

Laughter at law firms? We're serious

Lawyers don't laugh enough at work, says **Catherine Lawrence**, and she's not kidding. In fact, she has made it her business to persuade lawyers — and other humour-deprived professionals and businesspeople — that laughter can improve their working lives and help their organizations thrive.

Lawrence calls her Toronto-based company **Survival of the Funniest** because she believes that, in today's Darwinian business world, humour is a critically important life skill. Her clients, which have included the Canadian and Ontario Bar Associations, Thomson Carswell and Torys LLP, as well as banks and accounting firms, hire her to lead seminars and workshops, make speeches and plan entire events to help make work more fun.

A lawyer herself — she articulated with **Baker & McKenzie** in Toronto and worked in Labatt's legal department in London, Ont., for eight years — Lawrence has seen the effects of laughter, or the lack of it, in high-pressure environments: "When you go into a workplace, you can often tell very quickly how healthy it is. Some places have a sense of energy, buzz, excitement. Others are tense and over-stressed."

She likes to quote **Paul Hawken**, author of *Natural Capitalism*: "Laughter and good humour are canaries in the mine of commerce — when laughter dies, it's an early warning that life is ebbing from the enterprise."

At one law firm where she gave a talk not long after starting her business, she says, "The office space felt toxic. There should

have been a sign at reception that read, 'You are now entering a laughter-free zone. Enter at your own risk.'"

Typically, her presentations to business audiences contain "serious messages splattered with humour" and may incorporate yoga-inspired laughter exercises modelled on the methods of Laughter Club International, founded by **Dr. Madan Kataria** in Mumbai, India. She's also



Lawyer Catherine Lawrence works hard at getting pressured practitioners to lighten up.

involved with groups such as The Humor Project and the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, and has been named a Certified Laughter Leader by World Laughter Tour, Inc.

Although she has been trained as a standup comic, Lawrence doesn't believe that humour in the workplace is a matter of telling jokes or turning meetings into parties. It's about seeing the funny side of what you're doing and what's going on around you, and building that into the way you work.

As an example of the effectiveness of this approach, she tells the story of a retired

judge who is now a well-known mediator. During one particular negotiation, his upper set of false teeth were away for repairs, so he was wearing a spare set, which didn't fit very well. As the discussions wore on, his uppers kept falling onto his lower teeth with a loud clacking noise. He pushed them back repeatedly but they kept clacking. Soon he noticed the various parties to the mediation trying to hide their smiles. As the grins became giggles and then outright laughter, the tension of the meeting evaporated and the mediation was concluded quickly and successfully.

"Reducing tension among different personalities is one of the real values of humour in business," Lawrence says. "Humour also enhances creativity and productivity, facilitates team building and is a source of energy. Humour, especially the self-deprecating kind, is a sign of confidence, which can make others, both colleagues and clients, think more highly of you. This isn't just another trend or management fad," she insists. "Humour is really fundamental."

Laughter exercises, humour workshops, international laughter organizations — is there something wrong with this picture? Don't people know how to laugh without taking lessons? Isn't it essentially contradictory and self-defeating to treat humour so seriously?

"Well no, not in my experience," replies the Certified Laughter Leader who spends her time revealing the value of humour to lawyers, accountants and bankers. "That hasn't been a problem with the groups I deal with."

MICHELLE VELLA

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