

Disarming with Humor

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Abstract

Attending an academic advising meeting can be a challenge for students who either do not know what to expect during the advising process or fear that it will be a difficult exchange with the advisor. This article highlights a scenario of a reluctant student and explores how academic advisors can make their students comfortable and begin to foster connection with their students through humor. The article examines how humor can be intentionally infused into the Appreciative Advising framework specifically in the initial Disarm phase, which is focused on helping academic advisors build rapport and trust with their students.

Keywords

Appreciative Advising, academic advising, Disarm, humor, advisor

For many students, meeting with an academic advisor can induce stress because they do not know what to expect during the meeting or because they are struggling academically and worry that they may be in trouble. Because of these fears, students may be reluctant to schedule a meeting or if they do show up to meet with their advisor, they may not be willing to disclose much information to the advisor. To illustrate this point, consider the following advising scenario:

Elizabeth, a student in her second semester of college has been placed on academic probation. She received an email from her academic advisor requesting a meeting to discuss a plan for getting back on track academically. Elizabeth is anxious and avoids scheduling a meeting for several weeks despite continued outreach attempts from her advisor by both email and phone. Realizing that she has an advising hold that precludes her from registering for next term's classes, she reluctantly schedules an appointment with her advisor. As she sits in the waiting room, she nervously fidgets in her seat just wanting this experience to be over. When the advisor walks out to greet her, Elizabeth's heart starts pounding as she anticipates the advisor will be stern and punitive. Instead, the advisor warmly greets her with a smile and a handshake. After introducing themselves by their first names and confirming that Elizabeth prefers to go by "Lizzie," the advisor invites her to walk back together to their office. Making small talk as they walk, the advisor asks Lizzie if she had any issues finding the office today. Lizzie explains that parking was a nightmare, but she still made it in on time to which the advisor responds, with a chuckle, "Oh, I hear ya, Lizzie! Some days it feels like being on a merry-go-round from all the times I circle the parking lot trying to find a spot." Lizzie smiles at the joke because she can relate and she begins to feel some of her tension subside. "Maybe this won't be so bad after all?" Lizzie wonders.

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Although the scenario serves as an example of a reluctant student arriving for an advising appointment, it is one that academic advisors will likely observe at some point in their career. The question then becomes, how do academic advisors make their students comfortable with the advising process? In the scenario above, there were several nonverbal (e.g., smile, handshake) and verbal (e.g., name, small talk) disarming behaviors that led to a positive first impression (Bloom, 2008), which also included the intentional use of humor (e.g., chuckle, joke) to put the student at ease. Humor is a natural part day-to-day life that can positively influence one's emotions and social interactions (Lee & Lim, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore the benefits of humor and the do's and don'ts of using humor in advising meetings as part of the Disarm phase of the Appreciative Advising framework.

Benefits of Humor

Given the multitude of strategies and techniques that academic advisors have in their professional toolboxes, why use humor? In describing the function of humor, Mark Twain (1895) wrote, "Well, humor is the great thing, the saving thing, after all. The minute it crops up, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations and resentments flit away, and a sunny spirit takes their place" (p. 61). The positive benefit of humor is exemplified in the scenario presented above with Lizzie's tension easing following a warm greeting and the strategic use of humor by her advisor. To explain this phenomenon, humor relief theorists "perceive humor and laughter as a release of the tension and inhibitions generated by social constraints" (Carrell, 2008, p. 313). In the scenario, the perceived constraints of the academic advising discussion for a student on probation created the tension. The academic advisor's use of humor to disarm provided the relief.

Overview of Appreciative Advising

The use of the Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework as a medium to infuse humor into advising sessions is one way to create a warm and welcoming environment for students. Appreciative Advising is "an intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" using a six-phased approach (Bloom, 2008, p. 179). In the initial Disarm phase, advisors want to make their students comfortable through various nonverbal and verbal behaviors to make the student feel welcomed and begin to foster connection (Bloom et al., 2013). Disarming leads into the Discover phase, which provides an opportunity for the advisor to learn more about the student's strengths and passions through asking generative, open-ended questions; for example, asking a student to describe a time in which they were academically successful in the past (Bloom et al., 2013). Next is the Dream phase, which involves the intentional exploration of a student's vision for their future (Bloom et al., 2013). An example could be asking a student to vividly describe their ideal life 10 years from now. In the Design phase, advisors help their students to make connections between the Discover and Dream discussion to co-create a plan to help a student achieve their goals (Bloom et al., 2013). Although the Design phase often includes course scheduling and major exploration, it often also involves identifying social support and academic resources that will aid the student along the way. The Deliver phase is about the student acting to carry out their plan co-created during the Design phase. Lastly, the Don't Settle phase is when advisors continue to encourage their students to raise their own internal bar of success (Bloom et al., 2013).

