

Wo+Men's Leadership Centre

RISING UP THE CORPORATE LADDER, ONE JOKE AT A TIME: DO MALE AND FEMALE LEADERS USE HUMOUR DIFFERENTLY?

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Introduction

The use of humour at the workplace gets mixed reviews. While humour can create positive energy in teams and help to improve leaders' likeability, humour can also destroy a manager's credibility, prevent them from being taken seriously and offend people. Yet how do male and female leaders use humour differently in the workplace? In a study conducted at University of Cambridge Judge Business School, we found that women often hold back in using humour even when it may be effective – and this represents a major lost opportunity in gender equality in the workplace.

The issue of whether male and female leaders use humour differently in the workplace is an important question because studies have shown that men and women differ in their leadership styles. So the authors – an Executive MBA student who is a communications professional and part-time comedienne, and a business professor who directs a research centre on gender and leadership – sought to identify how and why humour and gender are linked at the workplace.

To answer these key questions, we conducted two studies. The first was a survey-based study of 100 middle and senior executives to identify the broad patterns of differences in how males and females use humour in workplace settings. In the second study, we build on these findings and interviewed successful female and male leaders about the humour strategies they use in enhancing their leadership. These studies indicate that gender differences are central to understanding the link between humour and leadership, and provide food for thought on how female leaders can better use humour strategically to become successful leaders.

Humour and leadership: Key concepts

There are two broad areas in understanding how executives use humour in their workplace: the sort of work settings where executives use humour, and the types of humour executives choose to use in their workplace interactions.

Work settings. Executives interact with peers, subordinates and superiors in different forms of interactions, formal and informal. These formal and informal settings are potential avenues where leaders can use humour, and executives vary in their comfort in using humour in these different work situations. Some executives tend to use humour broadly in most or all of their formal as well as informal interactions, while others use humour more carefully in selective informal settings. We examine three avenues of workplace settings where male and female leaders choose to use humour: Formal committees and meetings, Informal social gatherings, and One-on-one meetings with colleagues.

Types of Humour. Research has identified four styles that capture both the positive and negative sides of humour. Self-enhancing humour involves being able to laugh at yourself, including a joking reference to something bad that has occurred in your life. This often entails trying to find the humour in everyday situations, and making yourself the target of the humour in a good-natured way through expressions such as "Maybe I just don't quite get it." **Affiliative humour** involves jokes about everyday occurrences that many people can find funny, and this type of humour aims to bring people together through the sharing of mundane humorous matters. **Aggressive humour** includes put-downs of individuals or groups, which can take the form of bullying if used to threaten or harm psychologically. **Self-defeating humour** involves criticising yourself, and is often used to preemptively avoid attacks by making oneself the butt of jokes.

Study one: Sample and research design

Survey study: We used a snowball sampling method to conduct the survey. We started with Executive MBA students enrolled in a major university who then referred us to other acquaintances. Of the 168 we approached, 100 middle and senior executives completed the survey (a 60% response rate). Our sample consisted of 68 (67%) males and 33 (33%) females. Middle and senior executives of large public limited companies (> 5000 employees) constituted 36%, and founders of small start-ups (1-50 employees) comprised 19% of the total sample. The participants belong to a wide range of industries including finance, technology, healthcare, non-profit, public sector and energy. The survey was carefully designed using established scales of the four humour styles, and customised items for humour in different workplace settings developed through pilot testing.

Qualitative interview study. Following the survey study, we conducted in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with 14 middle and senior executives (eight females and six males) from large public limited companies to founders of small start-ups. They work in the finance, technology, healthcare, energy and tobacco industries.

Summary of main survey results: Gender differences in humour and leadership

We found significant differences between male and female leaders with regards to humour styles, workplace settings and the use of humour in making them better leaders. Here are the key findings:

Humour and leadership effectiveness:

Females believe much more than males that humour helps them lead better.

Workplace settings:

Male executives use humour more in formal settings, more in informal social settings, and much more with superiors – compared to female counterparts.

Humour styles

Significant gender differences: male executives use affiliative humour and aggressive humour much more than female executives do.

No significant gender differences: both male and female executives avoid self-defeating humour at the workplace, while both male and female executives use self-enhancing humour considerably at the workplace.

Implications of the survey study: What do the survey study results tell us?

We found an inherent gender contradiction in humour and leadership. Female executives believed much more than male counterparts that humour helps them lead better. Yet female executives use less humour in both formal and informal settings in the workplace, and also use humour less frequently with superiors. Thus, female executives seem to avoid using humour at the workplace despite their belief in its benefit in making them better leaders.

