

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

February 9, 2007

chronicle.com

## Advice

### Sense of Humor Preferred

*By Dennis M. Barden*

Over the course of the next few months, candidates for all sorts of positions will be invited to interview at campuses across the country to add flesh and bones to their curricula vitae. They will answer questions both predictable and idiosyncratic. They will eat innumerable meals with strangers who probe them for weaknesses and quirks. And they will make hundreds of decisions on the fly about how most positively to present themselves without inadvertently making a disqualifying misstep. They will choose which stories to tell to illustrate their points. They will make decisions about what to wear. They will settle on whom to offer up as references. They will opt to placate or to challenge a questioner.

And they will decide in the blink of an eye whether or not to try to be funny.

Humor is a powerful tool. It can disarm an adversary. It can leaven the purposefully self-aggrandizing nature of a job interview. Perhaps most important, it can serve as a window to personality in the same way that a résumé is a window to experience.

It can also backfire. One need look no further than last November's national election for an example. Sen. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts was campaigning for Democratic candidates for office and, at the same time, positioning himself for another run at the presidency. In essence, he was interviewing with the American public for the most important job in the land. And he tried to be funny. To say that his attempt at humor in that environment was poorly executed is an understatement.

But was it also ill-advised? Senator Kerry was criticized on the presidential campaign trail for being stiff, impersonal, and, yes, humorless. Isn't one of the most obvious remedies for that criticism displaying a sense of humor? Just as former Vice President Al Gore and Sen. John McCain of Arizona chose to serve as hosts on Saturday Night Live, should Senator Kerry not take the opportunity to show the American people his wit and cheek?

Evidently, he should not.

Usually, though, humor is the candidate's friend. In fact, a sense of humor is a strong preference — if not a requirement — in the description of the ideal candidate in virtually every position specification we draft for colleges and universities. Usually a "sense of humor" is inexorably linked to that ultimate phrase of institutional code, "tolerance for ambiguity."

A critical quality of leadership, humor provides perspective, enlivens the workplace, and reduces stress. Perhaps most important, it provides common ground between people who might otherwise be distanced from one another as the result of intellectual preparation or job title. And for the president on the fund-raising circuit, humor can be an invaluable tool.

How, then, should candidates display that highly valued quality without unwittingly shooting themselves in the foot? Can you be funny and still have gravitas? Is it ever safe for a candidate to poke fun at anybody or any institution? Isn't the whole business of seeking and pursuing leadership too serious and too important to risk pointing out the inherent humor in any aspect of it?

And what if the candidate simply isn't funny?

It would be close to unprecedented for an entire interview process to pass without there being some opportunity to put a sense of humor on display. That opportunity should be seized.

In a recent campus presidential search, such an opportunity not only arose but was purposefully offered up to a very serious final candidate. A board member (who was no George Burns) gave his best effort at playing the straight man by making an irreverent comment to the candidate to give her an opportunity to speak to her own background. Unfortunately, the candidate — who, by the way, had already displayed a robust sense of humor in earlier interactions — missed the opportunity.

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In fact, she misunderstood the intent of the board member's comment, taking it for serious and, therefore, denigrating. She was most diplomatic, and the moment passed without further incident, but the board member was horrified and ran to the candidate at the end of the session to explain his intent. Clearly, that act will not be playing in Peoria.

If a person who had already demonstrated a sense of humor and a person trying purposefully to use humor in a positive, productive way can't pull off a simple question and answer, what hope is there for the rest of us?

There are two ways to put a sense of humor on display. Telling a joke is always the most difficult and therefore the most dangerous. In fact, as a candidate, you probably should strongly resist the urge. Seldom does a planned joke at the outset of a presentation to a strange audience strike the right chord. In an interview, it is almost always a mistake — at best not funny and at worst offensive to someone in the room. Don't force humor; it must come naturally to have the desired effect.

The other way of displaying your sense of humor, however, is the easiest and the most ingratiating: Laugh at the humor of another.

For example, as a manager, I will not hire people if I cannot get them to laugh during the interview. Life is just too short to work with someone who can't laugh at its absurdities.

"Wait," you say, "doesn't that require that you be funny?" Certainly. The thing is, I have a track record of being funny, occasionally on purpose, and therefore might reasonably expect to say something at least marginally humorous in an interview setting.

Besides, I am not subtle; I am obviously trying to be funny. (You can tell because I laugh at my own gags, a not-too-subtle tactic intended to signal that a joke has been told.) Even if I don't succeed, when it is obvious I am trying to be funny, the person I am interviewing should be polite and laugh, thereby putting not one but two highly valued attributes on display — humor and courtesy.

There are also ways of being proactively funny that are less hazardous than trying to tell a joke. Wit and word play are generally viewed as intelligent, even erudite, forms of

humor. Building on the humor of another is both funny and complimentary. And self-deprecating humor can be the most powerful tool of all if it displays a level of self-knowledge and self-confidence and, at the same time, succeeds in making the speaker seem more accessible.

Above all, be yourself. It's far better to be hired or rejected based on an accurate read of your personality than on the facade you wear for the interview. If you have a sense of humor, you will have a chance to put it on parade during the hiring process without forcing the issue.

Leading a college or university is serious business. It requires integrity, intelligence, a monumental work ethic, judgment, political savvy, and considerable courage. Never before have the issues facing higher education been so public, and, for that reason, never have presidents and chancellors been under greater pressure both to deliver the goods and to do so squarely in the public eye. The times call for leaders of great ability and significant gravitas.

They also call for perspective, which is best displayed by a sense of humor.

At the University of Chicago, people tell a wonderful (and possibly apocryphal) story about the legendary president Robert Maynard Hutchins. Called to the Illinois state Capitol in Springfield to appear before the local version of the McCarthy hearings, Hutchins faced a group of state legislators who clearly smelled blood in the water. "President Hutchins, I understand that at your university, you teach communism," said one of the panelists with a gleam in his eye. "Yes," replied Hutchins without hesitation. "We also teach cancer." Sometimes a knowing laugh can be the most powerful laugh of all.

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