

Power Wit

Repair thy wit.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

You may have received advice that you should begin your speech with a joke—or at least include one—to break the ice. You'll notice, though, that the title of this chapter is not "Power Jokes." Instead, it is "Power Wit" because "wit" suggests intelligence as well as humor.

Winston Churchill, Douglas MacArthur, and Martin Luther King never opened their talks with some gag they had heard months before at a country club bar or a local Rotary Club meeting. Yet many a CEO has called me the day before he's to deliver a talk saying, "Humes, I need a joke to begin my talk. You know, something to break the ice. I know you have a storehouse of them."

I refuse. Oh, I do have a massive anecdote file, but I don't believe in tacking jokes on to some speech I didn't draft.

Don't Tack on Jokes

The difference between a joke and humor is the difference between a pornographic picture and a love scene in

a good movie. A joke told for its own sake—without much relevance to the speech that follows—insults the audience.

Yet speakers continue to open their speeches with banal amenities, which are then followed by a trite joke. Recently I heard a brokerage executive embarrass himself by beginning this way.

I'm not much of a speaker, but I know you should begin with a joke. Well there was this guy who went to a psychiatrist . . .

It reminds me of the person Sebastian describes in Shakespeare's *Tempest*: "He's winding up the watch of his wit, and by and by it will strike." Don't hold up a flag saying in effect, "Now's the time for a story, folks." Weave it seamlessly into your talk. Though many executives seem to believe otherwise, there is no eleventh commandment that states, "Thou shalt begin with a joke."

Aristotle once wrote, "The essence of humor is surprise." If that is so, why attempt to be funny when everyone is expecting it? Instead, sneak an amusing story into the middle of the talk, when it is sure to provide some sort of comic relief.

When you try to break the ice by rehashing a stale joke, you risk plunging into a chilly reception from your audience. Respect is the one thing an executive cannot afford to lose. And you will lose some if you tell a joke that others have heard before or don't find as funny as you do. You forfeit even more if the laughs you get are only perfunctory as if to relieve you of embarrassment.

You won't find any real humor in joke books. Why chance looking foolish? Telling funny stories is *not* a requisite in career advancement.

But true humor, as Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Abraham Lincoln all prove, is the hallmark

THE DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN A JOKE AND
HUMOR IS THE DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN A
PORNOGRAPHIC PICTURE
AND A LOVE SCENE IN A
GOOD MOVIE.

of the great speaker. As Shakespeare observed, "It makes a speech amble easily." Humor is a change of pace that refreshes.

Chuckles, a Change of Pace

Great speakers often use humor to lighten the mood of their audience. In his 1864 campaign, Abraham Lincoln acknowledged in a talk that he had made some mistakes in the handling of the war. He regaled the audience with this southern Illinois anecdote.

This Baptist preacher, in the course of his sermon, asserted that the Savior was the only perfect man who had ever appeared in this world, and that there was no record, in the Bible or elsewhere, of any perfect woman ever having lived on the earth.

Then there came from the rear of the church a mousy woman with a harrowed look and a hesitant voice. She said, "Begging your pardon, I know a perfect woman, Reverend, and I've heard of her every day for the last six years."

"Who is she?" asked the minister.

And the downtrodden woman replied, "My husband's first wife."

In 1940 Franklin Roosevelt was also campaigning for re-election. He shrugged off Republican attacks by telling of a West Virginia mountaineer he had met while running for vice president in 1920.

Now this hillbilly was partial to "white lightning," and his doctor told him that if he kept on drinking it, he'd grow deaf.

"Doc," he answered, "if it's all the same to you, I like what I've been drinkin' better than what I've been hearin'."

Leaders don't begin speeches with stale old jokes, but they do spice up their talks with humorous anecdotes.

**WHEN YOU TRY TO
BREAK THE ICE BY
REHASHING A STALE JOKE,
YOU RISK PLUNGING INTO
A CHILLY RECEPTION FROM
YOUR AUDIENCE.**

The Three R's of Humor

Here is a foolproof way to enliven your talks with humor without falling on your face: Follow the three R's of presenting humor—make it Realistic, make it Relevant, and don't Read it!