Disarm

Disarm as the initial phase highlights the importance of making a good first impression and is therefore an ideal phase to intentionally incorporate humor (Bloom et al., 2013; Lawson, 2009). In her article, *Disarm: The Art of First Impressions*, Lawson (2009) discussed the power of the first impression as an Appreciative Adviser and offered strategies for effectively disarming students in order to build rapport. Although the article does not speak directly to the benefits of humor, it does address its use in the initial meeting (Lawson, 2009). Wrench and Punyanunt-Carter (2005, 2008) found that an advisor's use of humor positively impacts the graduate advisor-advisee relationship. Because humor has been found to have a positive impact on the graduate advisor-advisee relationship (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2005, 2008) and the Disarm phase focuses on building rapport and trust with students (Bloom et al., 2013), I contend that the Disarm phase of the Appreciative Advising model offers the ideal framework for advisors to intentionally infuse humor into their meetings.

Do's and Don'ts of Humor

As an Academic Coach and Advisor, I often incorporate humor intentionally in my own work with students, particularly as a relationship-building strategy. Although I would love to say that I have 100% success rate, the truth is, there are times when my humor attempts are greeted with silence. Although this silence may be considered by some as a failed attempt—followed by wishes to be swallowed up whole by the earth right there on the spot—one must remember that humor is subjective. Because not every attempt to connect with a student through humor will successfully resonate with the student, there are general dos and don'ts to keep in mind.

The “Do's” of Humor

An academic advisor should use adaptive humor styles that will result in a positive outcome that builds connection and decreases tension (Riggio, 2015; Scheel & Gockel, 2017), such as sharing a mutual laugh over the lack of parking available on campus. Advisors should use humor that is based on their own personality so that it is perceived as authentic (Hughey, 2011). For example, I have a physical type of humor in which my comments are often accompanied by exaggerated facial expressions or hand gestures; however, if I attempted a deadpan delivery of the same comments, it would not come across as genuine to my students. Lastly, because students may perceive academic advisors as authority figures (Wagner, 2004), it may be helpful to try to clue the student in on the joke, which can be as simple as a smile or chuckle preceding a comment.

The “Don'ts” of Humor

Although this article advocates for the inclusion of humor into advising, there are certainly some “don'ts” to keep in mind when using humor with a student. An academic advisor should not use maladaptive humor styles that can be perceived as aggressive or insulting to the student, such as making the student the butt of the joke for not scheduling their advising meeting sooner (Scheel & Gockel, 2017; see also Riggio, 2015). Similarly, an advisor should avoid humor that is based on issues such as race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and politics as they may cause offense and result in pushing the student away rather than fostering connection (Scheel & Gockel, 2017). An advisor should also avoid the use of humor with a student who is experiencing emotional distress. Although humor can aid with the decrease of tension (Carrell, 2008; Scheel & Gockel, 2017), this instance would require the advisor to utilize compassion instead of humor in addition to making referrals to on-campus resources. As discussed, humor in the Disarm phase aids in building rapport with a student. Nevertheless, the research does caution against over-using humor particularly in the

initial meetings (Lawson, 2009). When my own attempts at humor have failed, I have found that continuing to attempt to connect with humor may cause unease or confusion for the student. Instead, shifting to another strategy, such as empathy, can lead to connecting with the student. It can take time to find that balance, but Appreciative Advising provides an opportunity to Disarm in each meeting.

Conclusion

For those looking to incorporate humor into their work as an Appreciative Adviser, they are encouraged to think of the intentionality behind their use of humor in the Disarm phase. I recommend the intentional use of humor in the Disarm phase to decrease tension and build connection through a shared laugh (Bloom et al., 2013). It is important to recognize that humor is subjective, and advisors should take care not to get discouraged if their attempt to make connection with a student through humor is not successful as this strategy is just one of many to build connection. In summary, humor is often a natural part of social interactions (Lee and Lim, 2008) that has proven to have a positive impact on the advisor-advisee relationship (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2005, 2008). The Disarm phase of the Appreciative Advising framework offers the possibility of intentionally incorporating humor into the advising meeting in such a way to foster that relationship.

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