

## "I had to convince people that work is not punishment"



KATE HULL RODGERS has been a humour consultant for nearly 20 years and has worked all over the world. With her actor husband, Bill Rodgers, she runs a consultancy called HumourUs in Lincolnshire, England. In addition to giving talks and workshops, she makes regular television appearances and is the author of *Pearls of Bizdom: How to Go from Grit to Great* (Writersworld Limited, ISBN 978-1-904181-82-8, £9.99), which is based on columns she wrote for a Sheffield newspaper. Hull Rodgers describes it as "perfect for the train or the toilet or the tired". You can see Hull Rodgers in action on her website, [www.humourus.org.uk](http://www.humourus.org.uk).

### How did you become a humour consultant?

I used to be an actress and that didn't go terribly well, so I had to reinvent myself. In fact, it went so badly that I became mentally ill and was hospitalized for psychiatric reasons, and that very much had to do with stress. When I got out of hospital, I didn't want to go back into theatre, so I started teaching workshops about how to deal with stress. And what I realized was that I'd really begun to get mentally ill when I started to take myself too seriously. Gradually I developed workshops that were about humour and healing. I started with looking at the strategic use of humour to deal with stress, which then developed into the use of humour for communication skills and for employee engagement, and now all my work is in a corporate environment.

### What kind of reactions do you get from participants?

When I first started working in Britain, I was met with a bit of cynicism and disdain. And because I've got the North American accent, it was an automatic, "Oh, right, another American idea" — even though I'm Canadian. So I really had to win people over to the idea that work was not a punishment, and that work was not "Get your head down and get on with it". I don't know whether the world has changed or I've changed and gotten better at what I

do, but now when I come in, people are already on board, which is great. I used to have to do the "why". Now I do much more of the "how".

### And it hasn't got to the stage where you've become so stressed with your new job that you need a way out?

[Laughs.] Well I've had those moments. That's the funny thing about stress. You need to learn the lessons constantly. It's like you can't go to the gym once, and suddenly you're in great physical condition. It's the same thing about anything in business. You constantly have to be rethinking, how can I be selling this better, how can I be communicating better? Stress is a huge challenge in today's workplace.

### Can you give an example of the kind of thing you do?

We look at things like simply practising laughter, which is one of the wackier ideas if you ask me. The idea is just creating laughter for no reason, so that people get their endorphins flowing, and they get a euphoric feeling. We all remember when we were kids and got the giggles. And when our mothers said, "What's so funny?" we couldn't define it. So if we want to feel good in our workplace, maybe when something funny happens we should allow the laughter to happen, and not have those phrases like, "Oh, better get back to work", or "All joking aside". Among other ideas, we look at doing acts of kindness in the workplace. People just do nice things for others, without expecting them to do something nice for us. So it's not all about telling jokes, but about really practical, simple ideas that don't necessarily take budget, but what they need is buy-in from the employees.

### Do you plan your presentations with British people in mind? Would they be different if you were dealing with Canadians or Americans?

Absolutely. There's a universal thing about humans. Most of us would like to be warm, to be fed, to protect our families and to have enough money. But every individual has a different sense of humour, and one of the major things that influences that is culture: the country in which you're brought up, the country in which you're working, the sector in which you're working. The sense of humour in a bank is different from the sense of humour when you're fighting fires. I've worked in 29 countries, and I can honestly say that every different country has a different sense of humour. When I work in Britain, it's a very caustic sense of humour; it's a very teasing, put-down sort of humour. If you work in North America, it's profoundly different — "gentle" isn't the right word, but people find other things funny. In Europe, in the Netherlands, for example, people find different things funny compared to people in Germany.