

# THE HR OBSERVER

## Laughing at the Boss's Jokes: The Hidden Strain on Employees

April 26, 2024



*Leader humor can also lead to employees burnout. Stock Image.*

---

Leader humor expression is when leaders attempt to elicit laughter or amusement from those around them, whether through jokes, comments, or gestures. While humor in the workplace is often associated with enhanced productivity stemming from positive emotions, sometimes it does not help at all.

Drawing from his extensive research alongside esteemed colleagues Xiaoran Hu, Michael R. Parke, and Grace M. Simon; Randall S. Peterson, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the London Business School and a distinguished figure in the realm of organisational behavior and leadership development, discusses laughing at the bosses' jokes.

In an interview with The HR Observer, Randall explains that such instances can exert pressure on employees to respond positively, potentially leading to burnout and diminished job performance. Moreover, the impact varies depending on factors such as status distance and power dynamics within the organizational hierarchy.

**What exactly is “leader humour expression”? How does this dynamic affect the workplace both positively and negatively?**

We use ‘leader humour expression’ to describe any attempt to get a laugh from those around you – a joke, a comment, a gesture, etc. Most of the research on humour in the workplace builds on the core finding that when people experience positive emotions (i.e., like amusement and laughter) they are more productive. But what has not been considered before is what happens when those attempts fail. Is it just neutral? Or does it cause a problem? This is what I sought to understand with my fellow researchers Xiaoran Hu of the London School of Economics and Political Science, and Michael R Parke and Grace M Simon of the University of Pennsylvania.

Our research showed that there can be negative repercussions to bosses using humour in the workplace when it fails as it places employees under pressure to laugh when they might not actually find what their bosses are saying is funny. Enforced laughter, or faking positive emotions, can lead to employee burnout and lower job performance and satisfaction.

**Following up on the previous question – what employees get affected the most?**

Our core effect is that when the leader fails in their attempt at humour it puts the worker under pressure as to whether to not respond, or to fake laugh (which takes energy). The bigger the status distance the more pressure there is to fake laugh, which depletes the employee's energy and leaves less for work. So, the CEO telling an unfunny joke to an intern, for example, has a stronger effect than the CEO telling an unfunny joke to a member of the senior management team.

If we look at power distance values – beliefs in the inherent wisdom of elders or those who are higher in the organisation – people with those beliefs feel obligated to fake it every time and so are more likely to fake it with the boss and become exhausted.

**How would you say this affects employees outside of their jobs, in terms of their wellbeing and personal lives?**

The evidence suggests that feeling under pressure to laugh at the boss' jokes would definitely negatively affect workers outside their jobs too. Faking positive emotions is depleting broadly. That is why jobs that require employees to always be polite and nice (e.g., customer service) are more tiring than those where workers can sit by themselves and get the work done.

If someone is carrying negative feelings home with them from the office, this will usually impact their personal lives and can have a detrimental effect on their mental and emotional wellbeing. It is well known that the feeling of having to put on an act at work and not being able to behave in an authentic manner has negative consequences on the efficacy, wellbeing, and performance of employees.

**You mentioned that humour and power is intertwined – what is the social impact of this?**

If a boss is trying to be funny, they are automatically trying to get a response, so the use of humour is never neutral or irrelevant. People have a split second to decide whether or not to fake a laugh, or even how much to laugh – trying to figure out if the boss thinks a particular joke is a little funny or a lot funny. At the same time, they are trying to decide what the consequences of not laughing might be.

On top of that, if they do decide to fake laugh at the boss' joke, they need to make it sound convincing enough not to cause offense. There is risk in being 'caught' fake laughing, which could be worse than not laughing at all. We find that believing your boss has high emotional intelligence makes the dilemma even more acute because they are more likely to detect the worker faking it, increasing stress on the person trying to decide whether to laugh with the boss' jokes.

There are two important implications here: 1) Bosses and other leaders need to know they are NOT as funny as they think they are (i.e., there is a lot of fake laughing

going on out there), and 2) everyone needs to understand that emotional labour is labour (e.g., have some understanding for service providers, be aware why they are so tired, etc.).

**We have all faked a laugh at a leader's joke at some point in our lives. What should leaders actually reflect on, so as to avoid having negative or surface-level interactions with their employees?**

See above to start – ask yourself why despite your employees finding you hilarious, your family and friends do not. Or think about whether your people have ever told you an attempt at humour was not funny. If so, they have a more honest relationship. If not, how much faking are they doing?

Most of us have been in a situation where we have felt obliged to laugh at a joke we didn't find funny or respond positively to someone in authority when that wouldn't have been our natural response. If this obligation becomes too regular, it tips over into discomfort or emotional distress.

Furthermore, as our study shows that using humour when there is a big power distance gap between the boss and the employee is riskier and more likely to backfire than when using humour with someone closer in terms of power distance, we would suggest that leaders reflect on power distance before using humour.

But, none of this says that leaders should not try to be funny occasionally. Research does show a little bit of humour DOES build relationships and improve performance. But a little goes a long way, so do not use what feels like a positive experience as a boss to go further with the boss' humour.

**Lastly, how would this define the relationships between employees? Is this likely to cause any workplace disruption or create a competitive environment to gain the likes of the boss?**

While we did not look at the relationships between employees in this research, the work does of course suggest that employees fake it because it positively impacts the relationship with the boss. For that reason, we can say that faking it and complimenting the boss consistently could be used to gain favour with the boss. However, while faking it is a mechanism that some may use to step ahead of others

as a favoured employee, there are negative impacts associated with such behaviour.

Our study found that pretending to find the boss' jokes funny increased when leaders made jokes more frequently, and this 'surface acting' subsequently resulted in emotional exhaustion in employees and had other negative impacts on their wellbeing. Those subordinates further down the chain of hierarchy felt even more pressure to fake their emotions, in part because of concerns that displaying the correct emotion might be instrumental to their career progression and personal goals. So, while faking it to curry favour with the boss might be a tactic employed by some, it is not without personal cost.