

PEP ROSENFELD

WORK-LAUGH BALANCE

Why and how humor will make you
and your team more successful



FOREWORD

By Seth Meyers

I have hosted a talk show for ten years and the decade before that I was a cast member and head writer on *Saturday Night Live*. Yet, if pressed on the most exciting time of my professional life I would point back to the two-year period beginning in 1997 when I risked everything and made the rash decision to move to Amsterdam for the purposes of performing at the comedy theater Boom Chicago. I left everything behind. My job as a waiter at a Mexican restaurant and... nothing else. Looking back, I guess I really didn't risk that much. Still, it was a leap, and I was lucky that the person waiting on the other side of the Atlantic to catch me was Pep Rosenfeld.

My first impression of Pep is one that has held firm in the entirety of the time that I have known him. Thoughtful, kind, patient, and above all else, deeply funny. All these tools came in handy as he took a young group of talented comedians and slowly but surely taught us how to take the lessons they learned in America and apply them to Dutch audiences. And we were not an easy lot to deal with! We were a mix of petulance, stubbornness, and homesickness aggravated by the fact that we weren't getting the same laughs abroad that we were used to back in the States.

(Also not an easy lot to deal with? Dutch comedy audiences. Don't get me wrong, I love 'em to death, but the next sympathy laugh they give will be the *first one*.)

And yet, despite those early hiccups, we learned how to make it work. Bad shows turned to okay shows turned to good shows and before we knew it, we were making work we were proud of. In large part because of Pep's steady hand. He knew how to listen to our problems, manage our egos, and most importantly, get the best out of us.

This is why he's the perfect person to write this book. Pep is not a comedian telling you how comedy can help your business. He's a businessman whose business is comedy. And he's also a comedian! When comedy works it looks easy, but getting there is hard. But any hard work, in any field, is easier if you can bring comedy into the equation.

The same funny, steady hand that steered me to success in my first professional endeavor and sent me on my way is on full display in the pages of this book. I'm jealous of anyone who is about to experience Pep and his wisdom for the first time. You're in for a treat!

INTRODUCTION

Humor Is a Magic Power

Welcome! If you bought—or were gifted—this book and are getting ready to read it, that's great. Not only do I hope you enjoy it, I am confident it will help you use humor to make your work life better. More on that in a moment, but for now you can go ahead and skip the next paragraph.

Okay, this paragraph is for folks who don't actually own the book yet. Hello! Wait, are you in a bookstore!? Respect. Anyway, I'm guessing you're checking out this book because you liked the title, and now you want to see if it's right for you. Or if it's right for that special someone in your life who's just special enough to earn a gift book. So let me be honest with you: this book is *perfect* for you and them! Why?

We all work. And we all like to laugh. This book is about how to do both at the same time—and why doing both at the same time is so powerful and so valuable. It's about how to make your workplace a place where you and your colleagues can appreciate and enjoy humor together. It's about why humor at work is better for you, your team, your company, and the quality of the work you all do together. But at its core, this book is about magic. Because humor is a magic power.

Humor connects people, even people who might not naturally get along. It communicates messages and makes them more memorable. It allows people to see subjects—and problems—in a new light. And it can literally stop people in their tracks and make them undergo an involuntary, very enjoyable physical experience: laughing. It's as if Harry Potter pointed his wand and said "Bellylaughicus!" And unlike Harry Potter spells or the Force from *Star Wars*, the magic of humor is *real*. And you can learn how to use it.

This book was almost titled *Humor Makes Business Better*—which I think you'll agree is much less catchy than *Work-Laugh Balance*. But it's true. In fact one of my core beliefs—one I'll prove as the book goes on—is that a dash of humor's magic makes all business go down a bit more smoothly, a bit more memorably, and a lot more successfully. And it makes it all a bit more human too. Because humor actually makes *everything* better. Now, of course I would say that. I'm a comedian. Maybe if I was a plumber I'd say "You know what makes everything better? Clean pipes." And to be honest, clean pipes probably do make a lot of things better. Clogged pipes certainly make everything worse.