Make Stories Realistic and Relevant

Tell stories that are believable. Don't repeat those jokes you heard about a horse walking up to a Texas bar or that one about Jesus and Moses on a golf course.

Anecdotes about the great and famous rate the best. It doesn't matter if your anecdote doesn't trigger gales of laughter because a colorful insight into a historic personality is always entertaining. If, in your talk, you will be discussing different approaches or alternatives, try this one:

During a tour in Canada, Churchill attended a reception and found himself seated next to a stiff-necked Methodist bishop.

A pretty waitress appeared with a tray of glasses of sherry. She offered one to Churchill, which he took, and then presented one to the Methodist bishop. The bishop, aghast at being offered alcohol, said, "Young lady, I'd rather commit adultery than take an intoxicating beverage."

Thereupon, Churchill beckoned the girl. "Come back, lassie. I didn't know we were given a choice."

And the story is easily relevant. Almost every talk involves choosing the right course for the future.

But if your company does not wish to change direction or course, this Churchill anecdote is apt.

In 1900, the twenty-six-year-old Churchill, after just being elected to Parliament, made a speaking tour of America. In Washington,

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he was introduced to a majestically endowed woman from Richmond, Virginia, who prided herself on her devotion to the "lost cause of the Confederacy." Her family were Southern Democrats who had opposed the Republican policy of Reconstruction.

Anxious that Churchill should know her sentiments, she remarked as she gave him her hand, "Mr. Churchill, you see before you a rebel who has not been 'Reconstructed.'"

"Madam," he replied with a deep bow that surveyed her décolletage, "Reconstruction in your case would be blasphemous."

Churchill once observed, "Anecdotes are the toys of history." Since toys are fun to play with, try playing with some anecdotes to liven up your presentations. Maybe your company faces new problems because of a recent law enacted by Congress or some new bureaucratic regulation. You might, for example, recount this story about Benjamin Franklin.

Before our Constitution in the 1780s, the United States was floundering in debt. One day during this period, Franklin entertained Dr. Benjamin Rush and Thomas Jefferson. The conversation turned to determining what was the oldest profession.

Dr. Rush, a physician, said the oldest profession was his. "After all, it was a surgical operation that made Eve out of Adam's rib."

But Jefferson, who built Monticello, said, "No, it was the architect. Surely it was an architect who brought the world out of chaos."

Then Franklin replied, "You're both wrong. It's the politician. After all, who do you think created the chaos?"

I heard a tale of diplomacy recounted by a CEO talking to his stockholders. In admitting his responsibility for misreading the market, he spun off this anecdote:

Just before the turn of the century, the sultan of a Middle East protectorate had an idea to put the newly arriving British minister in his place. He had a tunnel installed in the anteroom next to his

throne chamber so the British envoy would have to arrive in the sultan's chamber on his knees.

When the English diplomat arrived at the palace to present his credentials, he took one look at the waist-high tunnel and, instead of going forward on his knees, did it the reverse way. The sultan, sitting on his throne at the other end of the tunnel, saw emerging not a lowered head but another part of the anatomy.

Well, it was not the first time a chief executive got things ass-backward.

It doesn't matter that no famous names are cited. It is a believable historical anecdote that can be applied to illustrate any mistake or misdirection.

Let's move from statesmanship to the sports world for stories. I once heard an executive recount this anecdote involving Tommy Lasorda, former manager of the L.A. Dodgers:

It is all very well to talk out loud on all the things we could do to make our facilities better. But first we have to look at the basics. It is like the time the veteran Tommy Lasorda was managing the Dodgers in a year when they couldn't hit a ball the size of their hats and so had sunk deep into the National League cellar. One scout in a tank town in Nebraska called and said, "Tommy, I've just stumbled onto a great pitching find. This afternoon the kid pitched a perfect game. Twenty-seven strikeouts in a row! Nobody even touched the ball till a guy hit a foul in the last inning.

