SERIOUSLY FUNNY:

HOW TO USE Humor in Safety Training
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Start by thinking about humor.

When you think of humor, it’s often a fond contemplation because humor makes you feel good. In the same light, safety training should make you feel good because it’s meant to keep you out of harm’s way. Unfortunately, this isn’t often the case, which is why including humor in safety training can be a game-changer.

Practice your bit.

While some people seem to naturally be funny, it’s a skill they’ve probably been working on their whole life. That’s right: humor is a talent that requires a lot of practice. This guide will show you how you can get some laughs out of something as bland as safety training or in any situation where you’re speaking in front of other people.

Adding humor in safety training can:

- relieve stress
- improve learning
- inspire a good mood
- increase participation
- create allies
- define the learning environment
- positively change perception of trainer
Know when too much is too much.
The key to life is moderation. It’s also the key to humor in safety training. Since you’re not performing a stand-up comedy routine, you need to remember this. There is such a thing as too much humor, especially in safety training. Don’t lose sight of the overall message you’re trying to deliver. It’s nice to get a laugh (and once you make them laugh you’ll be greedy for more), but the laugh is only meant to help sustain your training, so you need to know your limits.

Use subtle humor to make a not-so-subtle impression.
People are preconditioned to believe they need to be stoic when presented with an important topic. It’s crucial to establish that it’s OK to laugh. When you’re infusing humor into a topic as critical as safety, you need to make sure you’re not trying to make the subject itself funny. Humor is not intended to take away from the seriousness of the topic. But it will ensure you aren’t leaving your audience depressed when the outcome of an impactful story tugs at their heartstrings. Subtle humor will keep the audience engaged and bring them back up from the lows in the training.

Channel your inner comedian.
You don’t have to be a comedian to use humor in a professional setting—it would certainly help, but here’s the secret: as long as you have a sense of humor, you can inject it into your training presentations effectively with practice.
Be objective—but don’t object to humor.

Safety training doesn’t often inspire excitement because it’s such a serious topic. When you think of regulations, policies and procedures, it’s easy to become overwhelmed before the training even begins. And the stress that accompanies those feelings is detrimental to learning. According to University of California – Irvine researchers, short-term stress lasting as little as a few hours can impair brain-cell communication in areas associated with learning and memory.

Enter humor.

[______________]. Humor creates a positive environment that will not only promote learning, but also engage participants and help them retain the information they’re being taught. More specifically, humor creates a physiological response that decreases stress hormones and increases positive mood and participation. Since safety training is often implemented after something bad happens, the stress relief and increased participation humor provides is vital.

Establish a club of people to laugh at your jokes.

Humor also creates allies. When you share humor with trainees, it’s like you’re letting them into a club. The members of the club (trainees) will bond over laughing at the same thing, which increases their engagement.

Include everyone!

Learning is increased and overall enjoyment of the training is higher when humor is involved. But it can also alienate people if one feels like they’re not in on the joke.

A positive outlook

The perception of the trainer is positively influenced by wit or humor, which establishes a good rapport between the trainer and trainees. Conversely, if there’s a lack of humor altogether, the opinion of the trainer can be diminished regardless of the value of the information provided.
What makes something funny?

1. By the book is not funny.
   If you research the history of humor, you’ll find it’s no laughing matter. Seriously, grab a glass of water, it’s dry. There are a few different theories on what makes things funny. One that continues to come up—and is applicable to safety training—is a theory that humor arises from incongruity. You’re surprised by what happens because it goes against what you expected to happen.

   That’s a big part of why humor works in safety training—most people are expecting a dull presentation.

2. Make sure they get it.
   Unfortunately, things aren’t funny just because you want them to be. What might be funny for some is not funny to others. So, before you attempt humor, it’s important to know your audience and especially know the things that would be humorous to them and what would turn them off.

Did you hear the one about the guy who lost his entire left side in an accident?

