

Join Julie Livingston, founder and president of WantLeverage Communications and host of PR Patter, a series of talks focusing on relevant topics in marketing and public relations today, in conversation with Kathy Klotz-Guest, keynote speaker, author, storytelling + creativity strategist, and improv comedian about bringing humor into the workplace. Bringing humor into the workplace helps provide psychological safety for employees and create trusting relationships. Learn more about the role that storytelling, humor, and trust brings in the workplace with Livingston and Klotz-Guest.

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"We're always dealing with people. People at the end of the day do people stuff. I used to joke that LinkedIn was where humor goes to die. Look, COVID happened. I think it was always this way, but I think what, what the pandemic did for us is it opened our eyes to how much maybe work isn't fulfilling for people, right? We're not getting our needs met. Psychological safety isn't there. Trust is low. Trust of leaders is at an all time low. It's because we don't see leaders being vulnerable, caring about people reaching out, creating psychologically safe environments to laugh, to try, to fail, to grow from. I think there's just a hunger for people to show up, be more real, just show up real. Humor is part of that. Humor says, I see you, we're all imperfect. Let's laugh together."

"Your number one goal as a leader is to build rapport, trust, and psychological safety. If you add humor because you think your job is to be the headliner at an event, then you're missing the point. Because humor is to advance and bring your people into greater trusting relationships."

"Nobody will follow you if they don't like and trust you. Humor is emotional intelligence"

--Kathy Klotz-Guest

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### **Transcript:**

Julie Livingston:

Good morning everyone. I'm Julie Livingston with Want Leverage Communications here for another installment of PR Patter-- conversations with people across my marketing and public relations network on topics that hopefully matter to you. Today I'm so excited to talk a little bit about humor, and my special guest is Kathy Klotz-Guest. She combines decades of tech communications and performing comedy to help leaders and cultures to be braver, happier and

more effective using humor as the founder of Keeping It Human. Kathy's last book was called *Stop Boring Me* and was named a CEO must read by Ink Magazine last December. She placed in the top three for funniest comedians in the San Francisco Bay Area, and third in height. You can check out her current LinkedIn course Leading in the Moment with Improv, and her next course under development is called Humor for Leaders. Welcome, Kathy. I can't think of a better way to start off a morning with a laugh.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

I agree. Thanks for having me, Julie. Y'all need it. Let's laugh.

Julie Livingston:

You know, I recently had the pleasure of being featured in a Morning Brew segment called It's Good Work. That was, that's comical. In fact, I'll put it in the chat here. It's gone viral, which is just crazy. I've never been viral before, so it's my first time. I think it's gotten close to 400,000 views on TikTok. It made me realize how much we need more humor in the workplace. The segment I did was called Why is LinkedIn So Weird? I do a lot of my work for leaders on LinkedIn, and it just kind of pokes fun at it, and it kind of makes you think about the value of LinkedIn in different ways and what it does for you. As a leader myself and having led marketing communications teams over three decades, I've realized the importance of humor and when it's not there. I've worked for leaders who are very serious all the time. What a drag that is. Why does humor matter at work, Kathy? What does it bring to us?

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Because people matter.

Julie Livingston:

Right? Hello? Right.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

It's like soil and greed. It's people. We're always dealing with people. As you well know, Julie, given the work that you do in PR, you're always thinking in stories and people. People at the end of the day do people stuff. I used to joke that LinkedIn was where humor goes to die. Look, COVID happened. I think it was always this way, but I think what the pandemic did for us is it opened our eyes to how much maybe work isn't fulfilling for people, right? We're not getting our needs met. Psychological safety isn't there. Trust is low. Trust of leaders is at an all time low. You know, I don't have to tell you, you know, if you look at measures like the Edelman Barometer, we look at the erosion of trust.

It's because we don't see leaders being vulnerable, caring about people reaching out, creating psychologically safe environments to laugh, to try, to fail, to grow from. I think there's just a hunger for people to show up, be more real, just show up real. Humor is part of that. Humor says, I see you, we're all imperfect. Let's laugh together. It's okay to be imperfect. I think there's just that absolute need. It always mattered. I think where we are at this particular time, you know, coming out of a pandemic, it revealed to us how big that gap is.

