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Coaching Perspectives

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HUMOUR IN COACHING? YOU MUST BE JOKING!

What is your appetite for using humour in coaching? Is it a rapport enhancer or something more substantial? And how do we use it appropriately for coach and client? **Charlotte Housden** explores.

Since I'm writing about humour, I'll start with a joke. A coach walks into a bar. The barman looks up and says, 'I thought you lot were professionals. A joke is no place for you!'

It's true, we want to be taken seriously. We're relative newcomers and want to prove our worth. We know coaching can make a difference. But humour? That won't work in organisations, especially if they're going through the serious business of change.

Ingela Camba Ludlow has written a book on humour in coaching and thinks humour can be helpful. She writes that it's 'an emotional leveller', bringing a shared understanding and 'a feeling of something connecting between minds, and the affection that comes with sharing a new insight'.¹ Others have shown strong links between humour and rapport, which can help create healthy coaching relationships.

Much of the research on humour comes from psychotherapy: for example, there's evidence it can 'promote feelings of intimacy and friendliness and facilitate the client's trust in the therapist'², plus help them to 'gain or retain a healthy perspective and to take control of their lives'.³ Many therapies include humour – it's at the core of rational emotive behaviour therapy, whose therapists say humour is as important as empathy and acceptance. Humour is also used in provocative therapy, dialectical behavioural therapy, logotherapy and natural high therapy.

When we use humour in coaching it can lighten difficult subjects, particularly if clients are weighed down, exhausted by navigating constant change. It can help them to be more playful in their outlook and enable them to stand back and view issues from different perspectives; this is particularly important for leaders who

are dealing with fast-paced environments and complex problems. Humour can help clients break out of their familiar patterns, find new ways of thinking and experiment with how they interact.

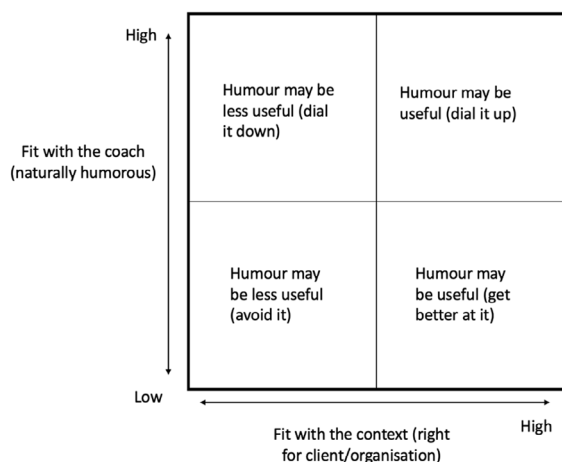
We've seen a dramatic rise in the prevalence of online coaching in recent years, and humour may help here too. A global survey showed that one third of coaches think online work is less intimate and less enjoyable, and that building relationships takes more effort. The researchers wrote that it 'may sometimes fail to replace the intimacy that comes from face-to-face engagement'.⁴ However, if humour can create greater rapport and trust, then it might also help develop better online relationships.

If humour is so good, why aren't we all using it our coaching every day? Well, like everything else, it's not a panacea. Where there is sunlight there is shade. Peter Hawkins writes in the preface to Ludlow's book about the 'shadow sides' of humour: a need to show off, avoid issues, caricature others and deny responsibility.

We also need to be careful about which type of humour we use. Psychologists have found that affiliative and self-enhancing humour (telling jokes or witty banter) can create relationship satisfaction, intimacy, openness to experience, self-esteem and happiness. But aggressive and self-defeating humour (such as sarcasm) creates dissatisfaction in relationships, anxious attachment, neuroticism and low self-esteem.⁵

Researchers say there can be 'detrimental effects if the humour is misunderstood, used to belittle, laugh at, or mimic the client'⁶, and warn it can 'easily be used to create feelings of superiority' by laughing at the expense of someone else.⁷

Tia Moin, on starting to work online with a new coaching client, wrote that the client was ‘particularly friendly and talkative and used humour a lot. Establishing rapport was easy.’ Over the session the client made a number of increasingly inappropriate jokes. Tia woke up the next morning feeling ‘violated, manipulated and uncomfortable’, and avoided sitting at her desk for some time; she felt the client had invaded that space.⁸ Tia’s experience shows we must be careful. If we decide to use humour, how can we keep it out of the shadows? How do we ensure it is fit for purpose, particularly with stressed and overworked clients? I’ve identified a couple of ways that might help. Firstly, you could use this model I created.



If you find yourself in the top quadrants, you may need to dial your humour up or down. If you’re in the bottom-right, perhaps you need to build up your awareness of your gaps, develop more confidence, or look for support to integrate humour into your practice. If you’re in the bottom-left, then back away... humour is not for you, or for them. Well, at least not now. Secondly, why not spend some time reflecting on these enablers for humour:

1. Contracting: set the scene so your client can expect humour to come from you and that it’s ok for them to be humorous too.
2. Self-awareness: reflect on the intent of the humour (you and your client). Is it a running-towards action (purposeful) or a running-away move (deflection, avoidance)?
3. Psychological safety: does it feel safe to use humour – for both of you?
4. Power: what are the dynamics? Is there co-creation? What’s the ratio of talking/listening, idea generation, self-disclosure?
5. Tailoring: each client is unique. What works for one won’t work for another. If you’re not sure, then first aim some humour at yourself and take note of your client’s reaction to it.
6. Your style: in your coaching are you high or low activity, formal or informal? Do you self-disclose, are you humorous or serious? Humour needs to fit your style, as authenticity is key. It’ll be unproductive if you force it.
7. Confidence: using humour takes confidence. You won’t know how it will land until you’ve tried it.
8. Coaching work: humour may work less well with some types of coaching (e.g., single sessions when you might need to move very quickly to action planning).
9. Organisational context: what is the organisational culture like? How mature is the organisation as a buyer of coaching/what do

they expect it to deliver? Use humour cautiously if you’re unsure how it will land.

10. Evaluation: how do you gather ongoing client feedback? How do you raise your own self-awareness? Can you bring these questions to supervision?

Let’s return to humour and how it might help clients navigate change. Albert Einstein said that no problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. I think coaches need to work differently given the volume and speed of change that many organisations are facing. So, can we be more courageous, stretch ourselves, model lightness and humour, be more flexible? Working in this way might help our clients break out of familiar thinking patterns and explore new perspectives. It might enable them to create positive change in the world.

I started with a joke, so I’ll finish with one too. A coach walks into a bar. ‘What can I get you?’ asks the barman. ‘A serious pint or a shot of laughter?’

What will you choose? It’s your punchline.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Charlotte Housden is a chartered occupational and coaching psychologist, supporting executive coaching clients and leading global leadership development and coaching programmes. She interviewed 108 people in 27 countries who were going through career and life changes and turned her findings into a book: *Swim, Jump, Fly: A Guide to Changing Your Life*. Since Charlotte wants to democratise coaching and psychology, making it accessible and engaging for all, the book is full of humour and cartoons. Contact her via swimjumpfly.com.

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