

Psychology

Sarcasm, Self-Deprecation, and Inside Jokes: A User's Guide to Humor at Work

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Summary. Humor is widely considered essential in personal relationships, but in leaders, it's seen as an ancillary behavior. Though some leaders use humor instinctively, many more could wield it purposefully. Humor helps build interpersonal trust and high-quality work... [more](#)

A few years ago, we conducted a research study in which we asked people to help us create an ad campaign for a travel service called VisitSwitzerland.ch (which we'd made up). We put the participants into small groups and showed them a photo—a Swiss landscape of a lake, a mountain, and the country's distinctive flag with its white plus

sign against a red background—accompanied by the question: “What made you fall in love with Switzerland?” We gave participants three minutes to come up with a memorable answer and then had them share their ideas with their groups.

In each presentation, we had two people (who were working with us) share first, using scripts we’d written for them. The first presenter offered a straightforward statement extolling Switzerland: “The country is beautiful. The scenery is truly breathtaking!” The second presenter alternated his approach. In half the presentations he said, “The mountains are great for skiing and hiking! It’s amazing!” In the other half, he added a pun: “The mountains are great for skiing and hiking, and the flag is a big plus! Seriously, it’s amazing!”

Admittedly, that isn’t the world’s funniest joke. But we used it to test a simple question: Can one joke make a meaningful difference in how people are viewed by others? In our study, the answer was unequivocally yes. Participants who heard the second presenter make the joke rated him as more confident and more competent than those who heard his joke-free delivery. The jokey presenter was also more likely to be voted as the leader for subsequent group tasks. That’s not a bad payoff for one barely funny attempt at humor.

This finding may not be surprising—many of us intuit that humor matters. Ask your colleagues what characteristics they value in a friend or a romantic partner, and they are likely to tell you (among other things), “a sense of humor,” “someone who makes me laugh,” or “someone who laughs at my jokes.” But ask the same people what traits they value in a leader, and odds are that humor will not top the list. We tend to view humor as an ancillary leadership behavior.

In fact, it’s a powerful tool that some people use instinctively but more could wield purposefully. One good laugh—or better still, a workplace culture that encourages levity—facilitates interpersonal communication and builds social cohesion. Analysis of large sets of workplace communications suggests that humor occurs in at least 10% of emails and is slightly more likely to be used by leaders in face-

to-face interactions. But these numbers can (and should) be larger. Research by us and others has shown that humor can influence and reinforce status hierarchies in groups, build interpersonal trust and high-quality work relationships, and fundamentally shape the way people perceive one another's confidence, competence, warmth, and clarity of communication. It also influences critical behaviors and attitudes that matter to leadership effectiveness, including employee job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, citizenship behaviors, creativity, psychological safety in groups, and desire to interact again in the future.

However, jokes that fall flat (they're not funny, or no one laughs) or are offensive (they're viewed as inappropriate for the context) can harm professional standing by making a joke teller appear less intelligent and less competent. They can lower status and in extreme cases cost people their jobs.

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In this article, we offer guidance on how to use specific types of humor to become a more effective leader—and how to avoid being the cautionary tale at your company's next HR training seminar.

Humor Can Enhance (or Hurt) Status

Humor and laughter are intricately tied to status and power. People in lower ranks who wield them well can climb the status hierarchy in their departments and organizations. As we saw in the Swiss advertising study (conducted with our colleague Maurice Schweitzer of the Wharton School), individuals who make funny and appropriate jokes are more likely to be nominated for leadership positions by their peers. In the same research project, we ran an experiment in which we asked people to recall moments when a colleague was funny. We

found the link between humor and status to be so powerful that merely prompting individuals to recall a humorous exchange with a coworker shifted their perceptions of the coworker's status.

Humor not only helps individuals ascend to positions of authority but also helps them lead more effectively once they are there. Professors Cecily Cooper (University of Miami), Tony Kong (University of South Florida), and Craig Crossley (University of Central Florida) found that when leaders used humor as an interpersonal tool, their employees were happier, which fostered better communication and resulted in an uptick in citizenship behaviors—voluntary actions that facilitate organizational effectiveness. That is, when leaders used humor, their employees were more likely to go above and beyond the call of duty.