He’s all right now.
The funniest joke in the world

In 2001, Psychologist Richard Wiseman teamed up with the British Science Association to carry out LaughLab—the scientific search for the world’s funniest joke. Through an online experiment, they had people from around the world vote on jokes. The findings determined that this was the funniest joke in the world:

“Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn’t seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps, “My friend is dead! What can I do?” The operator says “Calm down. I can help. First, let’s make sure he’s dead.” There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says “OK, now what?”
Laughter is often infectious. It’s easier to get laughs from a group of people than to elicit a laugh from an individual because it’s a social expectation. We are 30 times more likely to laugh in the presence of others. Take a look at old sitcoms. They used to film them in front of a live studio audience in order to share the laughter with those watching at home. Prerecorded laugh tracks were also used for the same effect. Laughter inspires laughter.

Start a laugh mob.

Instead of trying to get the laugh on your own, why not share something you found funny so that you can laugh together? Keeping your audience’s tastes in mind, there’s a good chance that if you found it funny, your audience will find it funny too (unless, of course, it’s something that would expressly turn them off). Laughing together creates a bond that helps the reception of your training message.

Laugh at your own jokes.

Have you ever noticed when you’re watching Saturday Night Live that you’re more inclined to laugh at the comedian smirking or laughing during their sketch than the ones who are deadpan? As a presenter, it’s important to know that it’s OK to laugh at your own attempts at humor. Laughter is a trick that some comedians use to prompt a laugh or save a joke.

Bring back show and tell.

Instead of trying to get the laugh on your own, why not share something you found funny so that you can laugh together? Keeping your audience’s tastes in mind, there’s a good chance that if you found it funny, your audience will find it funny too (unless, of course, it’s something that would expressly turn them off). Laughing together creates a bond that helps the reception of your training message.

Don’t just tell a joke.

Should you start your safety training with the funniest joke in the world? Of course not. A joke is a performance piece with the sole purpose of getting a laugh. When it comes to inserting humor into a training presentation, jokes aren’t always the right approach. Even if the joke is funny, with an audience full of people waiting to be trained on safety, this will not inspire them to learn more. The humor needs to be relevant to the training.

How to inject humor.

**Picture people with their clothes on.**

If you’ve heard the advice to open with a joke then you’ve probably also heard that if you’re nervous you should picture the crowd in their underwear before giving a presentation. Picturing people in their underwear doesn’t introduce a calming sensation any more than opening with a joke will introduce humor into a safety presentation.

**Keep it real-relevant.**

The humor needs to be relevant to the presentation otherwise the audience will wonder why you’re wasting their time. Opening with a joke can destroy your entire presentation (and your credibility as a trainer) if it bombs.

**Practice being funny.**

Build testing your humor into your preparation time. A study conducted among learning and design professionals by ATD determined that traditional classroom training requires an average of 38 hours preparation for a one-hour session. You might want to consider devoting some extra attention to getting your humor right.

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Be the star of your own video.

Follow the sage advice of practicing your speech or presentation in front of a mirror. A mirror may be a useful tool to get a close-up look at yourself delivering your presentation, but getting it on video is an even better solution. A video can show you what you need to work on for your presentation from voice pitch and timing to delivery and body language. And it will identify any nervous ticks you need to work out before you go live.

Do a dress rehearsal or TWELVE!

Show the footage to—or, better yet, practice in front of—a small audience before your presentation to test out your humor. How else do you think comedians know whether their jokes will work or not? They usually try them out with a small audience first before adding them to their act. If they bomb they just move on to the next joke.

Set the stage.

You can also set the tone of your training before it begins. Wardrobe, props, pictures, videos and music are all great subtle ways to insert humor into your safety training presentation (that aren’t jokes) without overdoing it. When you change the perception or mood of the room, people will generally be more receptive to learning. These simple tactics are not offensive and don’t waste anyone’s time. Once you’ve broken the ice, you’ll find that the audience is more willing to tolerate sections that may be a little more technical or dry (as often is the case with safety training) because they trust that you will bring them back to life with more humor.

Turn your blunder into a laugh.