Nevertheless, it's still true. Every situation is better when you can laugh about it. Even—and perhaps especially—difficult situations. Even a funeral. When my father died almost four years ago, I spoke at the end of his memorial. Was the first sentence I said a joke? Of course not. I'm not a monster. But the fourth and fifth sentences? They were absolutely jokes. I said:

My dad has affected everyone in this room and beyond. He made a big impression, and it lasted a long time. So I'd like to take this opportunity to talk about my dad and the effect he had on my life. I promise I *will* go on too long. But as my dad used to say, [my dad's voice] "Don't rush me."

Those lines killed.

That is to say, they killed *for a funeral*. It wasn't like Saturday night at a live comedy show. But they certainly made everyone feel a bit better at this somber occasion. We all felt even more connected. And though sad, everyone was a bit more open and ready for whatever I had to say. The humor had a magical effect on the situation. It lightened the room. It made things slightly better. And that's the effect I'm talking about.

You might be thinking: Doesn't some humor make people feel worse? Couldn't the wrong joke have ruined your dad's funeral? And can't the wrong kind of humor make the workplace feel less safe? The answer to all three questions is a firm yes, Yes, there definitely is a wrong kind of humor, a joke whose effect—intended or not—is to make people feel worse. That's the thing about magic. For every Harry Potter there's a Voldemort and for all the Jedi there are *exactly two Sith*. Chapter 5 will talk about this dark magic and how to avoid it.

At the time of this book's writing, I've been making a good living doing comedy for over 30 years. More like 40 years if you include working in Chicago's unpaid improv comedy scene. And more like 50 if you count unsuccessfully trying to distract my parents from fighting and then divorcing.

I'm one of the founders of Boom Chicago, the comedy theater in Amsterdam where many successful comedians got their start (and whose history you can read about in the very funny *The 30 Most Important Years in Dutch History*). I still write and perform comedy shows on the Boom Chicago stage where we embody our purpose: Life is better when we laugh together. In 2000 I was on the writing staff for *Saturday Night Live*, and we were nominated for an Emmy. Though if there's one thing you know about a guy who mentions how he was nominated for an Emmy, it's that he didn't win that Emmy.

I've got a friend named Jason. I met Jason after he did a standup gig in LA. Back then he was also writing screenplays. He's a smart, funny guy. He is also a tech-savvy fella who created a piece of software that changed how movie studios keep track of their stock. Or something; I've never quite understood it fully. But it took off and that became his main gig: running his software company. Doing so involved a lot of meetings and conferences—and each one offered a chance/obligation to speak. He had to sway potential customers, inspire partners, and outdo the competition at each one. Now, I'm going to go ahead and assume that most of his success has been due to the superiority of the product and company he created.

But having said that, Jason told me once, “Whenever there's an occasion where everyone speaks, it's like I have a superpower. I did comedy. And being funny is a superpower. It gives me an unfair advantage over everyone else. Even at the holiday parties when everyone makes a toast. Everyone is blown away by how well I communicate, and it's just not fair. Of course you were blown away: I'm a businessman who's also a comedian.”

Hmmm. Maybe I should email Jason and make sure he's cool with me quoting him. I bet he is.

At Boom Chicago, we've seen firsthand the power that Jason was talking about—the power of humor's magic. For the last decade, my main focus has been using comedy to improve business events. One of my primary tasks is to gather information about a company—what they do, how they do it, and the people that do the work. Then I write and perform a standup routine about that company, their industry, and the team. There's a bit more to it than that, but you get the gist. So I've seen firsthand how comedy can help turn what can be dry events into something special. Almost like magic, funny means engaging. Funny means memorable. Funny means better.

I bet if you think about it, you can confirm what I'm saying by considering the last event you were at. This could be a tech or business event, or an internal event for your company, or a company you do business with. What do you remember from that event? I suspect you remember one or two big messages. I bet you do *not* remember much from the myriad of PowerPoints you were shown. But I bet you can think of something funny that happened. Because humor sticks. It makes an impression. And if that humor was combined with one of those main messages: *abracadabra!* The main message was linked to something that both you and plenty of other attendees actually took away from the meeting.

