Humor can make you a better workplace leader, if you use it properly; here's how

June 18 2024, by Nilupama Wijewardena, Charmine Hartel and Ramanie Samaratunge

Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

When asked to describe an ideal organizational leader, many people might be inclined to use quite serious adjectives such as solemn,

determined or results-oriented.

Yet one trait is not only often overlooked, but also essential for managers.

Humor—whether it manifests as a funny anecdote, joke, performance or witty remark—is a crucial tool for good leadership.

When used well, humor can increase employees' psychological empowerment, job performance and well-being, and also make people perceive their leaders as more effective.

But many managers are not humor-savvy. As a result, humor is often used ad hoc rather than as a tool. And because humor can be risky if misunderstood or misinterpreted, some leaders avoid using it at all.

Our recently published paper introduces a humor toolkit specifically for organizational leaders. Its primary goal is to deepen the understanding of the humor process. It's about the "why," "when" and "how" of using humor in a leadership context.

What is humor?

Most people have a good intuition of what humor is, but it can be a hard thing to put a finger on.

We define humor as "any form of communication that creates unexpected or surprising meanings, resulting in amusement for the listeners or audience."

Leaders' humor is therefore any message, verbal or nonverbal, shared by a leader which is—importantly—funny or amusing to the employee.

Paul Malone's [seminal work](#) on humor in the workplace called on leaders to use humor not just because it's fun, but also as a tool to increase employees' satisfaction and performance.

Where appropriate, this could include intentionally sharing a funny anecdote during a meeting, incorporating humor into an email, giving a funny pep talk to the sales team, or using amusing mimes to communicate instructions.

But leaders' humor can also be unintentional, such as a sudden slip of the tongue during a presentation that makes the audience laugh. Both types of humor can help employees feel motivated, appreciated and less stressed at work.

Using humor effectively at work

At an academic level, there are two key elements of a "[workplace humor event](#)": humor creation and humor appreciation.

It starts with a humor creator—in our case a leader—who, based on their intentions, delivers humor through a suitable channel (verbal or written) to an employee, and receives a response.

But the success of this interaction—humor appreciation—is influenced deeply by the quality of the relationship between the leader and employee and the context in which it occurs—the organizational culture, what an employee is doing and who else is present.

The employee's characteristics, such as gender, [cultural background](#) and responsiveness to humor, are also important factors in how humor will be received.

Employees are more likely to appreciate leaders' humor if:

1. they have a high-quality, trusting relationship with the leader
2. they perceive that the leader uses humor with positive intentions
3. the humor is appropriate to the situation
4. the joke is inoffensive to them or others.

Delivering humor effectively is like any other storytelling. A leader must master the art of delivering a humorous message, using an appropriate tone of voice, stance, and range of facial and bodily expressions, with a particular emphasis on timing the punchline for maximum impact.

Leaders must also be able to listen and respond to their employees and stay attuned to the different emotional responses that different types of humor elicit from different employees.

Dos and don'ts for leaders when using humor

Using humor constructively in the workplace centers on paying close attention to relationships and effectively adjusting to different people and contexts. It should only be used with mutually constructive intentions.

Here are some general guidelines:

Dos:

1. Get to know employees and develop trusting relationships before using humor with them. This helps to match humor type with employee characteristics.
2. Regularly weave humor into interactions with employees to bring about desired work outcomes.
3. Allow employees to respond back with humor.

Don'ts:

1. Humor is counterproductive in instances where employees' lives are threatened, or in dire or catastrophic situations.
2. Never use negative humor (such as sarcasm or aggressive humor) that bullies or belittles employees.
3. Don't aim to be a stand-up comedian at work. Be natural and spontaneous.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation