

# Leaders Who Can Laugh at Themselves Get a Thumbs Up

December 09, 2014



Humor in the workplace can foster a positive atmosphere that helps coworkers bond, but jokes in the office can also fall flat, hurt feelings, and can even lead to lawsuits. A new study finds that leaders who strike the right balance, laughing at themselves but not their colleagues or underlings, may be seen as more likable, trustworthy, and caring.

Researchers Colette Hopton (Seattle University), Julian Barling (Queen's University), and Nick Turner (University of Manitoba) hypothesized that, regardless of whether people actually thought a leader was funny, self-deprecating jokes would be seen as an expression of a leader's values and concern for others.

"We chose humor as a mechanism through which leaders express their concern for others (vs. the self) because of the potential for humor to be both a weapon to harm others and a tool to build relationships," the researchers write in the *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*.

Leaders who focus on the well-being of others, known as transformational leadership, are more likely to earn the trust and good will of their employees. Poking fun at themselves may be one way in which leaders can de-emphasize differences in status between themselves and their employees, providing evidence of their concern for others.

For the study, the researchers placed 155 business students in one of four humor conditions: self-deprecating humor (making fun of yourself), aggressive humor (making fun of someone else), in-group deprecating humor (making fun of a common trait between the leader and the employees), and a control condition with no humor. For each scenario, the participants read a speech in which the company's leader introduces a new employee named Pat.

The different experimental conditions were manipulated with a single statement at the end of the vignette: "I am so glad that Pat took this job despite knowing all about me!" (self-deprecating), "I am so glad that Pat took this job despite knowing all about you!" (aggressive humor), "I am so glad that Pat

took this job despite knowing all about us!” (in-group deprecating), and “I am so glad that Pat took this job!” (control condition with no humor).

Although there were no differences between the conditions in ratings for how funny the leader was, the self-deprecating leader received significantly more positive ratings for trustworthiness and leadership ability. Additionally, the leader using aggressive humor received a worse evaluation than the leader who used no humor at all.

“Thus, it is important to reiterate that the perception of transformational leadership may be less dependent on how funny leaders are perceived to be, and more dependent on what the type of humor indicates about leaders’ values,” writes Hopton and colleagues.

The researchers caution that too much self-deprecating humor may backfire, coming across as insincere or fake. They also note that more research is necessary to generalize the results of the study – for example, the young sample of study participants may be biased towards certain types of humor compared to a more mature sample. Future research may benefit from using alternative stimuli, such as video clips of leaders, which can provide insight into the effects of factors like body language and audience response to deprecating humor.

## **Reference**

Hopton, C., Barling, J., Turner, N. (2013). “It’s not you, it’s me”: transformational leadership and self-deprecating humor. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 34(1), 4 – 19. doi: 10.1108/01437731311289947