Vulnerability, Risk, And Comedy At Work

How One Leader Was Able To STAND UP To Traditional Leadership

By David Horning

When it comes to taking risks, the last hour of an all-day management retreat for your team doesn't seem like it'd be the time or place – they're tired, their work for the day is done, they feel the sweet release of freedom at their fingertips – when suddenly, it's ripped away for an extra hour of training. And not just any training, *stand-up comedy* training.

"If looks could kill, I would've died right there on the spot," recalls Steve Cody, founder and CEO of NYC-based Peppercomm.

Peppercomm is a marketing communications company that prides itself on challenging conventional wisdom when it comes to marketing, and what challenges conventional wisdom more than combining stand-up comedy and managers? Okay, maybe discipline via trial-by-combat, but comedy in the workplace is up there.

Why take such a risk? According to Cody, after performing stand-up for a few years, he began to notice that the skills he learned onstage were actually benefitting him around the office.

"My senses were sharpened by having to read the room, deal with silence, catcalls, and nerves before making a major presentation, so I said, 'I think this is applicable to the workplace.'"

He's right.

Comedy, or at the very least, laughter in the workplace, has been proven to generate results for those organizations who place high value in humor. According to a Huet & Associates study, organizations who used humor to engage employees reported shareholder returns 19% higher than their competitors. A study by market research company Ipsos found a correlation between employee retention and the sense of humor of the managers at those organizations – imagine all that time and money you'd save on recruiting and onboarding with lower turnover rates. And a study published in *The Journal Of Managerial Psychology* discovered a direct correlation between a supervisor's use of humor and employee performance, engagement, collaboration skills, and satisfaction. Leaders who use humor were also perceived as better performers and more likable.

The effects of humor at work are clear, so even though Cody's managers were initially resistant to the idea of comedy training, they didn't take long to come around.

"You could see everybody pulling for one another," remembers Cody, "so it became part and parcel of our training program." Now, Peppercomm uses his outside-of-the-box, culture-building, shared experience a few times a year to train new hires or employees moving up in the organization, and they even offer the training to clients. Because of this unique cultural cornerstone, Peppercomm has a competitive edge over more serious marketing firms when it comes to attracting potential clients and hires. More than once, Cody has heard, "You made us laugh," when closing a deal with a new client, so needless to say, his risk to introduce comedy to his team had more than paid off. Not only has it helped attract new clients, but it has also landed Peppercomm on many "Best Places To Work" lists, including Forbes, Crain's, and Inc., which makes the firm a destination for the PR world's creative up-and-comers.

The gamble could've easily backfired on Cody, but he doesn't look at taking risks from such a doomsday, "What if it all goes wrong?" perspective. Another powerful lesson the average non-comedian can learn from stand-up is that it's okay to fall on your face when you try something new, and this willingness to be vulnerable and honest in pursuit of a goal can serve as a catalyst for growth.

As the old adage goes: it's about the Journey, not Steve Perry.

Okay, maybe that joke didn't work, but I had to at least take the risk and include it. If you didn't laugh, I'm okay with that because instead of wasting energy and speculating on "What would've happened if I included the joke?" I now have the answer and can learn from it… and never say that again.

OR find a new way to say it better.

OR include it as part of a longer joke.

In today's workplace, vulnerability and the willingness to think outside-of-the-box are vital leadership skills for adapting to changing times, and when things don't go according to plan, your team will look to *you* for guidance.

"I allow all of my employees to see me fail, and fail miserably," remarks Cody.

Come again?

"You've got to be a little more human and authentic." But what about the idea that leaders have to be strong and have all of the answers?

In short, this perspective of leadership is outdated. With the development of virtual and AI technology disrupting the status quo of work and new challenges popping up seemingly on the hour, agility is a much more valuable leadership skill than rigidity in the modern workplace, and the first step to being agile is to come to terms with the fact that you may be wrong sometimes... and that's okay!

Not only is it okay, it's *more* than okay in today's world. With technology speeding up the way we work, we *have to* hang onto our humanity in the workplace, and the best way to do that is by being open to your own imperfections and being willing to laugh about them.

"People want the truth and want to be treated as peers, which is difficult if you're in the CEO spot. But the beauty of comedy is that it level-sets. It personifies and humanizes the CEO in a way that nothing else can."

By taking a risk and trying something new, so much can go wrong, but if you're open to laughing about it, not only will you be quicker to adjust, your people are more likely to have your back. According to Cody, employees expect vulnerability, humanity, and open-mindedness in their leaders.

As a comedian, if you're willing to put yourself on the level of your audience and connect with them as an authentic human being – rather than performing by memory, or lecturing them on the way *you* see the world – you build trust. Once an audience trusts you, when one of your ideas *doesn't* connect, they stay on board and are rooting for you to adjust and succeed with your next joke. Some comedians will badger an audience for not laughing, others will plug on in a rote, rehearsed way, but the ones who can take that bombed joke and build audience trust on a non-laugh by turning the attention to *their own* failure – those are the greats.

Just like performing stand-up, being a leader is rooted in being a human being first, and being a human means making mistakes.

Leaders: ask yourself, with whom would you rather work side-by-side? The person who works the same way every day, who has tall of the answers and never admits when

they're wrong? Or the person who is willing to try new things, who has questions and admits that they don't have all of the answers, and is sometimes willing to laugh at themselves?

Be the leader you'd rather work with – that's who your employees need you to be.

According to Cody, "The companies and leaders that'll come out of this [pandemic] with the most success are the ones who show that they care. You need to let [your employees] know that it's okay to not be okay."

With this leadership mindset, you have permission to present your wild, outside-of-the-box idea to *your* team, and even if it fails miserably, remember, that's what makes all of us human.

For more about Steve and Peppercomm, visit peppercomm.com

If you're a leader and you want to benefit from the results of using humor as a leadership tool for dealing with uncertainty, adversity, and conflict in the workplace, set up a free consultation call at watercoolercomedy.org/booking