Selfishly, I hope I hosted that event and you remember plenty of funny things I said. And if I was doing my job right, I linked those funny things to ideas that were important to the organizer

of that event, and you remember those ideas too. The first two chapters of this book will dive into why humor is so good for individuals and so powerful in the workplace.

Quick story: I've got a friend whose name is...let's call him "Paul." I've known Paul since we were in nursery school together. During our childhood, Paul was the person my mother liked to compare me to. Unfavorably. As in, "Why can't you be more like Paul?" And it wasn't just me. Lots of kids in my class were compared to Paul by their parents. And not for nothing. Not only was Paul naturally smart, he was kind. He was positive. And he was the classic good kid: He studied. He worked hard. He played sports—was the captain of the swim team. And during the summer, he was even a lifeguard at the beach. So naturally, toward the end of high school, when the thin and thick envelopes started arriving from fancy colleges denoting rejection or acceptance, Paul received a thick one from Yale. I received a thin envelope from Yale, as well as several other Ivy League schools.

And while it would be fun to write that Paul went to Yale, smoked so much pot that he dropped out, and now manages a weed dispensary on Clark Street in Chicago, that's not what happened. Paul killed it at Yale. He went on to go to medical school at the University of Chicago and killed it there too. Now Paul is a well-respected family doctor. If my mother was the type that still compared me unfavorably to other people—which I'm glad to say she is not—she could fairly say, "Why can't you be more like Paul *the doctor*?"

I had a dream once that I was on a road trip with Paul. In the dream we were driving along an empty road in the desert, kind

of like one of those deserted roads in *Breaking Bad*, when we happened upon a car wreck. Someone had driven off the road and plowed into something, and it was a mess. The front of the car was all twisted up and mangled. Smoke was pouring out of the hood almost cartoon-style. I couldn't see any blood or bodies, because thankfully my subconscious wasn't in an R-rated mood.

Paul leapt from the car and held up his hands like a TV surgeon fresh from scrubbing up. He surveyed the scene and declared, heroically, "I'm a doctor. How can I help?" In the dream, I *also* leapt from the car. I *also* held up my hands like that same well-scrubbed surgeon and declared, somewhat less heroically, "Okay... what's funny here?"

I tell this story for two reasons. First, to demonstrate just how deeply that inferiority complex was apparently internalized. Even as a successful adult, my subconscious seemed to ask, "Why can't you be more like Paul, *the doctor*?"

Second, to show that comedians are always looking for the joke. Even in our dreams. Even in awful, PG-13-rated, car-wreck dreams. We see the world in a weird, interconnected way, and can't turn off that divergent way of thinking. No matter what the situation, we hold up our hands like a TV surgeon and ask, "What's funny here?" We can't help it. We see the humor in everything, all the time, everywhere. Even when seemingly—and perhaps wildly—inappropriate, we're making connections and coming up with jokes. Chapter 3 of this book will focus on how to make those comic connections and find humor where you didn't see it before. How to develop that comedian's

mind. In that chapter, I'll even include exercises to practice the skills I talk about, so you can put them to use right away. Chapter 4 will help you turn those connections into real, honest-to-goodness jokes.

By the way: Do comedians always say every joke we think of? Of course not. At least most of us don't. We don't say every joke we think of any more than comedy muggles say every single thought that they have. But we certainly *think them*. Are there times when we make jokes we probably shouldn't have made? Oh yes; see "Sex Chair" in the Chapter 2 FAQ.

A disclaimer before we dive in: I refer a lot in this book to how "comedians" work. But every comedian is different and every comedy writer is different. So frequently when I write "comedian" or "comedy writer," while I am doing my best to tell you how comedians in general work, I'm mostly telling you how the specific comedian writing this book works. And when I say, "I'm mostly telling you," my goal is that this book feels like a conversation, not some academic treatise on humor. This is a very personal topic for me. So while I'll cite some academic studies and other sources in endnotes at the end of the book, at the end of each *chapter* there won't be citations. Instead, there will be an FAQ. There, I'll imagine questions one might ask to dive deeper into the details of that chapter.

