader by managing or controlling emotions, encouraging interaction and communication, and facilitating through real emotions how to be successful in the future. By showing empathy and understanding of how people feel in this scary economic landscape, it is possible to create a rapport with employees that helps them to embrace difficult decisions and tap into their creative and innovative capabilities.

We all jump on the Freakout Train when we feel change is happening to us and we have no ability to influence or drive our destiny. We feel we are simply on a ride where someone else is the conductor.

Leaders can redirect this runaway train. Consider the Freakout Train mental picture. Use humor as a strategic tool of engagement. Ask your people what additional images they would add to the “caricature of how they feel.” Encourage them to add humor and levity to help make the serious issues more approachable. Ask:

- What quote would best capture your emotions?
- What's affecting the speed of this train?
- What does it feel like to be on a train to the unknown?

- What do you believe is in our control that could allow us to reroute this train?
- How could we identify additional ways to use our innovation, creativity, and inventiveness to seize new opportunities?
- If we could accomplish all this, would our feelings change? How?

In this way, you can validate the emotional state of your people. Then, you can begin the process of facilitating people through these emotions so they can be understood and managed. The key is to give people a way to express how they feel, to make the unconscious conscious, and then decide what we want to do about it as we go forward. We need to help people make the important move from “How do I really *feel* about this?” to “What can I *do* about this?”

Engage People in Solving the Problem

When we know exactly what emotions people are feeling are and how they're connected, we can begin to help them deal with the emotions – find out what accelerates the Freakout Train, and what drives these emotions to an increasingly frenzied state. We can do this with gentle humor that connects everyone who's standing in a similar “train station.”

So how do we get people to the place where they want to do something to abandon the Freakout Train? We get them involved in the decision process. People need to understand the reasoning behind current decisions, what's necessary to make those decisions succeed, and how they can either contribute to slowing down the Freakout Train or accelerating it, depending on their actions.

Here are three specific steps you can take to help your people become even more engaged when things are frightening:

1. Your people want to know that *you* know what it is like to be them, and that you care about the fear, anxiety, and even terror they feel. When you can demonstrate empathy or emotional intelligence, you can become Cosby-like in making an authentic connection because you understand and care about their predicament. How can you do this?
2. Consider your role in making the frighteningly serious issues approachable by seeing the lighter side, to open the door for meaningful discussions on the “undiscussables.” How could you create napkin-like sketches to open the door to currently undiscussed emotions?
3. Nobody enjoys living on the Freakout Train. Once the key questions are placed in public view, explore how the creativity of your people could be engaged to control some elements of their destiny. Ask how we could change the Freakout Train and define the direction in which we should be headed.



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