"Listen, Boss, the kid's with me right now. Shall I sign him up?"

"No," Lasorda said, "sign up the guy who hit the foul ball . . . we need hitters."

Adopt an Anecdote

The secret to presenting speech humor is to weave it in as part of your own experience. In *Adventures of the Engineer's Thumb*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has these words of advice from the master sleuth:

"Experience," says Sherlock Holmes laughing. "Indirectly it may be of value, you know; you only have to put in your own words to gain the reputation of being excellent company for the remainder of your existence."

Holmes is saying that to be a good storyteller, you have to put the experience in your own words.

Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, Franklin Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan were all superb raconteurs and they made their stories part of their own experience—even if secondhand.

When you start by saying "this salesman" or "this psychiatrist," you have already signaled the audience that this is a joke—something that didn't really happen—and

you already have lost them. Lead them by the hand into your story by saying, for example: "An old woman in the town I grew up in" or "A lawyer I know once had a client walk in . . ."

When you find a story that fits the purpose of your speech, adopt it. It is

now your story, something that happened to you or a friend of yours. Say it aloud, and then close your eyes and tell it in your own words. Once you repeat it a few times in your own style, you begin to believe that it really did happen.

I drafted a speech for the head of a printing company to present to a trade association. It included this story:

Recently business has become almost a dirty word. "Sell" is a four-letter word, and profits spelled p-r-o-f-i-t-s are without honor. But to me the profit motive is not something to condemn but commend.

In that connection I recall a high school reunion I attended not long ago. One alumnus who was remembered as the dimmest in the class returned in a chauffeured Rolls Royce. It seems he had become a fabulously successful president of a gasket company.

**THE SECRET TO
PRESENTING SPEECH
HUMOR IS TO WEAVE IT
IN AS PART OF YOUR
OWN EXPERIENCE.**

Naturally, all of us as his former classmates were curious as to how someone that stupid had made so much money. So after we plied the fellow with lots of drinks, a friend of mine put the question to him: "Just how were you able to put together this gasket operation you run?"

"It was easy," he replied. "I found a manufacturer who could make them at one cent apiece and then I sold them at five cents apiece. And you just can't beat that four percent profit!"

Humor and Poetic License

Actually, the speaker had no such classmate, but he told the story as if he had. Don't worry about stretching the truth. You're not under oath. There is humor license as well as poetic license.

Another executive I know also cited a fictional classmate in this anecdote:

I remember my high school biology class when Dr. Davidson asked Angela DiMarco, a transfer from a parochial school, "Angela, what part of the human anatomy enlarges to about ten times its normal size during periods of emotion or excitement?"

"I . . . I can't answer that question," the girl stammered as she shyly avoided looking at the teacher.

Then Doctor Davidson called upon a boy sitting next to her. "What is the human organ, Clark?"

Clark correctly answered, "The pupil of the eye."

"Miss DiMarco," said the professor, "your refusal to answer my question makes three things evident. First, you didn't study last night's assignment. Second, you have a dirty mind. And third," concluded the professor, "when you marry you'll be in for a tremendous disappointment."

And then the speaker segued into his point. "Well, if you don't read the lesson of recent market trends, you're going to be in for a big disappointment."

For a story to illustrate the importance of adequate capital for investment, I heard another businessman recount this experience he supposedly had:

In my younger days I was assigned to a branch office in the Midwest and I remember attending a chamber of commerce dinner honoring their man of the year.

This man was chairman of the board of the bank. His name adorned the biggest office building downtown. He also owned a small plane factory and sat on the board of two Fortune 500 companies.

Members at the head of the table repeatedly recounted the story of how he had walked into the small city thirty years ago with only the suit on his back and all his earthly possessions wrapped in a red bandanna tied to a stick over his shoulder.

As various members of the city gave their speeches in tribute to him, each mentioned the bandanna story.

Well, I was sitting next to a reporter who had just been newly assigned to the city. In fact, neither he nor I had lived in the city long.

