

It's ok for leaders to have a sense of humour

But only if it's not at the expense of others: It's better for the team if you laugh at yourself, write Kai Chi (Sam) Yam and Jenson Lau



A good sense of humour is often regarded as an important factor for successful leadership. It is an important way successful leaders motivate their followers and gain their support. For example, former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was hit by an egg thrown by an angry protester in a rally. He responded humorously and said “this guy owes me bacon now,” which eased tension and even gathered support from the protesters.

Empirical research in management likewise suggests that leader humour improves followers’ performance and job satisfaction. Recognising the value of humour, some political and business leaders even hire coaches to improve their own sense of humour for better leadership outcomes.

Whereas scholars have thus far focused solely on the benefits of a sense of humour in leadership, we explored both its pros and cons in a recent **paper**. We conducted two field studies involving more than 400 employees both in China and the United States. We found that a leader’s sense of humour is a mixed blessing, raising both follower work engagement and their deviance from desired behaviours.

When leaders use humour, they make it more acceptable for employees to violate the organisation’s norms, which then leads to increased *follower deviance*. Prototypical deviant behaviour includes cursing at work, acting rudely against others, and taking property from work without permission. However, leader humour also improves the quality of leader-member exchanges (LMX), which then leads to increased *work engagement*.

In both studies, participants completed surveys at three different times in order to increase causal inferences that leader humour is indeed one of the reasons for increased follower deviance and work engagement. We found evidence that confirms our hypothesis: a sense of humour in leaders is, on the one hand, generally associated with increased follower deviant behaviour, and on the other hand, it tends to be associated with increased work engagement. A prototypically engaged employee

responded positively to statements such as “I work with intensity on my job”, “I pay a lot of attention to my job”, and “I am enthusiastic about my job”.

Importantly, these two outcomes are affected by the style of a leader’s sense of humour – an aggressive style is especially likely to provoke followers’ deviance and discourage their work engagement. Examples of aggressive humour include sarcasms, satires, or humorously conveying disapproving information to followers.

Although successful leaders often use humour to motivate their followers to achieve greater performance, they should be careful about their style of humour in different situations. They also need to be aware of their status as role models because their actions would be regarded as social cues for their followers. Based on our findings, we want to be clear that leader humour continues to be an important tool for successful leadership, even though it has this potential drawback.

Fortunately, our work also suggests ways to enjoy the benefits of leader humour while minimising its drawbacks. We recommend that leaders avoid aggressive humour at all costs. Our work shows that humour or jokes at the expense of followers are likely to backfire, whereas self-deprecating humour tends to lead to positive follower outcomes such as increased work engagement.

So yes, go ahead and tell jokes at work. But, keep it clean and learn to laugh about yourself instead of at others.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors’ paper *The mixed blessing of leader sense of humor: Examining costs and benefits*, co-authored with Michael Christian, Zhenyu Liao, Wu Wei and Jared Nai, in *Academy of Management Journal*, April 2017
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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