Why is humor so powerful? In a study to understand what makes things funny, researchers Caleb Warren (University of Arizona) and Peter McGraw (University of Colorado at Boulder) found that humor most often occurs when something is perceived as a benign violation. They conducted studies in which participants were presented with scenarios depicting someone doing something that was benign (for example, a pole-vaulter successfully completing a jump), a violation (a pole-vaulter failing a jump and getting seriously injured), or both (a pole-vaulter failing a jump but not getting seriously injured). Participants who saw the third kind of scenario (simultaneously a violation and benign) were more likely to laugh than those who saw the scenarios that were either strictly benign or strictly violations. Things strike us as funny, the researchers concluded, when they make us uncomfortable but do so in a way that is acceptable or not overly threatening.

Because telling jokes that violate our psychological safety can be seen as risky, it can make people appear more confident and more competent. In one of our studies, we found that regardless of whether a joke was considered successful or inappropriate, participants viewed joke tellers as more confident—because they had the courage to attempt a joke at all. Projecting confidence in this way leads to higher status (provided the audience has no information that suggests

a lack of competence). We also found that people who violate expectations and norms in a socially appropriate way are seen as more competent and more intelligent. This finding confirms our feelings about funny conversationalists: We admire and respect their wit, which raises their prestige.

But the violating nature of humor is also what makes it risky. Jokes that go too far over the line of appropriateness have the opposite effect—an “eek” reaction. Rather than thinking that the joke teller is intelligent and competent, observers think, *What an idiot* or *I can't believe he just said that*. Although tellers of inappropriate jokes are still seen as confident, the low competence signaled by unsuccessful attempts at humor can lead to a loss of status. In fact, our research confirms that failed humor is quite costly for leaders, making them even worse off than serious, humorless leaders who don't attempt jokes at all. Finding the balance between a benign violation and an extreme violation can be tricky—even professional comedians routinely face criticism for overstepping—and it takes skill to get it right.

Context Matters

When we converse with others, we need to balance multiple motives simultaneously. We may aim to exchange information clearly and accurately, make a positive impression on one another, navigate conflict, have fun, and so on. The degree to which each motive is viewed as normative and socially acceptable varies from setting to setting. That's why context is so important when it comes to humor. It's probably safer to tell your funny story about the horrible hotel service you experienced abroad to your friends at a dinner party (where the normative motive is enjoyment) than to a border patrol agent as you are reentering the country (where the normative motive is information exchange). A certain joke may work dazzlingly well with one group of people but completely flop with another—or even with the same group in a different context. And although jokes

generally function as (well-intended) social glue, they may have the opposite effect if they're perceived as thinly veiled brags or as insulting to specific people or ideas.

Here are ways to capture the benefits of humor while avoiding the contextual risks.

When to use inside jokes.

This form of humor happens anytime an outsider doesn't have the background information needed to get the joke. Inside jokes are extremely common—our data suggests that almost everyone has engaged in or witnessed one. But how does insider talk, especially inside jokes, affect the dynamics within a group?

In collaboration with Ovul Sezer (University of North Carolina), Maurice Schweitzer, and Michael Norton (Harvard Business School), we conducted a study to understand those effects. We asked people to engage in a brainstorming task on instant messenger. Each participant was teamed up with two of our research assistants posing as fellow participants. In one condition, one researcher sent a message to the team that the participant couldn't read (it looked like garbled text), and then the other researcher sent a response: "I agree!" This made the participant think that the other two had exchanged information that he or she was not privy to. In the other condition, the second researcher responded to the garbled message with, "Hahaha, that's hilarious, I agree!" It was a subtle difference—in both conditions, participants were on the outside. Did it matter whether what they missed was funny? Yes. Participants were more likely to believe that their partners thought of themselves as superior in the inside-joke condition than in the inside-information condition, and they reported lower group identification and cohesion when the secret exchange involved a joke.



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We've all experienced this phenomenon firsthand. Although levity is typically thought of as a behavior that binds people together, it can draw fault lines in a group, making some people feel awkward and excluded. Inside jokes have their place, of course. They can signal closeness or camaraderie, making people feel pleased to be in the loop. This kind of humor can be useful in transactional or nonconsequential situations when it doesn't matter much if an outsider doesn't get it. But the research on this kind of humor is clear: When group cohesion is important, tell jokes that everyone can understand.

When to use sarcasm.

Despite the fact that you're soooo good at using sarcasm, a little more guidance won't hurt. Research by Li Huang (INSEAD), Francesca Gino (Harvard), and Adam Galinsky (Columbia) reveals that sarcasm is not just for teenagers trying to irritate their parents; it can be useful for managers and teams as well. In their study, participants either made or received sarcastic comments or made or received sincere ones. Participants in the sarcasm condition were significantly more likely to solve a creativity task assigned later in the experiment than those in the sincere condition. In a subsequent study, participants were asked to merely recall a time when they either said or heard something sarcastic or a time they said or heard something sincere. Once again, creativity on the subsequent task was higher in the sarcasm condition.