Finally the honoree rose to acknowledge the acclaim and thank the city for befriending him.

When he finished, my journalist seatmate rose to ask a question: "Sir, can you tell me what you had wrapped in that bandanna when you walked into this city thirty years ago?"

"I think, son," he said, "I was carrying \$100,000 in bonds and another \$100,000 in certificates of deposit."

Illustrating with a Parable

Benjamin Franklin also stressed the importance of investment with a story. Note how he incorporated this parable of what happened to the merchant into his own experience.

Now this shoemaker I knew in Philadelphia was soon to be off by coach to New York to visit his brother. So he needed to find a stable where he could keep his horse.

He went to the first livery and the owner said, "We charge twenty dollars a month for the feeding and watering of your horse, but we give you back two dollars for our use of the manure."

"Twenty dollars! Good heavens, that's ridiculous," said the cobbler, and he left to look elsewhere.

At another stable, the liveryman gave his cost: "It's ten dollars a month, but we give you back a dollar for the manure."

The shoemaker shook his head and asked if the liveryman knew someone who would charge less.

"Well," the liveryman answered, "there's an old Quaker off Arch Street with fees of only five dollars a month."

So the shoemaker inquired at the Quaker's.

"Yes," the Quaker said, "I charge only five dollars a month for keeping your horse."

"What about the manure?" asked the cobbler.

"Manure? At five dollars a month there will be no manure!"

Here's my favorite "realistic" story that I've incorporated into speech drafts for several corporate clients.

Some weeks ago I ran into an old friend at a restaurant and asked him how his daughter, Jennifer, was doing at the state university.

He shook his head and handed me this letter that he had in the inside pocket of his jacket. I read it and asked him if I could have a copy of it. I have it right with me. [Here the speaker pulls out a folded, signed, typed letter from his pocket and reads:]

Dear Mom and Dad,

I won't be coming home for Christmas. I'm leaving college and moving to Nepal. I'm also pregnant and my boyfriend is a Buddhist. I'm moving to his home on the top of a Himalayan mountain.

Love,
Jenny

P.S. I'm not pregnant. I'm not becoming a Buddhist. I'm not moving to Nepal. But I did fail calculus and biology. But it does put those grades more in perspective.

See you at Christmas,
Jenny

The relevance of this college letter story works any time any executive discusses a few recent problems but wants to put them in the perspective of the larger picture.

Right, you're saying to yourself, it's *relevant* and *realistic*. But what about the third R, which is *don't read it*?

Tell Rather Than Read a Funny Story

Tell as though from your own experience rather than read a humorous anecdote or story from your speech text. The only exception to the "don't read" rule is when something that's written serves as a prop for the story, such as the college letter or perhaps a newspaper clipping referred to in an anecdote.

TELL AS THOUGH FROM
YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE
RATHER THAN READ A
HUMOROUS ANECDOTE
OR STORY FROM YOUR
SPEECH TEXT.

If the anecdote comes in the middle of a talk, put it in a bracket [the Churchill anecdote], or [the 4% profit story], or the [Benjamin Franklin "chaos" tale].

That's how Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan did it. Of course, they had told the stories they used often enough that they knew them by heart.

Reagan, for example, used to regale audiences with this Churchill story:

Sir Winston Churchill was invited by the British Women's Temperance Union to deliver an address at the Savoy Hotel in 1953.

In her introduction of the seventy-eight-year-old prime minister, the Temperance Chairperson said, "You know, Sir Winston, our

organization, while it admires your statesmanship, does not approve of your bibulous habits.

"As a matter of fact, we have estimated that if all the wine, whiskey, and brandy you have consumed in your life was poured into this ballroom, it would come right up to your chin."

In answer, Churchill said, "Madame President, I accept the accuracy of your calculations. But as I look at the high ceiling of this room and ponder my seventy-eight years, my only thought is this: How much left to do and how little time to do it!"

