

People view funny co-workers as competent and self-assured, study says

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

After "attractive," few compliments are more universally welcomed than "funny." But being deemed hilarious or witty is more than just a personality trait that can win you more friends. If used successfully, humor also can boost your status at work, persuading others that you're both more confident and more competent than you may actually be,

according to forthcoming research into the connection between status and humor.

"If you are brave enough to tell the joke that you want to tell, whether it succeeds or not, people ascribe confidence to you because they see you as efficacious" for taking such a risk with all the ways a joke can potentially fail, said Alison Wood Brooks, assistant professor at Harvard Business School and the paper's co-author. "To tell a successful joke does, in fact, take quite a lot of competence and not just general intelligence, but emotional intelligence, to figure out all those variables."

Humor is often viewed as superfluous or ancillary behavior and hasn't been thought of as something that affects relationships and hierarchy within organizations and in daily life.

"We do a lot of things to increase our status. We try to work really hard. We try to demonstrate that we're really smart. We work hard at developing our status in an organization, and what we're showing is that humor is one of those tools," said Professor Maurice Schweitzer of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and a paper co-author, along with Brad Bitterly, a Wharton doctoral student.

Make no mistake: Using humor is definitely risky. If a joke bombs because it is inappropriate or boring or just not funny, it can diminish status by causing people to see you as less competent for failing to pull off the aside. And if a joke really goes beyond the pale, it may even get you fired.

What makes something funny? One prevailing theory posits that humor is a violation of some social norm or expectation that's done in a benign way.

"If the violation is too severe—if I'm making jokes about 9/11—that

crosses a line, it's too much of a violation. But if I'm making jokes about the War of 1812, there's so much distance that's passed, it doesn't feel as raw, and so that can feel more benign," said Schweitzer.

Bitterly and Brooks were prompted to explore the relationship between humor and status after noticing how people with less standing, like graduate students and young adults just entering the workforce, often deliberately muffle their full personalities at work for fear of looking bad and perhaps diminishing their career options.

They "often feel trapped in a prison of silence where they can't make their jokes because they know that it's risky. They know that if they voice their jokes and they don't land, people are going to think they're dumb and inappropriate and unprofessional," said Brooks. "And all of that stuff is really damaging."

Because humor is so context-dependent, little academic research has been done into how trying to be funny, and either succeeding or failing, influences interpersonal perceptions, cognitive behaviors, and relationships inside and outside of work organizations, the authors said.

What could be funny in an industry like the restaurant business might not get a laugh with dentists; within a company, the folks in accounting might find something hilarious that goes right by the human resources department; and what amuses an executive assistant may not do much for the boss. Cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences also affect what is perceived as funny.

"So to study it properly, not only do you need to use an enormous array of different jokes, but also different scenarios or contexts," said Brooks.

After testing hundreds of jokes to identify a representative selection of remarks that were universally seen as either funny, not funny, work-

appropriate, or not work-appropriate, the authors ran eight experiments asking respondents to rate jokes on how funny, how boring, and how appropriate they were under various situations.

Later, the respondents were asked to rate the confidence and competence of someone who had told a funny and appropriate joke. Those who made funny and appropriate remarks or jokes were rated highest in confidence and competence. Those who told appropriate but unfunny or boring jokes were still rated highly confident, but were seen as less competent, and thus lost status, for failing to make people laugh. Joke tellers who told inappropriate jokes but got people laughing were not penalized for going over the line. But people who told inappropriate and unfunny jokes were perceived as having low competence and therefore accorded less status.

"We did anticipate that if someone said something massively inappropriate, people are going to think, 'What an idiot, I can't believe that person said that,' and it would harm status," said Bitterly.

"Something that was more surprising was when we looked at appropriate jokes, if they didn't land ... the overall effect on status wasn't that detrimental" because the person was still seen as confident and the hit to their perceived competence "was relatively small."

The key takeaway, the authors say, is that given how effective humor can be in advancing a person's [status](#) at work, employees should use humor more deliberately and strategically, while businesses should consider humor as a key dimension during management hiring and training. Prior studies have shown that having a good sense of humor brings levity to a workplace, which contributes positively to work culture, helping keep employees engaged and happy to come to work each day.

And while there are many ways that a [joke](#) can go wrong—and certainly

it's essential to be mindful of potential pitfalls—being too cautious is not a good strategy because that removes a powerful and effective tool for getting ahead, particularly for low-ranking employees trying to advance.

"Just as we want to develop our spreadsheet skills, our communication skills, or our negotiation skills, we should develop our [humor](#) skills," said Schweitzer. "We need to create impressions at work, we need to communicate effectively, we need to stick up for ourselves, [and] this is part of that skill set."

More information: T. Bradford Bitterly et al. Risky Business: When Humor Increases and Decreases Status, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2015). DOI: [10.2139/ssrn.2656617](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2656617)

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