But what happens if you bomb? Since you’re not a comedian and you’re only adding minimal humor, moving on to the next joke isn’t an option. Your best bet is to acknowledge your blunder. Make a joke out of your failed attempt at humor and you’re sure to get a laugh (and reestablish that bond with your allies).
Positively change perception.

Being involuntarily confined to safety training can cause people to be closed-off and downbeat—so it’s important to keep the humor positive since some participants will walk into the training with a negative attitude and no desire to change it. Sarcasm and negative humor generally produce adverse results in this type of setting and can make an already unimpressed attitude turn worse. Derogatory humor can also kill your credibility with your audience because it veers on the negative side—showing a critical or disrespectful attitude, even if it’s aimed at yourself, is not a good way to get a laugh. You need to nurture the relationship with useful information and positive humor to yield good results.

Let the audience know you’re human.

Self-effacing humor (admitting your flaws) like laughing at something you’ve done can work in safety training when the audience is more receptive and positive. Letting the audience know you’re human is a great way to keep them positive. Storytelling works well for this type of humor. True stories make the most compelling points and the stories can be exaggerated for effect. Anecdotal stories (based on second-hand accounts rather than hard facts) help people come together—it certainly helps the trainer seem more relatable and the stories do not have to strictly be your own. You can tell a story about a conversation you overheard or retell someone else’s story so long as it helps you get your message across.

Paint a picture with the story. It will inspire a laugh and help people remember the point you were illustrating by leveraging their episodic memory.
Apply the rule of three.

Don’t forget the rule of three when planning your story or joke (you know the old three guys walk into a bar setup). In writing, when you’re listing things you use the rule of three—it’s the smallest number required to make a pattern and three is an easy number of things to remember. The rule of three dictates that you set up the patterns, listing two similar items and then overthrow expectations by listing an incongruent idea with the third item. In this case, there is a magic number for funny—it’s three.

Three guys walk into a bar...

Embrace human error.

A lot of times stories or jokes contain elements of human error. So long as it doesn’t have a serious outcome, human error can be funny. America’s Funniest Home Videos is based on this premise. In a safety training setting, human error can be used as a teachable moment. You get the laugh but then pose the question of how it could have been worse, taking it from funny to serious.

Start with what you find funny and go from there.

When trying to plan your presentation, it’s best to start with material that you find funny and share it (don’t try to steal or pass it off as your own). But don’t rely on your memory to recite it later (you’ll definitely butcher it). Instead, take notes on your phone and transfer it into a humor journal when you get home. Once you get into the habit of doing this, you’ll be thankful for all the moments you’ve captured when you least expected to.
People watching. 

Not in a creepy way, but have you ever just sat and watched people in everyday interactions? People watching is a great pasttime that will reveal the idiosyncrasies in everyday life. Prime locations are airports, Walmart (the people of Walmart are so fun to watch that they have their own website), the mall, bars or any public transportation. These are also great places to observe human error—from shopping cart blunders at the grocery store to people texting and walking into someone/thing. You can translate these common behaviors to your work environment to highlight serious potential outcomes. Set it up like a comedian would, “Have you ever noticed people at the mall…” or “The other day when I was grocery shopping I saw…”

Go to a comedy club. 

This one might seem obvious, but it’s worthwhile to check out a comedy club when preparing for your presentation. Comedians are big proponents of telling stories from their own lives and making observations. Don’t rip off their act word for word, but take note of how they deliver a story or listen to the observations they make and see if it inspires you for your own presentation. Another thing that comedians do well is to make people feel like they’re in on the joke. They don’t make fun of them. Rather, they position their bits like: “Do you ever feel like…” or “Have you ever noticed…” speaking directly to them. Even though the question is rhetorical, the audience ponders their response, they feel included and the outcome is typically a laugh since everyone is in on the joke.

Once you train your brain to look for comedy, you’ll see that it’s everywhere.
Safety conference sessions and workshops.