But on Reagan's five by five card, the story looked like this:

Churchill,
Women's Temperance Union
chairman's calculation—of alcohol
If poured into room
up to chin
Churchill—high ceiling—age
"HOW MUCH LEFT TO DO—HOW LITTLE TIME TO DO IT.

For an executive who served in World War II, I drafted this story:

I went back to Normandy with a group of veterans, and one guy I met told me of his experience just before D day.

In those days before the Normandy invasion, trains were very crowded because of the thousands of troops stationed in Britain. A young G.I. who had been up all night boarded the train in Bristol in the south of England. He entered a compartment where five people and one dog were seated in the six-seat cubicle. Approaching the lady who was the owner of the little Pekinese, he said, "Ma'am, may I sit down?"

"Absolutely not," replied the dog owner.

After fifteen minutes of standing, the tired GI again asked, "Ma'am, if you don't mind, I have been standing up all night. I love dogs and I could hold it on my lap."

"Indeed not," said the lady.

Thirty minutes later the GI said, "I've been standing for forty-five minutes. I have twenty-four hours of leave. Would you please let me sit down for a minute?"

"Young man, you are absolutely impertinent," she said as she hugged her little Pekinese.

At that, the soldier opened up the window, grasped the Pekinese, threw it out the window, and sat down.

Then a mustachioed brigadier sitting across from them said, "You know, that's the trouble with you Americans—you always do things the wrong way. You drive on the wrong side of the street, you hold your fork with the wrong hand, and now you throw out the wrong bitch."

For that story, his five-by-eight card included these notes:

Pvt.—seat crowded train

Fat lady with Peke

Refuses—"Absolutely Not"

2nd Time—you Americans rude

Third time refused

Put dog out window

Brigadier—opposite

"drive wrong side of road"

"fork wrong hand"

"THROW OUT THE WRONG BITCH"

If you try to read a humorous story word by word, you'll die at the podium. Before you give your talk, practice telling it aloud a few times, then reduce it to a few brief phrases to jog your memory. Look at the card to refresh your memory, and tell it while you're looking at the audience, not looking down at your notes.

At the beginning of this chapter, I wrote that starting a talk or presentation with a joke is a no-no.

After all, I explained, Churchill didn't begin a speech with some yarn or gag. But Churchill would have done so

if the comic illustration had been the whole thrust of a very short talk. Churchill once rose to attack appeasement. He began this way:

When I was a boy, I used to look forward to the London arrival of the Barnum and Bailey Circus. But there was one show that my nanny would not let me see. She said, "Winston, it is too revolting a spectacle for the human eye."

The sideshow was called "The Boneless Wonder." Now, after thirty-six years, where do I finally find this freak?

Not in the circus, but here in the House of Commons, sitting on the front bench are the boneless wonders.

IF YOU TRY TO READ A
HUMOROUS STORY WORD
BY WORD, YOU'LL DIE AT
THE PODIUM.

That is how Churchill characterized the spineless appeasement of the prime minister and foreign secretary toward Hitler.

The introduction of a speaker might include humor. For example, I once introduced a New York lawyer this way.

Our speaker today is qualified by both background and experience. In no way is he like my nephew George. That boy barely managed to get up sufficient courage to show his report card to his father and ask for his signature. When my brother saw George's grades, a D and an F, he berated my nephew for such a poor record. When the reprimand was over, George asked my brother, "Dad, do you think it is because of heredity or environment?"

Well, a Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton and litigation head of one of Manhattan's most prestigious law firms must have had brainy parents as well as years of trial experience.

The head of a food company, when presenting an award to the salesman of the year, began with this Lincoln anecdote:

In 1864, General Grant was one of the few Union generals engaging the enemy, winning victories, and advancing southward.

One day Secretary of War Edwin Stanton brought in a confidential report to President Lincoln.

"Mr. President," said the bearded Stanton, "these papers document witnesses who have observed General Grant actually imbibing in his tent."

"Is that so?" drawled Lincoln. "Does the report also reveal the brand of whiskey he was drinking?"

"I don't understand why that is necessary," said the confused Secretary Stanton.

