

**Karyn Ruth White**  
**Laugh and Learn Productions**

Telephone: 303-369-8277  
1-877-KRWHITE  
Address: 3551 South Monaco Parkway, Suite 307  
Denver, CO 80237

Fax: 303-369-1018  
Email: [krw@karynruthwhite.com](mailto:krw@karynruthwhite.com)  
Website: [www.karynruthwhite.com](http://www.karynruthwhite.com)

**The Business of Humor**  
**by**  
**Karyn Ruth White**  
**National Humorist and Life Skills Coach**

Steve Allen likens having “a sense of humor” to having “an ear for music.” The only hitch is, we all seem to have different tastes in music. The subjective nature of humor can sometimes cause confusion and misunderstanding in the workplace. Here are some tips to keep in mind when using humor at work or anytime.

As each individual has his or her own sense of what is funny, each gender group has its own unique way of seeing humor. Women often find things funny that men don’t understand, while men often use humor in ways women don’t understand. These gender differences can sometimes cause confusion in life and in business. Being informed and aware of these humor differences can help to minimize misunderstandings.

**Women, Men and Humor**

Little boys and little girls are taught from a very early age to use humor differently. Little boys learn to use humor aggressively to assert their status in the group, they learn quickly how to bully with humor.

As men, they carry these lessons into adulthood and into the workplace. Men tend to use humor as a socially acceptable disguise for aggression. Thus we have the incessant bald and fat jokes. It is not uncommon to hear one man “joke” to another man, “Hey Jim, didn’t you have hair the last time I saw you?” At which point Jim may shoot back, “Sure, maybe I’m losing my hair but at least I can still see my belt.”

Women never use humor this way, not publicly anyway. (Privately however, entirely different sets of rules apply.) When it comes to humor, little girls learned to “play nice.” They learn the importance of collaboration versus

competition and we try to avoid hurting other people's feelings with our humor. Therefore, women will not generally use humor aggressively in public.

Think about it, would you ever walk up to one of your female business associates and say "Hey Doreen, is that your butt or did your knees explode?" Tell me, how long do you think that business relationship would last? While men can talk to each other like this all the time and continue very productive working relationships.

Awareness of the gender differences in humor usage is the first step in helping us, as business people, learn to manage and respond to these differences. Here are a few tips:

1. Observe and Learn

Start observing how your business associates and staff use humor with you. Is it aggressive, is it self-deprecating, or is it other-deprecating? Do you notice any interesting patterns around how they use humor with you versus how they use it with others?

2. Don't Try To Be "One of The Boys"

Whether you are male or female, you should only use and invite the style of humor that you are comfortable with. For instance, if you are a male who is not comfortable with the aggressive style of humor, don't use it. If you are a female who *is* comfortable with the aggressive style of humor, then use it, but be aware that you are sending the message that you can accept this type of humor in return.

3. Establish Your Personal Humor Boundaries

If a co-worker's joke offends you, either remove yourself from the situation or tell them that you find their joke offensive. Sometimes people respond to this piece of advice by saying, "But I don't want to seem unfriendly or come off as a prude." If your objection to the joke is stated in a non-emotional, objective and professional tone, you have a better chance of stating your point without offending the joke-teller. Better to seem a bit unfriendly or even a little prudish than to be repeatedly subjected to offensive humor.

4. Use "I" Messages

For example say, "Frank, *I* don't find your blond jokes amusing." (You can even smile as your saying this.) This approach is less confrontative than, "Frank, your jokes are offensive."

## 5. Cultivate Your Own Style of Humor

Elevate your own awareness of what you think is funny and what isn't. Who are your favorite comedians, what are some of your favorite sit-coms, what authors do you think are funny? Valuing and cultivating your own unique sense of humor is a powerful tool in coping with the stress of business.

## 6. If You Offend, Apologize

If you offend another with your humor, apologize immediately and take note not to use the same brand of humor with that person again. But don't let one misunderstanding stop you from attempting to use humor at work. Heaven help us all if we stop laughing.

## 7. Encourage laughter and levity in your work environment

Remember, when people enjoy themselves at work, they are much more likely to come to work.

Karyn Ruth White is a National Humorist and Life Skills Coach helping companies to energize morale, improve retention and enhance overall workplace performance. Visit her website at [www.karynruthwhite.com](http://www.karynruthwhite.com)