Julie Livingston:

I was just reading some of the research in an article in Harvard Business Review. The facts support this, that when leaders inject humor into the workplace, they are 27% more admired. They're more motivating, their teams are more engaged. They're more than twice as likely to develop creative solutions to business problems and innovate. Who doesn't want that? But you know, you and I were talking earlier about how humor really to be funny takes a little bit of courage and guts. So talk about that too.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

It does take courage. I'd also say, I think part of why we're so scared is that we equate humor with funny, and humor does not equal funny. I do stand up comedy and improv comedy, and I teach, and I just did it at a winery. I was telling Julie out here, it was so much fun. I say that because it's important to differentiate. If you can laugh, you have a sense of humor, congratulations! You're human, you breathe. Look, humor is our birthright. Funny is the specific goal of being funny. And that's wonderful. Sometimes they're the same thing. But I separate them because sometimes just being humorous and playful is enough to lighten a room. And funny can be a heavy burden. If an executive or a leader is naturally funny, that's wonderful.

It doesn't mean that that has to be the requirement. We can just lighten up a little bit, be more playful, and that is better than nothing. That is wonderful. It does take courage. It takes a tremendous amount of courage, because if you're going to do it, you have to understand that there are some rules of the road. And honestly, there's just one rule. I could give you 50 rules, but I won't do that. The thing is, people are already scared of the idea of humor at work. They're scared. The more rules we give, the more people get in their head. Very simple here, here's my litmus test. If you are bringing people together with your humor, your jokes, your stories, whatever, whatever expressions of humor, if you're bringing people together, lifting them up, making them laugh at a common human situation or your human situation, that's great. That's a thumbs up. If in fact, your humor comes at the expense of people, and putting them down, that's bad. That is the single greatest litmus test that I've found in my experience to be true.

Julie Livingston:

That's so right on. Years ago I was leading a marketing team for an organization, and actually the CEO was kind of a funny guy, but his humor was not necessarily in tune with what was off color, and it wasn't in tune with the team. Right. So I think you really do need to be sensitive to that. He started this thing where he was circulating jokes by email that were to some people kind of offensive, you know, about women and sex. And it was like, yep. Where is this going? That did not work out well for him. So I think you do have to know your audience, right?

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Yeah. You have to know your audience. You always have to remember in the back of your head, your job as a leader isn't to be, to be headlining at the, at the yuck hut.

Julie Livingston:

It's not.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

I mean, we all want a headline and the “yes.” But here's the thing, your number one goal as a leader is to build rapport, trust, and psychological safety. If you add humor because you think your job is to be the headliner at an event, then you're missing the point because humor is to advance, to bring your people into greater trust and relationship. Safety and humor has to advance that goal. So anything that undoes that goal is not okay. The rules are different. I mean, if I'm doing standup, yeah, I might say a few things, that I wouldn't say if I'm doing a corporate gig, but I know what stage I'm on. I think the number one thing we have to be mindful of is, does this advance trust, does this build on relationships with people? Teams need that trust. Your humor has to always keep that in mind.

Julie Livingston:

I work with a lot of CEOs on developing their executive presence on LinkedIn specifically, and through their thought leadership and getting the place in news articles, etc.. I find that when they have a warm kind of sense of humor, we can bring that out through the language they use through images of them, and you could even see it in somebody's headshot right. The way you smile, that kind of twinkle in your eye. It really does emanate a type of warmth and it establishes a connection that's, that's, that's palpable.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

It really does. It's empathy. It's empathy, and it's approachability. There are studies that have been done, and I know Julie, this is right up your alley for what you do. You know lots of research shows that when we look at leadership, we look at things like warmth and competence— and competence matters, but it's pretty binary. I mean, you either are competent or you're not. So at a certain point, you know, okay, you've checked the box. But the real difference in connection with teams and leaders, at a certain point, confidence is not relevant. What matters is warmth.

Julie Livingston:

It's how you connect with people.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

It's how you connect. Part of being warm is that humor. Can you admit that if you make a mistake, are you able to be human about it? Are you able to not take yourself so seriously, take what you do seriously, but don't take yourself seriously every minute. Right.