Why does this happen? Sarcasm involves saying one thing and meaning the opposite, so using and interpreting it requires higher-level abstract thinking (compared with straightforward statements), which boosts creativity. The downside is that sarcasm can produce higher levels of perceived conflict, particularly when trust is low between the expresser and the recipient. And because sarcasm involves saying the opposite of what you mean, there's a risk of misunderstanding or worse if the recipient does not pick up on the humorous intent and takes a sarcastic comment literally. The lesson: Unleash your sarcastic side to get creative juices flowing—but tone it down with new colleagues, in unfamiliar settings, or when working in teams where strong relationships haven't yet been built. Until you've established trust, it's best to communicate with respect.

When to use self-deprecation.

During his presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy faced accusations that his wealthy father was attempting to buy the election. At the 1958 Gridiron dinner, Kennedy addressed those accusations by saying, "I just received the following wire from my generous daddy: 'Dear Jack, don't buy a single vote more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide.'"

Self-deprecating humor can be an effective method of neutralizing negative information about oneself. Research by one of us (Brad) and Maurice Schweitzer found that individuals are seen as warmer and more competent when they disclose negative information about themselves using humor than when they disclose it in a serious manner. When they add humor to a disclosure, counterparts view the negative information as less true and less important. For example, the study found that job candidates who revealed their limited math ability in a humorous manner ("I can add and subtract, but geometry is where I draw the line") were perceived as better able to do math than those who disclosed the information in a serious manner ("I can add and subtract, but I struggle with geometry").

There are limits to the benefits of self-deprecating humor, however. Among lower-status people it can backfire if the trait or skill in question is an essential area of competence. For instance, a statistician can more safely make self-deprecating jokes about her spelling than about her statistical skills. So when discussing core competences, another form of humor might serve the purpose better. (An exception worth mentioning is when being self-deprecating about a core competence is the only alternative to disclosing the information in a serious way.) You should also avoid using humor to reveal your failures in situations where levity would be seen as inappropriate (such as if you are testifying in court) or when the failure is perceived as so serious that joking about it would be in poor taste. At the 2004 White House Correspondent's Dinner, for example, President George W. Bush showed a video in which he was searching around the Oval Office and saying, "Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be somewhere. Nope, no weapons over there...maybe under here?" The topic was too consequential for jokes, and the video generated harsh criticism.

When to use humor to dodge difficult questions.

In the second of two debates during the 1984 U.S. presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan, the incumbent, was asked if his age would impede his ability to do the job in a second term. At age 73, Reagan was already the oldest president in American history, and he was perceived as being fatigued during the first debate. The president responded by saying, "I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience." The audience, along with Reagan's opponent, Walter Mondale, erupted in laughter. Mondale later said it was the moment he knew he had lost the election.

Few people enjoy being asked difficult questions like the one posed to Reagan. Previous research has revealed a range of ways people can respond: by staying silent, explicitly lying, paltering (saying truthful things to deliberately mislead), or responding with another question. Using humor to dodge a question is another option that can be quite

helpful in certain situations. That's because humor is cognitively distracting, according to research by Madelijn Strick (Utrecht University) and colleagues. Just as a good magician gets the audience to look away from the sleight of hand, a successful joke can turn our attention away from certain information. Successful humor also makes us happy, and we are more likely to trust people when we are in a good mood. And as we have mentioned, funny people are seen as more intelligent and skilled. Part of the reason Reagan's response was so effective was that his mental ability was under attack. By responding with humor (even with a scripted line he had probably rehearsed), Reagan signaled to the audience that he was still mentally sharp.

When to use humor to deliver negative feedback.

During the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was angered when General George B. McClellan failed to attack General Robert E. Lee in Richmond. Lincoln addressed the issue in a letter to McClellan saying, "If you don't want to use the army, I should like to borrow it for a while. Yours respectfully, A. Lincoln." Using humor to deliver negative feedback, as Lincoln did, can make criticism more memorable.

Delivering negative feedback can be challenging, so it may be tempting to fall back on a joke to lighten the mood. However, couching criticism in the form of a joke can lessen its impact. Peter McGraw and colleagues ran experiments in which participants reviewed complaints that were made in either a humorous or a serious manner. Although humorous complaints were better received than serious ones, they were also seen as more benign, and people felt less compelled to take action to rectify the problem.

Because accompanying criticism with humor softens the feedback, it detracts from getting the point across when the issue is not obvious. If a manager jokes about a subordinate's slipping performance, the employee may think either that his performance hasn't been slipping or that the situation isn't a big deal. If it were, why would she be joking about it?

