

Funny bosses can ease employee mood but may harm wellbeing - Study reveals how

Excessive manager humour increases surface acting, leading to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and lower job satisfaction among employees.



Are you a manager who enjoys using humour to ease the tension among your employees during stressful situations? Well, a study says humorous managers can inject levity into a solemn meeting or uplift the atmosphere, but excessive joking might negatively impact employee welfare.

A newly released study in the *Academy of Management Journal* investigates the phenomenon of "leader humour," where individuals in leadership roles employ humour, potentially prompting subordinates to feel compelled to engage in "surface acting."

Randall Peterson, a professor of organisational behaviour at London Business School, Xiaoran Hu, an assistant professor of management at the London School of Economics, and Michael Parke and Grace Simon from the University of Pennsylvania collaborated on the study, which encompassed a field experiment, laboratory experiment, and a multi-wave field study.

The research revealed that managers who excessively utilise humour contribute to heighten surface acting among employees. This, in turn, can result in emotional exhaustion or burnout, as well as decreased levels of job satisfaction.

"When the boss tells a joke that is not hilarious, the employee has to decide whether to fake laugh or not," said Peterson, reported Business Insider. "That decision takes energy, no matter the decision. If they fake laugh, that is additional emotional labour that takes energy away from work."

According to the study, the practice of surface acting can set off a chain reaction of negative well-being consequences for employees. Funny leaders, who are prone to making more jokes, may find themselves encouraged to continue this behaviour if they receive positive responses, whether those reactions are genuine or merely surface acting.

Nevertheless, this doesn't signify the complete prohibition of humour among bosses in the workplace. In fact, the research indicates that employing "fewer, higher-reward attempts" at quality humour can actually have a beneficial impact on employee well-being compared to an excess of jokes.

When leaders exercise greater thoughtfulness in their use of humour, it helps to alleviate the burden of surface acting. Peterson advises leaders to adopt a strategy of using humour "sparingly" instead.

Drawing on a saying from the US Army, he suggests that leaders should remember that they might not be as amusing as they perceive themselves to be in their leadership roles. People might laugh simply because they recognise the leader's authority.

Mostly, control how much humour you use. A little humour goes a long way because it signals your approval of relief from being serious all of the time. Research strongly supports the notion that laughing a little bit makes us more productive in our work. "But you can have too much of a good thing! More is not always better. Or think of humour like marmite — a little goes a long way, and not everyone likes it."