You might be surprised to find that people are already doing humor in safety—and they’re doing it well. The humor is usually subtle, so that may be why you haven’t heard about the hilarity in these safety sessions, but it’s enough to make the presentations enjoyable and ensures the audience retains the information. Check out some conferences and workshops around the safety industry and see how they’re presented—you never know what you’ll be able to borrow for your own benefit.

Shameless plug: There’s a reason SafeStart speakers are continually on the “Top 10” speakers lists, they are often asked to come back to present at the same conferences due to their popularity, and their sessions are standing room only. If you want to see how humor in safety is really done, check out any one of SafeStart’s consultant’s sessions.

Videos.

YouTube is a video-sharing website that hosts a wide range of clips, videos, trends and channels uploaded by individual users. This is a good place to find relatable material to the content you’re delivering. You can subscribe to channels that you find useful for ease of sharing their content in the future. If you need a video clip to support your topic, YouTube probably has something for you.
Television, movies and print.

Situational comedy easily lends itself to training sessions. So take a page from current sitcoms (yes, that stands for situational comedies) like Modern Family, The Big Bang Theory or Brooklyn Nine-nine, or go back to some old ones like Seinfeld, How I Met Your Mother or Friends. When you can relate to the audience through something they’re interested in, you instantly develop a connection with them. (You can often find clips from sitcoms on YouTube if you need a little help demonstrating your point). Since pop culture is a way to connect with your audience, movie references or clips will help you do just that. Relevant books, magazines, newspapers or other related print can also speak to your audience on a level they didn’t expect. “I read this article the other day…” Once that bond is established, you have their trust and they will look forward to the material you deliver.
Social media.

No matter what your social media preference, there are a lot of outlets for funny material. Twitter can be a great source for hilarious content. Have you ever seen celebrities read mean tweets? In theory, it shouldn’t be as funny as it is. To look for helpful material, you can follow funny people on social media or peruse the numerous websites and Twitter feeds dedicated to humor. Some of them even focus on safety, so it’s not that hard to find something that speaks to a wide range of humor tastes.

Introduce a little fun.

While it’s not specifically humor, adding a fun element to your presentation will have the same effect. Games are a great way to inspire retention and also add a positive, fun element to the training. Look for free gameshow templates online or other free training games. Or make your own game like Caption This—putting related safety activities, concepts, or catch phrases to pictures is a fun way to get the audience to retain the information you’re delivering.

**Free training games:** (https://www.trainerbubble.com/downloads/category/free-training-resources/free-training-games/)

**Gameshow templates:** (https://www.lifewire.com/free-powerpoint-games-for-teachers-1358169)
The rights and wrongs of humor.

**LAUGH AT OTHERS.**

Take what you find funny and share it with the group so you can collectively laugh at it. This will not only create a bond between you, but it will increase engagement and retention. When you find something funny, write it down. Don’t rely on your memory to recall what it was.

**DON’T BE MEAN.**

It’s never appropriate to ridicule, mock others or use offensive humor when delivering a training presentation. Sarcasm can come off harsh, so it’s best to avoid it in training presentations. Don’t be mean to yourself either. Self-derogatory humor can quickly derail your presentation. Use positive, nonaggressive humor to improve learning outcomes.

**LAUGH AT YOURSELF.**

Self-effacing humor can help you gain credibility with your audience. If you don’t take yourself too seriously, you are showing that you’re human. Since humans are more likable than robots (people like flaws), pointing out your obvious blunders (in a positive way) and making light of them is a great way to win people over. Starting the laughter is another way to encourage laughter from others.

**DON’T TRY SO HARD.**

If you’re trying too hard to be funny, it’s almost guaranteed that you won’t be funny. Do not use too much humor; it will lose its luster. Subtlety is the key to humor in safety training. Trying to force humor is the same as trying to force someone to laugh—it ends up being anything but funny. Make the right preparations to include humor in your training presentation and allow it to flow naturally.
FIND HUMOR IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS.

