A comic’s nightmare is to realize the whole audience is composed of engineers, police, or lawyers. These three professions are reputed to be low on the sense-of-humor scale. Funeral directors are often ranked down there, too. And law firms often have the quiet somberness of a mortuary—not much merriment goes on in busy law offices.

Fun and play are often considered unprofessional, yet absence of humor is a problem for the legal profession. Merry barristers are successful lawyers. Humor has many extraordinary benefits for people practicing law—three are briefly described here.

Creative Problem Solving
Good lawyers know how to bring creativity to their many legal problems. Humor is a critical element in creativity. Creativity gurus such as Edward de Bono tell us that humor is essential in finding new ways to see things, and in designing new solutions. Our minds tend to get stuck in ruts and patterns, and humor jump-starts us out of these old ways of thinking.

To illustrate, look at a joke. It depends on a switch from one line of thinking to another in order to result in a laugh.

Consider this Garry Shandling joke: “I sold my house this week. I thought I got a good price for it [here comes the switch]—but it made my landlord mad as hell.”

Or this Woody Allen joke: “I divorced my first wife because she was so immature. I’d be in the tub taking a bath and she would walk in whenever she felt like it [here we go]—and sink my boats.”

The listener is going along in one direction and all of a sudden the joke takes him or her in another direction. If the listener does not have the flexibility to make that switch, or if the switch is not well made, the joke will not be funny.

A good laugh helps people to solve problems. In one study, those who watched a humorous video were much better able to solve a problem requiring a creative solution than those who had been shown a serious video or those who engaged in physical exercise.

The use of humor to loosen up one’s mind does not require lots of jokes. It simply requires that people be of good humor instead of serious and somber. People in good moods are more expansive and positive in their thinking, and they are more likely to be adventurous and take risks—all elements of creativity.

Lawyers need creativity in these times of swift change. Old ways of running a practice do not always work. It seems that every aspect of the business of law is being re-examined—including billing, recruiting, hiring, serving the client, training associates, partnering with non-lawyer professionals, competing against other firms. Lawyers need the benefits of humor to help them succeed in new times, to jump out of old ruts, to discover new solutions. To keep humor out of a law firm is not in the firm’s best interest.
Stress Reduction and Health Promotion

Many studies have shown that a good laugh improves health and strengthens the immune system. In these days of increased health insurance costs, a healthy law firm can have a real advantage, not to mention increased productivity, fewer missed days, and a lower tissue budget.

Law firms are often high-stress environments, and stress is one of the leading causes of health problems. Humor reduces stress by relaxing the muscles and acting as a natural tranquilizer.

Besides these physiological benefits, humor helps us to maintain mental health. People with a sense of humor can get a new perspective on the problem at hand, which helps distance them from the stress.

How often has something awful happened that after a few weeks or months seemed funny? The passage of time allows you to take a new perspective and to achieve some distance from the crisis. The trick is to shorten that time period so that laughter and humor lessen the stress more quickly.

Teamwork and Collaboration

Laughing together enables people to work better together. This is true not only for members of the same firm or practice group, but also for opposing counsel trying to forge a settlement. Magicians use humor for this very reason. When a magician first comes on stage, there is an adversarial relationship between him or her and the audience; the magician wants to do the magic and the audience does not want to be fooled. Laughter lessens the adversarial element. While it is not suggested that lawyers develop a stand-up routine prior to a deposition or settlement conference, bringing a sense of humor can encourage a more productive session.

The law firm that values teamwork amongst its members should provide opportunities for them to laugh together. At the very least, it should not frown on laughter when it does occur. Collegial laughter is not a waste of time; it promotes creativity, health, and collaboration.

Bringing Humor into the Practice of Law

Does the firm bring in funny videos or put jokes in its internal newsletter? Do lawyers make sure they attend comedy and comedy clubs? Perhaps. But integrating humor into the office involves more, because a sense of humor is a state of mind.

Harvey Mindess, in Laughter and Liberation, offers a wonderful list of traits, the freedom from which promotes a sense of humor: conformity, seriousness, inferiority, reason, egotism, and redundancy. Believe it or not, some of these traits have been found in lawyers.

Very effective methods and exercises exist to free people from each of these traits. Consider redundancy. Redundancy often occurs when we do things out of habit. A way to look anew at these habits is to question assumptions. Ask yourself, why am I doing it this way? Does this way make sense? Is there a better way? Is there a more fun way?

Here are some questions to ask about some law practice habits. They may seem silly, but being able to explain why they are silly allows you to make conscious decisions and question your assumptions.

What do we wear? The way a person dresses sends many messages. Lawyers may want to consider these messages and modify them.

Where are meetings held? Is the office the best place? How about a bowling alley? Maybe a bike ride? Who attends the meetings? Why not bring pets?

Animals have a calming effect, as long as they are domesticated. Where do you sit during meetings? Your desk? Your windowsill? Or on the floor? Maybe you do not sit at all. Perhaps you do improvisational comedy together.

Should you use music in your office? And some kinds of music such as Baroque speed learning and improve retention. Some music results in stress. Why not have music for each kind of meeting?

What is included in your internal memo? Do they promote the traits on Mindess' list or freedom from them?

Leave no sacred cows; question all assumptions. Most of all, have fun with these questions. Doing so will increase your sense of humor, moving you toward inconceivable mental and physical health, and uncountable wealth.

And smile next time you see a lawyer wearing a bow tie.

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