



Why laughing at the boss's jokes might not be a good idea

Employees are more likely to quit if they force themselves to laugh too much, study finds

By **Chloe Leung** | 11 February 2025

Bosses' jokes can lighten the mood and ease tension in meetings, fostering a more relaxed atmosphere.

But there is a downside for employees if senior executives use humour too much, research reveals.

The more leaders use humour in the workplace, the more it increases employees' emotional exhaustion and reduces their job satisfaction, a study combining field and lab experiments from London Business School reveals*.

The researchers tested whether regular joke-telling by office leaders put undue pressure on employees to laugh out of a sense of obligation, rather than because they were amused.

They found that workers faked laughter to please those in authority. The more that jokes were told, the more employees' energy was worn down by feeling obliged to respond positively, particularly with more senior executives.

This process happened even when participants actually found leaders to be funny.

Randall Peterson, professor of organisational behaviour at London Business School and one of the study's authors, said: "If bosses are using humour routinely and expecting employees to respond, there's a risk that people will start faking it because they feel they have to, especially if there's a major power imbalance.

"Employees may worry that if they do not laugh at the boss's joke, it could make them look bad."

The problem was exacerbated by leaders misinterpreting employees' fake laughter as real, leading them to tell more jokes, which eventually spiralled out of control, he said.

However, the negative side effects of too many jokes are not restricted to awkward meetings.

The impact on employees' emotions and performance was such that it made them "more likely to quit, because [people] are using energy to manage emotions instead of getting the job done", Peterson said.

Maurice Schweitzer, professor of operations, information and decisions at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, added that not laughing at your boss's jokes could also have serious consequences, including posing a "risk" to career progression.

"In many organisations, people want to select somebody for promotion who is easy to get along with.

"By not laughing at jokes, you are sending a message that you are not part of the group," he said.

Team leaders and other senior figures should be cautious about how they use humour in the workplace to avoid these negative effects, experts say.

Bradford Bitterly, assistant professor of management at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, said: "Overall humour can have powerful interpersonal effects. But people should think of it like a medicine.

"Just like quality and quantity are important with medications, people [should] make sure their jokes are funny, appropriate, and not overdone."

Executives could seek feedback about their humour and practice in order to get better at using it in the office, Bitterly said.

"If you're a manager and thinking of including some jokes in an upcoming talk, run it by people who are going to give you honest feedback."

"Although some people are funnier than others, humour is a skill, and people can learn to be funnier over time," he added.

Melanie Pritchard, success coach and well-being trainer, agreed and said executives could start by using humour in one-on-one interactions.

She said leaders should be "good at [reading] the personality of the group" before introducing humour in a team setting.

"A little bit goes a long way, anything more [can] backfire," Peterson added.

*Faking it with the boss's jokes? Leader humor quantity, follower surface acting, and power distance, by Xiaoran Hu, Michael Parke, Randall Peterson and Grace Simon.

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