When to use humor as a coping mechanism.

Do you remember the day after the 2016 U.S. presidential election? For Donald Trump supporters, it was a happy day; for Hillary Clinton supporters, not so much. We took that opportunity to study how humor might help people cope with negative news. The day after the election, one of us (Alison) and several collaborators asked people who had voted for Clinton to write either something humorous or something meaningful about Trump's victory. Those who sought humor in the situation felt better about it in the moment—and they still felt better about it when the researchers checked back in with them months later.

Humor can be an extremely powerful coping tool, in even the toughest of circumstances. Leadership consultant Linda Henman found that American prisoners of war in Vietnam frequently used it to deal with the tough conditions they experienced. Strick and colleagues conducted studies in which they presented participants with photos of negative scenes (such as a physical assault or a car crash), followed by either a funny stimulus or a positive but not funny stimulus. Participants presented with the funny stimulus reported fewer negative emotions than did participants presented with the nonhumorous one. Why? Again, the cognitively demanding aspect of humor distracts people, leaving them less able to focus on negative information.

Other research, however, revealed that the type of humor matters. One study by Andrea Samson (University of Fribourg) and James Gross (Stanford) found that positive, good-natured humor in response to bad news made people feel better, but negative, dark, or mean-spirited jokes made them feel worse. It's also important to be careful about offending others with jokes when a situation is ongoing or recent ("too soon").

When Humor Works and When It Doesn't

There are no hard-and-fast rules about when it's safe or appropriate to tell a joke, but these general guidelines can ...



But in general, humor can be tremendously useful in helping people cope not only during or immediately after a negative event but also over the long term. In other studies Samson and Gross conducted with Alana Glassco (Twitter) and Ihno Lee (Uplight), participants who created funny responses to negative stimuli (such as responding to a photo of a man with facial stitches with, “Now he has a great zombie costume for Halloween!”) reported higher positive affect a week later when they were shown the negative pictures again. So the next time you receive bad news at work (slow sales or a botched launch), think about ways to laugh about it (“At least we don’t have to worry about stockouts” or “I’ve been stress eating so much it’s a shame my portfolio isn’t tracking my waistline”), even if you don’t say them out loud. As comedian Stephen Colbert observes, “You can’t laugh and be afraid at the same time—of anything. If you’re laughing, I defy you to be afraid.”

You Don't Need to Be a Comedian

Just as you don't need to be Phil Mickelson to do well at the company golf outing, you don't need to be Amy Schumer, Ali Wong, or John Mulaney to use humor well in the office. If anything, following the style or content of many professional comedians—who are expected to push the boundaries of appropriateness—would be dangerous in most workplaces. A joke's success depends on who's telling it, where and when it is told, and to whom, so everyone should use caution

when attempting to retell a comedian's jokes at work. The good news is that your colleagues are not expecting you to be as edgy (or as funny) as the professionals—or even to tell planned jokes at all.

When you think about humor as a tool of leadership, recognize that people can be funny in a variety of ways. For example, witty conversationalists differ from elaborate storytellers, clever emailers, and rollicking presenters. Each of these types of humor requires a different response time, unique delivery pacing, and an understanding of the audience. If you're uncomfortable making jokes in a large group or during a presentation, stick to using humor in one-on-one conversations. If you tend to be more serious when talking one-on-one, you might try sending funnier emails. Options for incorporating more humor into your work life abound.

CONCLUSION

Humor at work is a delicate dance, and humor research is still in its infancy. Scholars (including us) are gaining data-driven descriptions of how people use various kinds of humor, and of when it works and when it doesn't. But any rules of thumb for using humor have to include a caveat: Context matters. Conversational dynamics can vary profoundly from culture to culture, person to person, and group to group. These factors are tricky to navigate and make it difficult—even in the moment—to know whether your humor attempt has been successful or not. Many people will laugh politely even if something isn't funny or is in poor taste, creating an unreliable feedback loop.

If you don't think you can land jokes at work, or you're too nervous to try, that's OK. Not everyone is meant to be funny, just as not every attempt at humor will be successful. (Even professional comedians have bits that bomb.) But you can still incorporate levity into your work life by doing something simple: appreciating other people's humor. Be quick to laugh and smile. Delight in the absurdity of life and in the jokes you hear. A life devoid of humor is not only less joyful—it's also less productive and less creative, for you and for those

around you. Abundant benefits await those who view humor not as an ancillary organizational behavior but as a central path to status and flourishing at work.

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