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Summary

When the Boss's Jokes Draw Fake Laughs

Supervisors may not realize how often their employees' reactions to their jokes, from knee-slapping guffaws to genial smiles, are exaggerated or completely fake—and that those reactions can come at a cost, according to an [Academy of Management Journal article](#).

Because they're lower on the organizational ladder, employees can feel pressured to act like they enjoy their bosses' humor, regardless of whether or not they are actually amused. Such "surface acting" can be mentally draining, according to "[Faking It with the Boss's Jokes? Leader Humor Quantity, Follower Surface Acting, and Power Distance](#)."



"There's a very clear expectation for laughing or smiling or displaying positive emotions when somebody tells a joke. The structural and psychological power difference between leaders and followers just makes these expectations more important," explained [Xiaoran Hu](#) of the London School of Economics and Political Science. "Surface acting is going to lead to a series of negative well-being outcomes, such as feeling emotionally exhausted and less satisfied with their jobs."

Hu wrote the article with [Michael R. Parke](#) of the University of Pennsylvania, [Randall S. Peterson](#) of London Business School, and [Grace M. Simon](#) of the University of Pennsylvania.

Most prior research shows that leaders expressing humor at work is usually beneficial. But Hu, Parke, Peterson, and Simon found that such research:

- Assumes that expressing humor is the same as actually being funny
- Overlooks emotion regulation among followers.

The coauthors based their [findings](#) on three studies among hundreds of people:

- In southern China, 88 part-time professional degree students who were managers at their respective organizations, as well as their subordinates. Some managers were encouraged to express humor with subordinates, others were not. The researchers found that the more the leaders made jokes, the more the subordinates felt "emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction through surface acting, and this effect was particularly strong for followers endorsing high power-distance values (those who are attuned to deferring to those in higher authority)."
- At a northeastern U.S. business school, 198 participants in simulated focus groups about a university bookstore. The groups differed by whether the leader used puns and whether the

Low leader humor quantity condition

"For instance, would you be willing to pay \$4 for this balloon (*point to balloon*)? The price may seem high. But I'll remind you, the price of balloons is truly dependent on the economy."

"Moving on, in the bookstore, there is an ongoing debate about which item is the most popular, but it typically ends up being one of our men's accessories."

"The next item we'll discuss is a branded jacket. This new jacket will be reversible."

"I've always thought it is a shame that we don't have reversible blazers; but our president is worried they would sell out very quickly."

High leader humor quantity condition

"For instance, would you be willing to pay \$4 for this balloon (*point to balloon*)? The price may seem high. But I'll remind you, the price of balloons is truly dependent on inflation. (*Ha-ha*) Inflation, get it? The price is dependent on inflation."

"Moving on, in the bookstore, there is an ongoing debate about which item is the most popular, but it typically ends up being a tie. (*Ha-ha*) It ends up being a tie."

"The next item we'll discuss is a branded jacket. This new jacket will be reversible ... as it turns out. (*Ha-ha*) As it turns out, a reversible jacket."

"I've always thought it is a shame that we don't have reversible blazers; but our president is worried they would sell so fast they'd catch on fire. Get it? They'd be blazing off the shelves. (*Ha-ha*)"

participants were made to endorse high versus low power-distance values. Results were similar to the first study, even when participants found the leader's humor actually funny. It also showed that surface acting increased as the follower power distance increased.

- In southern China, 126 employees at a tech firm. Results were similar to the first two studies and confirmed that surface acting was amplified as follower power distance increased.

"Managers need to be more cautious and careful with expressing humor, because followers may feel pressure to fake and exaggerate their laughter, which can lead to negative emotional outcomes for them. That's the unintended consequence of leader humor, because of the unbalanced power differences," Hu said. "Leaders should focus more on fewer and higher quality jokes and be more cautious when using humor with followers who endorse high power-distance values."

"Less is more across the board" when it comes to leaders making jokes at work, he said.

"Frequent leader humor expression, regardless of its quality, can cause employees to fake it with the bosses' jokes, reducing their [well-being](#) in the process," the [authors wrote](#).