Julie Livingston:

Not at all. It used to be that, well, and maybe some places are still like this, you know, you go to work, it's very serious. People at work are looking to achieve serious goals. But if you can have fun while doing that isn't that the most incredible motivator? I mean, how many people do you know, who really look forward to going into the office or working remotely and connecting with their teams? Because they know that there's gonna be a bit of fun in it.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

We need fun. I think in the past somehow, somewhere along the line, fun got a bad rap. I think part of it is because of leaders that, you know, did send out these, you know, “copy all” on these inappropriate jokes and, and they were like, you know, that's funny. And I'm the leader. No, it's not funny. But I think if we just step back and realize that, you know, playfulness and the ability to make mistakes and then learn from them and be imperfect and connect with each other on that is so important, to build trust and to the psychological safety for people to feel they can speak up and give ideas and to not feel judged by them. That we cannot have innovation without fun and playfulness. We can't.

Julie Livingston:

No, you really can't. One of the things, when I'm working on an executive's LinkedIn profile, for example, I often say, let's bring out the human in that person. Because I want them to be seen as approachable and accessible and real. Not like, not a Barbie doll, not a figurehead, but a human being who has, you know, really gotten through some hurdles, has had phenomenal successes, and has done interesting things. That's really what I think makes a real leader.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Yes. Our job as leaders, I think sometimes we get carried away with this kind of thought leader. It sounds like it, with all the gravitas of my finger quotes. Because it sounds so serious and so, ugh. But I think at the end of the day, nobody will follow you if they don't like you and trust you. You know, laughter builds trust. Laughter is the shortest distance between two people. And the thing is, laughter is the single greatest predictor of a healthy environment. If you walk into an environment, and I can walk in and I can be in an environment less than five minutes, Julie and I can tell you if it's healthy or not. I can tell you, because the biggest bell weather of that, the single greatest predictor is laughter in that environment organic, not you know, the fake like, oh my God, this, this thought leader is needy, we better laugh at his joke. But like organic.

Julie Livingston:

Right. You can see it in people's faces and you can just feel the vibe.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

You can see it, you can feel it. You can't fake that stuff.

Julie Livingston:

How can CEOs and other leaders do to advance humor in the workplace?

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Show up. First of all, show up as that talking about it, yes. Make it safe, but model it, show up and not take yourself so seriously. Lighten up. If you make mistakes, admit it. If you want a place to celebrate imperfection, show up and talk about it. And model that. Make it safe. Let people know. Let people know. Share stories far and wide in terms.

Julie Livingston:

I was just going to ask you about that. How does storytelling play into bringing humor?

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Stories are everything. Look, stories are social proof and stories show and tell. Better than, you know, me telling you that this is a safe environment. Sharing stories is really critical. Share stories of screw ups or funny things, or bring it in and show stories of imperfection. Or maybe your team tried something and it didn't work, but they learned a big lesson. Get good at telling stories that are humorous and that are real. We don't have to be funny at a microphone. We can just tell really great stories in our teams to lift people up. Stories are absolutely everything. Leaders, more than just, even being great joke tellers should learn how to tell stories of social proof. That's how we show. We don't tell, we show.

Julie Livingston:

How do stories prompt different kinds of thinking?

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Well, stories are everything. I think if we can move people and inspire people, we let them know that it is safe here. Those stories can be of people who maybe tried something and it didn't work, but that team survived and lived to tell the tale, and this is what they learned from it. The behavior we want to reward and we want to see, we've got to tell stories that inspire more of that. So whatever we want in that environment, let's get good at the prompts, the inspirational prompts, and the stories that show that it's okay to fail here. It's okay to try things. It's okay to be human. And we value that. Think of stories as social proof. What do you wanna see more of? Let's start telling those types of stories.

Julie Livingston:

I think that they can inspire people and teams to really be creative and unafraid to put forth new ideas. I think that when you have a sense of calm and like I could be me in the workplace, it really gets people to pull together more and to be more agile and resilient. When you're more at ease, the ideas start flowing.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

It comes from a belief that I'm gonna be okay. If I make a mistake, if I show up and it doesn't work, I'm gonna be okay.

Julie Livingston:

I've worked with leaders who admit that, you know, we tried something and it didn't really work, so okay, team, let's huddle and let's figure something out. So that we can get past this and do it a different way.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Yeah. Can we laugh? Can we learn from it? Those are the things that signal to everybody in the organization that it's okay. That's the social proof people need. I think more leaders need to

understand that a humorous story about imperfection or something really human can inspire in so many more ways than a joke.

Julie Livingston:

I think that what you're saying is that telling jokes is not necessarily about bringing humor into the workplace, but it can be.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

It could be.