When asked about whether there is a double standard for humour, females believed more than males that women leaders using humour are taken less seriously, are less well-liked, and are seen as less competent. These results suggest that the fear of a double standard may be holding female leaders back from using humour strategically in becoming effective leaders.

Study two: How can you use humour to unleash leadership effectiveness

The results led us to move from description to prescription, so we asked the question: How can leaders (both male and female) use humour strategically to become better leaders? We used in-depth qualitative interviews with successful male and female leaders to identify some key considerations for including humour in the leadership toolkit.

Know your audience: It is critical for leaders to know the audience including their work backgrounds, basic personal information and their affiliations. Knowing the audience can help leaders minimise the risks associated with the use of humour such as offending peers, appearing insensitive and being socially distanced at the workplace. In today's LinkedIn and Facebook age, it is quite easy to get this information. The better you know the audience, the better you can customise self-enhancing and affiliative humour, and the more you can avoid well-intentioned self-enhancing or affiliative jokes turning into unintentionally aggressive or self-defeating humour disasters. Regardless of the humour style you use, knowing your audience can help you better connect with your audience and focus on commonalities in bringing people together. In this regard, a female project leader at a major European aircraft manufacturing company stated:

"Create a connection with your audience. While preparing your jokes, think of what you have in common with your audience. Avoid risky topics such as politics or religion. It is also important to own your joke: once it's out there, it's out there. If it works, everybody will laugh and if it doesn't, well, just say: 'I'm sorry' and move on."

Be mindful of laughing at others: Avoid aggressive humour that is insulting to others and can subject peers and colleagues at work to negative psychological effects such as frustration, anger and sadness. Aggressive humour can socially distance leaders in workplace settings and create conflicts and animosity. Instead, focus on affiliative humour that brings people together and creates positive energy. A female founder of a small finance company said:

"Humour should be something that brings the team together, rally the troops to get through difficult periods. We should try to be kind as much as possible in our organisations and especially if we are managing people. Organisational humour should be kind and intelligent in using situational awareness. For example, you can look at different customer stereotypes or things that might happen within the value chain and you can draw comedy from it."

Laugh at yourself instead: Humour can be powerful for leaders in downward management. Using self-enhancing and self-defeating humour can enhance the psychological safety of peers and subordinates in being open and talking freely with leaders about their concerns. When leaders show their own vulnerabilities to subordinates, they reduce feelings of intimidation and improve their likability among those employees; this can make subordinates feel more comfortable admitting their own mistakes, expressing their concerns and challenging the leaders, all of which can enhance performance. A male CFO of an American smart home product company stated:

"I think humour is effective when you are getting things done. And, along the way, you show that you're not taking yourself too seriously; that we just can't stop and have a good laugh together. From a leadership position, self-deprecating humour is really good, it helps subordinates know that you're a real person and you realise your flaws."

Although very effective in interacting with subordinates, self-defeating humour may create unnecessary risks in interaction with superiors and peers, so it is important to avoid self-defeating humour in these settings.

Appear in control: Use jokes to illustrate a key point or to highlight a key point, but avoid telling jokes just to be funny all the time. Joking for its own sake can make executives look unprofessional and not taken seriously. An attorney at a major American law firm describes how less is more:

"People who come across as very serious when they say something that's funny are far more impactful than the person who jokes around all the time. So, if your style is to be quiet and understated, you can still be very funny and have an even bigger impact if you just choose those very few well-timed moments to make it happen."

A regional director of a large UK-based mortgage company reinforced the importance of using humour to show that you are authentic and in control even under pressure:

"If you are under pressure, humour is the first thing that can disappear. So if you can still use it while under pressure, it conveys the message that you are in control of yourself and the situation."

Be ready: Women can encounter sexual remarks or inappropriate comments about physical appearance. Our interviewees recommended being well-prepared with a pointy joke that helps convey the inappropriateness of the remarks and embarrass the person cracking the joke without being combative. In this regard, an attorney at a major American law firm advises women to be ready with a funny comeback for these uncomfortable situations:

"If you have a ready comeback in your pocket, it's a really good way to point out something that's inappropriate without coming across as the bitchy feminist."

Conclusion

If used appropriately, humour can be a critical tool in enhancing leadership effectiveness. Yet women leaders seem to hold back from using humour in their interactions in the workplace, and this is a major lost opportunity in becoming better leaders. Suggestions yielded by our qualitative interviews can help female leaders become more confident about using humour strategically in becoming better leaders.

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