

Leadership spotlight: A little humour goes a long way

In new research, Randall S Peterson and colleagues ask, could the boss's jokes lead more to languor than laughter?

If I make them laugh along the way, sue me. And I don't do it so they turn round and go 'Thank you David for the opportunity, thank you for the wisdom, thank you for the laughs.' I do it so, one day, someone will go 'There goes David Brent. I must remember to thank him.'"

"The Office" is a mockumentary-style sitcom television series that became a major hit in the UK and as a US spinoff. The original show follows the day-to-day interactions between employees of Wernham Hogg, a fictitious paper manufacturing firm in Slough, England. At the centre of office life is the figure of David Brent, a boorish and self-important general manager who labours under the misconception that his employees admire and respect him. The bulk of the comedy stems from Brent's awkward and frequently offensive attempts at humour: jokes that fail to land, buffoonery that is met with astonished silence.

The characters of David Brent and his US counterpart, Michael Scott, have passed into comic lore since The Office first aired. But their cringeworthy antics illuminate what is, in fact, a rather serious point; one that is addressed by LBS Professor of Organisational Behaviour, Randall Peterson.

In their new study, Randall and colleagues Xiaoran Hu (LSE), Michael Parke and Grace Simon (University of Pennsylvania) ask the question: is humour always a good tool for leaders to use in the workplace? And could there be instances where the boss's jokes may lead more to languor than laughter – more exhaustion than elation?

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"Faking it with the boss's jokes?" departs from conventional wisdom on the use of humour in the workplace, says Randall. "There's a general consensus that cracking a joke will put people at ease, that it's a really effective stress buster. Current academic thinking is that humour alleviates things such as exhaustion and strain, making work more enjoyable. Leaders who are humorous generally benefit their employees; this is behaviour that encourages the release of good stuff like dopamine, making people feel more resilient at work."

Randall and his co-authors wanted to put these ideas on the stand.

Leaving aside the question of quality – whether good versus bad, inclusive versus offensive jokes have positive or negative impact – they wanted to see if regular or habitual joke-telling may put undue pressure on employees to laugh or respond positively out of a sense of obedience, rather than genuine amusement. And whether this in turn might actually increase things such as stress and emotional exhaustion.

“If you are trying to be funny, you are de facto trying to elicit a response, so the use of humour is never neutral or irrelevant,” says Randall. “And if you are using it routinely and expecting your subordinates to respond, there’s a risk that people will start faking it because they feel they have to; especially if there’s a major power imbalance between you. You may end up depleting their energy as a result.”

To test this hypothesis, Randall and his colleagues put together three studies looking at how the volume of joke-telling and the seniority of the leader telling the jokes impacts employees.

To start, they had executives attending a leadership programme purposefully incorporate more humour into their workplace practices, and capture feedback from their teams over the course of a week.

“We invited 100 or so EMBA participants at a university in China to experiment with regular joke-telling and more playful behaviour back in their organisations, and then survey their staff,” says Randall. “And looking at their responses, we did find preliminary evidence of people faking it to please the boss, and of this having a negative impact on energy. So we wanted to crank this up and really dig into the underlying psychology of depletion and exhaustion.”

To do so, they set up “focus groups” at a behavioural lab in a US university. Paid volunteers were recruited to participate in three break-out groups, each led by professional actors following pre-written scripts. Each actor was assigned a certain seniority in terms of their leadership profile, and scripts were modified for the volume of jokes. The sessions were filmed for consistency and participants’ responses to humour captured via surveys. Again, Randall and his co-authors found evidence that repeated joke-telling wears energy by obliging people to respond; especially when the joke-tellers were believed to be very senior leaders. And this was happening even when participants found session leaders genuinely funny.

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Curious to explore these findings in a real-world setting, the team worked with a tech firm in China to collect employee feedback over a four-week period. These workers were habitually assigned to different projects, led by different bosses. They answered surveys that touched on the amount of humour deployed by these bosses, their seniority, and the impact persistent joke-telling had on energy and engagement levels. Randall and his colleagues then compared this feedback with results from the previous two studies.

"What do a field experiment, a lab experiment and a multi-wave field study have in common?" he laughs. "This sounds like the start of a bad joke, but the findings are actually pretty serious. Across the board, our studies find that the more leaders use humour in the workplace, the more it worsens employees' emotional exhaustion and their job satisfaction. And this is even more acute with very senior leaders – when there's more power distance between the boss and the employee."

So what's going on?

The use of humour creates a moral hazard for people, explains Randall. Individuals have a split second to decide whether to fake it or not with a joke, and what the consequences of not laughing might be. What's more, if we do opt for the fake laugh, we need to ensure it sounds convincing enough to avoid causing offence. All of which adds up invisible effort – a lot of it.

"We've come to understand humour as a force for good; for positive impact. Humour is seen as an easy fix: the boss tells a few jokes, it's low risk and it brings potential rewards. We've found, however, that there are risks attached to humour, especially if you make humour part of your common leadership practice."

"The Office" resonates so well with people because we all "recognise the pain," says Randall. Most of us have been in a situation where we are obliged to respond positively to someone in authority, whether that response feels authentic or not. And if this obligation becomes too regular, the "pain" is magnified.

So should leaders avoid humour at all costs? Not at all, say Randall and his colleagues. By all means tell a few jokes but do so sparingly, they argue. And be mindful of your impact. Humour has its purpose, but just like punishment, it should be used with caution.

The punchline really is: a little bit of humour goes a very long way.

Randall Peterson is Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Academic Director for the Leadership Institute at London Business School.