



Why so serious?

Funny managers can cause job dissatisfaction - here's the issue with it



Managers underpin businesses. They are the stewards of your culture, they act as liaisons between upper management and the rest of your workforce, and they evaluate the performance of staff, ensuring the skills in your firm are conducive to you achieving your goals.

Beyond L&D, you trust your managers to lead in their own unique way. For some, this involves leading with empathy and for others being an active listener is their main asset. For some leaders, however, managing with a sense of humour is integral to their leadership style and the way they communicate with colleagues.

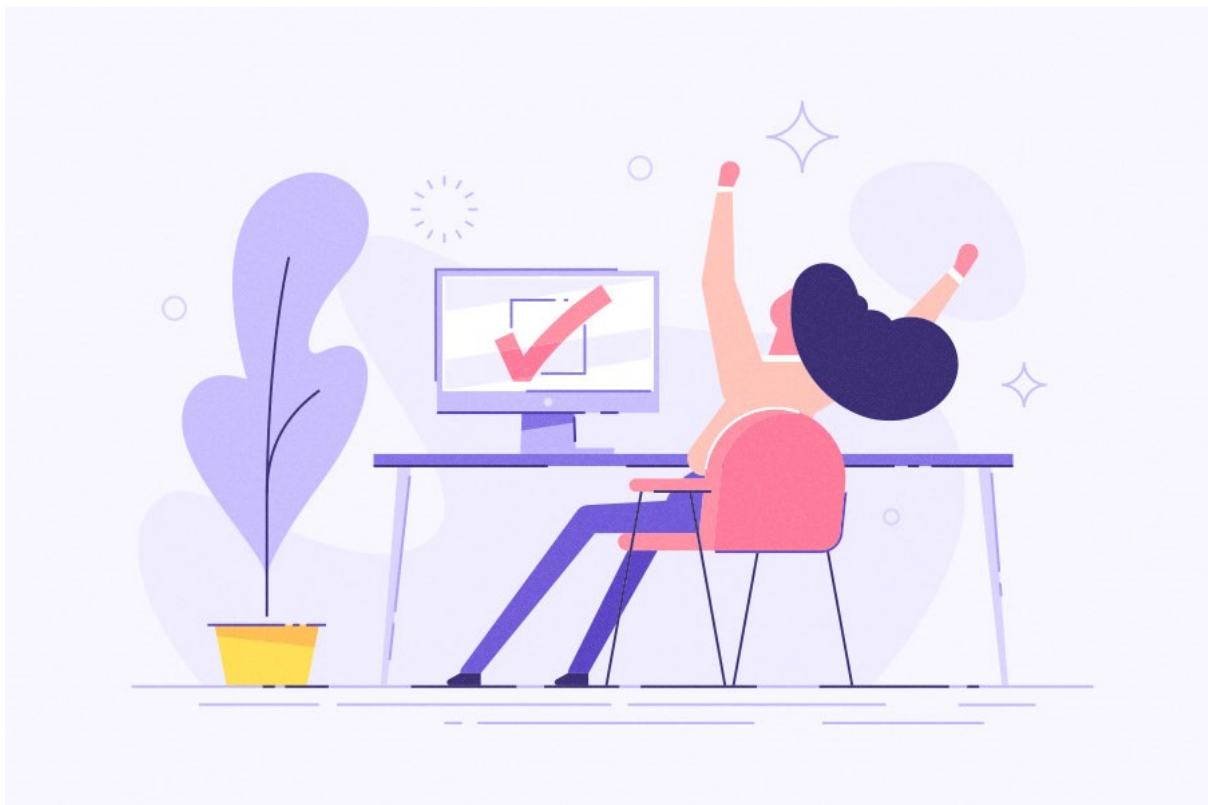
One might assume this would only have positive consequences, as a funny manager can ease tension and create a positive and happy culture. However, recent research has found that managers who use humour frequently cause job dissatisfaction and poor wellbeing amongst employees.

Why? The research from the Academy of Management Journal says that 'leader humour' puts pressure on subordinates to engage in 'surface acting' - meaning staff feel consistently pressured to react with a positive emotional response. As a result, this can lead to heightened levels of discontent within a team who might feel like they must consistently perform.

Why so serious?

We all want to show up to work and feel comfortable, understood, and not feel like we need to put on a show or fake our feelings. However, having a 'funny boss' can make teams feel like they do need to act – and reports say this can lead to emotional exhaustion, or even burnout.

"When the boss tells a joke that is not hilarious, the employee has to decide whether to fake laugh or not," the study's author, Randall Peterson, told Business Insider. "That decision takes energy, no matter the decision. If they fake laugh, that is additional emotional labor that takes energy away from work."



Of course, cracking a joke at work is a good thing and should be celebrated. Being too serious at work and not letting your team laugh can also make staff

feel like they can't be themselves or have fun on the job – this too can be a consequence of burnout.

“I would say there are boundaries that need to be considered,” comments Emma Serlin, body language and communication expert and founder of London Speech Workshop. “Don't rely on humour to build connections with your team. Instead, rely on listening, gaining interest, engagement, and openness to build connections. Once you've got those, you can bring in humour.”

Clearly, there is a difference between having a joke every now and then, and humour being an integral aspect of the way you are at work. And ultimately, a manager has a responsibility to lead with a degree of emotional intelligence and self-awareness, to make sure their leadership style is appropriate to the different personalities in their team, and everyone feels comfortable.

“For managers, there is also an absolute need for emotional intelligence to take it to a place of seriousness and gravitas when needed,” continues Serlin.

“Without this skill, there is a danger of not being taken seriously when it's required. On top of this, as a manager, if you are having a difficult conversation with someone, bringing in some humour may not be best as they may think you are not taking the situation very seriously. Before you start the conversation, make sure you understand the context and issues that may be affecting how someone is feeling and behaving. If you're not sure, keep an open mind at the start of the conversation and be prepared to truly listen.”

Authenticity and psychological safety

The bottom line is that it's the responsibility of managers to foster a culture of authenticity and psychological safety in your organisation – and humour can play both a positive and negative role in this.

Serlin continues: “As mentioned, humour can allow people to bring a more authentic version of themselves forward – especially if they are generally more

light-hearted and easy-going. Having said that, it's important to acknowledge and be aware that not everyone will have the same mindset as you, and may hold different concerns where humour will not be the appropriate reaction.

“As such, different humour should be respected. No one should feel forced to laugh and feel like if they don't there will be negative consequences. If that happens, then there is a lack of psychological safety within the team or workplace.”

Ultimately, humour can be used as a tool to grow and support a safe environment. However, it shouldn't be used as a replacement for real, meaningful communication in the workplace. Above all, managers listening to, engaging with, and understanding their teams is necessary for success.