Will this book make you a professional comedian? Will Netflix sign you to do your next strategy or sales presentation as a new special? The friendly answer is "probably not." The honest answer is "no." The truth is, some people are funnier than others. They are the folks that become professional comedians and

comedy writers. And if you are one of those people *and* are reading this book you are probably killing at your current job. Maybe take some classes and try out your stuff at an open mic night.

So no, this book won't get you a slot opening for [name of the hottest comedian at the time of this reading].

But here's what this book *will* do for you:

- It will demonstrate why laughing and humor are so valuable, especially in the workplace.
- It will help you become funnier by teaching you seven specific skills to find what's funny in a given situation—and offer you challenges to put those skills to the test.
- It will teach methods to use humor at work and in your leadership.
- It will show you how to use humor to improve your work environment.
- It will illustrate how to recognize—and avoid—negative humor.

So let's hold up our hands, TV-surgeon style, and start figuring out what's funny. It's time to master the magic of workplace humor and make life a little better for you and your team. And full disclosure: I thought about ending this chapter by referring back to the beginning (see the section on callbacks in Chapter 4) and saying something like, "Welcome to humor Hogwarts" or "Now you're a comedy Padawan." But I think we would both agree: doing so wouldn't have been all that funny.

INTRODUCTION FAQ

Q: Will this book make me a comedian?

A: I feel like I was pretty clear about this, but no, it probably won't. What it will do is help you understand and appreciate why humor is a major benefit to your work life—and help you to be funnier while you're there. Funny at work is easier than funny onstage.

Q: But not a professional comedian?

A: No, probably not.

Q: I'm not funny—can this book help?

A: Yes! After reading it, you'll understand how to learn what your colleagues and teammates are thinking about and what they will find funny. You'll develop seven skills to find humor—even where you didn't expect to find it. And you'll be armed with basic techniques for creating jokes.

Q: So I can end up a professional comedian?

A: Wow.

Q: Why do you say humor is like magic?

A: Humor has a weird power over people, one they can't quite

control. When you find something funny, you can't help it; you smile, you laugh, you feel more connected to the group you're with, and you feel more positive about the person who made you laugh.

Q: That sounds like the start of a creepy chapter about hitting on strangers.

A: Hmm. I think that says more about you than about what I wrote. Though to be fair, humor is great for making human connections. So yes, it's probably helpful for hitting on strangers.

Q: "Probably"?

A: Okay, humor is definitely a helpful tool when hitting on strangers, but that is not what this book is about.

Q: Did you really make jokes at your father's funeral?

A: Absolutely. And the MC of the event was my best friend Andrew Moskos. He made more jokes than I did. He was on fire. My dad wouldn't have had it any other way.

Q: How long did you work at *Saturday Night Live*?

A: Not long, like half a season. It was a fantastic experience. It was Tina Fey and Jimmy Fallon's first season doing "Weekend Update", and I wrote for that part of the show. I would write jokes in what I thought was Tina's voice, and when she used one, she would tweak it to make it harder and funnier. Seeing what she did with my jokes was a powerful learning experience.

Q: Did you actually email your friend Jason and ask him if he was cool with you paraphrasing that thing you attributed to him?

A: I did! He wrote me back and said, "I love the inclusion of the anecdote."

Q: What's "Paul's" real name?

A: Paul.

Q: What's a "comedy muggle"?

A: Really? I was sure everyone would get that reference. A muggle is a term from the *Harry Potter* series that refers to non-magic people. So a comedy muggle would be a non-comedy person.

Q: Hey if you didn't get into Yale, where did you go to college?

A: I went to Northwestern where I was part of the Mee-Ow Show, the improv comedy show that was not just the inspiration for the format of Boom Chicago shows, but was a major factor in my life turning out the way it did. So though I was disappointed at the time, these days I'm grateful the Yale admissions board gave me a hard pass.

Q: Enough questions—I can't wait to read the book so I can become a professional comedian!

A: You're doing a bit, right?