Tell stories. Be more relatable to your audience by telling a story about something you saw in your day-to-day routine like going to the bank or standing in line at the grocery store. Or if you’re a really good storyteller, fiction can spark humor as well. Your inspiration can come from people watching, comedians or even social media.

DON’T BE SO PREDICTABLE.

It’s important to think outside the box, especially when delivering a presentation. People won’t remember the same old same old, so spice things up with a video clip or a picture. Retention will be higher when you reinforce your message with something they didn’t expect.

SET THE SCENE.

Let your audience know it’s OK to laugh. A costume, props or even the right music can go a long way in setting a less-serious tone before training. When there are no good clips or pics to represent the point you’d like to make, act it out. The more unexpected the performance, the funnier it will be. Even a simple facial expression, hand gesture or a dramatic pause can set the tone or prompt an appropriate response from the audience.

TRY NOT TO WING IT.

You wouldn’t try to wing your teachable moments for your presentation, and you shouldn’t try to wing your humor either. Make sure you’ve done the required practice and preparation before you go “live”. If you’ve tested your material you should already have an idea of how it will fare in front of your audience.
KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.

Some cultures vary in what’s acceptable for humor. If you’re traveling for your presentation, it’s best to research any discrepancies that might be found from one culture to another. Humor works better when the audience understands it. Regardless of where your training takes you, know your audience and what they’ll find funny.

DON’T MISS THE POINT.

Use humor that is related to the topic you’re delivering training on, otherwise your audience will question why you’re talking at all. And remember, if you have to explain why something is funny, it’s not funny.
ACTIVITY
TOUGH CROWD? CREATE YOUR OWN AUDIENCE!

Paper Chain People Instructions
1. Take a piece of paper (8.5" x 11") and cut it lengthwise.
2. Fold it into quarters accordion (pleated) style.
3. Draw a figure of a person on the top layer. Be sure that the arms extend beyond the edge of the folded sheet.
4. Cut the figure out and unfold. You will get a chain of dolls holding hands.

At the heart of all safety training, people are the most important factor.

This activity can be an exercise in your training to demonstrate how connected people really are and emphasize the point that our actions can affect more than just ourselves—they can literally tear people apart.

You could plan some activities as illustrated throughout this guide for impact using the theme: we’re all in this together, until the chain is broken by an injury or worse.

Your demonstrations could include dramatically tearing the paper chain, crumpling someone under the heavy load of a notebook, threatening to cut one paper person from the middle of the chain with scissors or sending people to the shredder for maximum effect.

Use your imagination, make your serious points but keep it light and fun.
Now that you’re hilarious, how do you use your powers for good?

You can start by sharing this guide with your network. This guide works not only for safety training, but it is applicable to all presentations. Please share this guide with anyone who delivers presentations or speaks in front of people. Feel free to share it with others in the safety industry too.

DOWNLOAD AN ELECTRONIC COPY
FOR OTHERS OR DIRECT THEM TO: SAFESTART.COM/GUIDES/HUMORGUIDE

Employee Engagement Resources

Lack of engagement is one of the top safety challenges in the workplace. Unfortunately, this problem is sometimes hard to represent numerically. What’s more, people’s understanding of what engagement is and how to achieve it can vary. As a result, the problem remains unsolved in many workplaces.

Our free resources can help you inspire employees and get buy-in from your leadership group. You can find them at: safestart.com/employee-engagement/

Poster Guide

When used correctly, safety posters can be an incredibly effective communication tool. Learn all of the factors you need to consider to get it right.

Access the guide at: safestart.com/posterguide

ABOUT SAFESTART

SafeStart is the most successful safety training process in the world for developing personal, 24/7 safety skills that address human factors in safety—proven to reduce injuries 50% on average by more than 3,000 clients in 60+ countries.

Humor in Safety Webinar

Want to hear more about humor in safety from the master? Check out Tim Page-Bottorff’s webinar on the topic. He’ll explain the importance of storytelling, show you how to humanize yourself, demonstrate how to relate a common interest to the training topic and discuss when and where humor is appropriate.

Learn more at: safestart.com/webinars/humor