"Because," answered Lincoln, "I want to send a case of it to my other generals."

Well, I would like to know whether our friend Dick Standish here eats Cheerios or Wheaties for breakfast, and whether Dewar's or Johnnie Walker is his favorite poison.

Because I'd send some to the rest of you.

Ending or Beginning with Humor

The humorous story can be the way to launch a brief two-minute talk and can also be an effective way to end a talk.

At the Sunday breakfast of a weekend trade association conference, the association head gave these closing remarks:

I want to say thanks for the last few days. I got some knowledge and some fun out of it. It reminds me of a fur store merchant I met recently in Philadelphia when I was looking for an anniversary gift for my wife. When I walked into the store, one of the managers was giving a bum's rush to get some guy out of the store. Later, I heard the furrier tell what happened. It seems this young man and a blonde companion came into the store on the previous Friday afternoon. The man told the clerk that he wanted to look at the most expensive fur coat in the place. The clerk was doubtful so brought out a nice squirrel-skin job.

"Take it away," said the customer. "Apparently, you didn't hear what I said. I want the most expensive coat you have."

So the clerk trotted out a beaver coat. Then a sealskin, then a sheared raccoon, but each time with the same result. So finally the clerk shot the works and brought out a \$5,000 mutation mink.

When the man saw that, his eyes lit up. Turning to the blonde, he said, "That's the idea. Try it on and see how it looks." And to the clerk, "I want to charge it. Go ahead and check my credit. Sew the name 'Bunni' on the back of the coat. I'll be back on Monday to pick it up."

"Certainly, sir, anything you say," the clerk responded.

Well, on Monday the young man who'd bought the fur coat arrived at the store alone. The minute he walked in, the clerk rushed up to him shaking his fist, followed by the floorwalker, the chief buyer, the manager, and the credit manager. All were shouting at him. "We've looked you up," said the angry credit manager. "You have no more credit than a mouse. You couldn't charge a toothbrush."

"Now calm yourself," said the man. "I haven't taken anything out of your store. I just came in to thank you for a wonderful weekend."

Another time I was present when, at the end of the dinner, an executive hoisted his wine glass, expressed thanks to the host, and told this Churchill story.

I think we all are grateful to our host for this splendid repast. It is certainly far superior to the one Winston Churchill had at the home of the duke and duchess of Westminster.

A friend asked Churchill when he returned to London the next Monday how the Saturday dinner had gone. Churchill replied, "If the champagne had been as dry as the cigars, if the Chardonnay had been as cold as the soup, if the beef had been as rare as the service, if the brandy had been as old as the chicken, if the chicken's breast had been as plump as the maid's, and if the maid had been as willing as the duchess, it would have been a splendid evening!"

**THE HUMOROUS STORY
CAN BE THE WAY TO
LAUNCH A BRIEF TWO-
MINUTE TALK, AND CAN
ALSO BE AN EFFECTIVE
WAY TO END A TALK.**

So wield wit like Churchill. Be a raconteur like Reagan. Make your anecdotes realistic and relevant, and be sure you tell it in your own words rather than memorize or read it! Glance quickly at your notes to jog your memory if necessary. Remember that the secret of humor, as Reagan once said, is to be entertaining while enlightening, and vice versa.

Power Parable

Through parables of sunlight.

—DYLAN THOMAS

Jesus Christ never used the word “salvation.” It was Paul who used the Greek word in his letters, for he wrote his epistles in the Greek language. Instead, Jesus preached about a young man who blew his wad on wine, women, and song, then came back and said, “Dad, forgive me and let me have a second chance.” That is “salvation” expressed in a story.

Do you think those illiterate shepherds and fishermen would have understood “salvation”? It would be like using the word “synergy” while speaking to a bunch of cowboys about the combined effect of roping and branding on the ranch. People cannot picture words like “salvation” or “synergy.”

Years after the death of Jesus, his disciples remembered his sermons and delivered their recollections when the New Testament was being written. Why? Because Jesus spun parables to explain abstract virtues.