Julie Livingston:

It can be, right. If you're selective and strategic about it.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Exactly. Humor is bigger than jokes. Jokes are a part of humor, and I love jokes, and if you're a great joke teller, do it. But I think it's bigger than that. Humor is playfulness, it's stories, it's whatever brings people together to celebrate imperfection. That could be a lot of things. Jokes are just a small part of it.

Julie Livingston:

Are there certain kinds of exercises or activities that could help leaders to bring humor into the workplace and make it part of the regular culture?

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Absolutely. So really quickly, there's was a study done by Rod Martin, a psychologist about 20 years ago. From that research, he developed what's called the four humor styles. Now there's many humor styles, but basically everything bubbles up into four styles, and it has to do with the individual and the team. When we look at what humor works well in organizations, there's a style called affiliative. Affiliative humor lifts everybody up. That's what leaders really need to be going for self enhancing. Meaning, how do I lighten up a stressful situation as an individual, self-enhancing? And also affiliative, how do I lift my team up? With that in mind, think about the ways that you can show up and be lighthearted, and talk about the imperfection of the company. Own it because your employees are going, do they know? Does that leader know that this is happening here? Own it. Show some humility. You can have a funny story that doesn't celebrate your success. All those kinds of things. Think about storytelling in your team. What if at every meeting you warmed up and went around the room and said let's build a story one word at a time.

Julie Livingston:

God, I love that.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Do that. Let's all laugh at each other together, not at each other's expense, but let's just laugh at our common silliness. Or maybe you do a yes and exercise. And each other go around the room

and just see how silly and crazy your idea can get, because you don't have to do the idea. But let's just engage in the "what if."

Julie Livingston:

It's a great icebreaker?

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Great icebreaker, and you're going to laugh. You're going to, there's no judgment. There's no judgment, there's no yes buts. The whole exercise is to support each other, just to support each other's ideas. That kind of stuff gets people laughing in a creative frame of mind and makes it safe to engage in big idea thinking with no judgment.

Julie Livingston:

I love those, Kathy. Those are so easily actionable and wonderful.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Anyone can do them easily.

Julie Livingston:

I do find that when I am working with a leader on their communications and positioning them as a thought leader and as a subject matter expert, I find that they are so much more easily promotable when they come across as human. When they, when they're smiling and engaged with people, and they really are able to get the pulse of the people they work with. I think that has so much to do with, you know, not funny, but humorous.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Funny is great. If you are really good at being funny and affiliative with me, meaning remembering that your goal is to lift people up— if those coincide for you, that's awesome. If you know you're not a great joke teller, that's good, but you're a great storyteller. Ooh, that's great too. That's great too. If you can do that, if you can do that, what you're really doing is, to your point, it's you're, you're building trust. You're building trust and togetherness and connectedness, and that is what teams really desperately need. How does this leader make me feel?

Julie Livingston:

I find in pitching those kinds of leaders to the media, for example, that they have more credibility because of the way they tell stories with a little bit of a twist. They are more apt to be asked to do media interviews, broadcast interviews, podcast interviews, and speaking engagements. Because they're able to bring that humor into any situation and connect with an audience. It's a great and very vital business skill to have.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

It's huge. It cannot be underestimated. The benefits you talked about earlier. It's innovation, it's approachability, it's competence, it's warmth. All those things are needed for leaders to lead. I



mean, you're not a leader if no one wants to follow you.

Julie Livingston:

No, you're not.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Nobody's there.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

It really is. We have to get away from this, this idea of a leader and just being impenetrable and impervious to showing emotion and all this stuff. I think we all know, as you said, the best leaders are able to really understand the humanity and the emotions of their audiences. That's what we're looking for. We're looking for that awareness. Humor is emotional intelligence. Humor is IQ folks. I think that we're afraid of it. It's changing and it's my goal, part of my mission is to change it. I think what we're starting to see is that people go, oh yeah, the smartest leaders with the highest emotional intelligence, they get that it's a people skill. And that's exactly right.

Julie Livingston:

Ugh, Kathy, this has been such a fun conversation. I'm so glad that we connected and thank you for getting up so early at the crack of dawn. This was a pleasure. I hope you'll come back some time. And everyone stay tuned. We'll have another edition of PR Patter next week.

Kathy Klotz-Guest:

Thanks, Julie.