

Humor Is Serious Business

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Career & Success

Written

You are not as funny as you should be, and your company is suffering because of it.

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Self-deprecating jokes humanize leaders and create connections with employees. |
Graham Roumieu

You are not funny. I don't mean "you" in the generic sense, but literally you personally, because you're a businessperson. I, however, am funny. In fact, I'm so funny, I get paid for it. Not as well as you do for your businessing, but really well considering what I do is way less boring. I literally don't know how to use Excel, or even if people still use Excel, or if I'm misspelling Excel.

Statistically — which is the only way you people understand anything — it is highly probable that you used to have a sense of humor. Or even that you have a pretty good one when you're not doing businessy things. Recent Gallup data reveals that people laugh significantly more on weekends than on weekdays.

Further, this data suggests that as people get older, they stop smiling and laughing as frequently. This and other emerging research collected by Stanford Graduate School of Business professor [Jennifer Aaker](#) and lecturer [Naomi Bagdonas](#), who co-teach [a course on the subject](#), suggests that people fall off a "humor cliff" — both in laugh frequency and self-perceptions of funniness — around the time they enter the workforce.

This is a trend that Aaker and Bagdonas would like to see reversed, since humor is an effective and underleveraged tool for power, offering a competitive advantage against peers, higher retention rates of employees, innovative solutions, and teams that are more resilient to stress.

As a businessperson who doesn't have much time for reading because you have to go back to your businessing, you are probably wondering: Are there any contrived metaphors I can remember as a takeaway for how I can utilize humor in the workplace? Why, yes, there are: bridges and ladders.

Bridges are tools to build bonds, increase trust, and strengthen cultures. That is not what bridges in real life do, so a better metaphor might be "magnets" or "food," but we figured you businesspeople mostly skim and don't think too deeply about words.

The reason humor works as a bridge (just go with it) is that laughter sparks the release of oxytocin, a hormone that facilitates social bonding, increases trust, and quickens self-disclosure. This is key in a workplace since all the other ways to release oxytocin are no longer permitted by Human Resources. In a 2015 study, psychologists Alan Gray, Brian Parkinson, and Robin Dunbar had participants watch either a funny or neutral video clip before engaging in a self-disclosure exercise

with a stranger: People who watched the funny clip revealed 30% more personal information relative to those who watched the neutral clip.

When it comes to non-strangers, shared moments of laughter help facilitate closeness down the line. A 2007 study by social psychologist Doris Bazzini and her colleagues found that couples who recalled moments when they laughed together were more satisfied in their relationships than those who recalled positive memories that weren't funny.

But how can you, a businessperson who non-ironically uses terms such as “leverage best practices” and “exploit core competencies,” move the needle on your humor skill set? First, get good at self-deprecating, which is the opposite of everything you've ever done. Self-deprecation humanizes leaders, creates connections with employees, and makes people think the self-deprecator is even more powerful than she is: After all, if she can afford to mock herself, she must be confident in her abilities. It also signals to employees that they are allowed to be funny. Self-deprecation, however, can hurt your credibility if you're in a position of lower status in the organization.

If you are in a position of higher status or early in your relationship, it's best to avoid jokes that are aggressive (roasts, teasing, mocking); it is worth noting that Don Rickles never held an office job. Instead, use humor to highlight shared viewpoints or common enemies.

And don't ever punch down by making an employee the butt of your joke. Instead, punch yourself. During a visit to Aaker and Bagdonas's class, Hiroki Asai, former head of marketing communications at Apple, told the story of how he challenged himself to make all 1,000 employees laugh during every all-hands meeting. Once, he purposely showed up late to a meeting and then had a colleague play footage of him asking the beloved cleaning woman for advice on how to run the company. At the end of the video, she slapped him in the face and told him to get a grip; she became the hero of the group and Asai's foil in many videos to come.

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So how can you keep a pulse on what's funny? “The best meritocratic part of comedy is that people either laugh or they don't,” said Seth Meyers, host of Late Night with Seth Meyers and former head writer at Saturday Night Live, when speaking with the class. While this is the case in the comedy world, it isn't always the case in business; especially as you get more senior in an organization, lower status employees may laugh out of social deference, rather than genuine appreciation for your sense of humor. That's why Meyers advised the students to “get good at knowing the difference between your real laugh and polite laugh. Once you recognize it in yourself, you can identify it in other people.”

If you're not funny — which, to be clear, you are not — have no fear. All you need to do is figure out who in your organization is funny and encourage them. Call them “humor ambassadors,” in order to ruin the experience for everyone. Empower them to take on rogue humor missions and help you create more bonded and resilient teams in the process.

Ladders are not the opposite of bridges, or one of the first things you think of when you think of bridges, but, again, go with it. Unlike bridges, ladders are ways to use humor to increase your

status, or decrease someone else's. Studies conducted in 2016 by Brad Bitterly, Alison Wood Brooks, and Maurice Schweitzer showed that if you are able to land a joke in a professional setting, your colleagues are more likely to view you as competent and attribute higher status to you.

But landing a joke requires knowing your style. Leslie Blodgett, the founder and former CEO of bareMinerals, explained: "People want authenticity. If you're not a joke teller, don't practice joke telling. Practice being yourself." And don't show your cards too soon. Anne Libera and Kelly Leonard, who hail from Chicago's legendary Second City improv theater and trained talents like Tina Fey, Stephen Colbert, and Jordan Peele, ran a workshop in the class and emphasized the element of surprise, saying, "The minute you announce that something is going to be fun — it is over."

One of the more surprising and effective places for humor is around the negotiations table, where humor can make you more persuasive. In a study by researchers Karen O'Quinn and Joel Aronoff, participants negotiated on the purchase price of a piece of art. When the sellers concluded their final offer with the humorous line "...and I'll throw in my pet frog," participants in the study granted 18% more concessions than in the control condition, thereby demonstrating that you should not run a psych study with 10-year-old boys.

Humor also increases power through memorability. Venture capitalist David Hornik, who's a general partner at August Capital, argued that most board meetings "run the spectrum from tedium to sadness, so if someone is willing to take the risk to create some levity, there is incredible value in that. People remember it." Biologist and author John Medina agrees, noting in his book *Brain Rules* that "the brain doesn't pay attention to boring things." In addition to oxytocin, laughter releases dopamine, which aids in memory and information processing.

Humor can help you land your dream job as well. A survey of more than 700 CEOs by Hodge-Cronin and Associates showed that 98% of CEOs prefer job candidates with a sense of humor and 84% think that people with a sense of humor do better work. Dwight Eisenhower said, "A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done."

If Dwight David Eisenhower, the second least naturally funny president after Franklin Pierce, thought humor was necessary to beat Nazis, build highways, and warn against the military-industrial complex, then you better learn it too. So build a bridge, climb a ladder, mix a metaphor, and use the most obvious tool that everyone else is afraid to touch. And if it does get you fired, please let Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas know. They're working on a study that's not finished yet.

Joel Stein writes a weekly humor column for TIME magazine and was part of the editorial team for the Humor: Serious Business course at Stanford GSB. He graduated from Stanford in 1993.