

# The Importance of Humour at Work!

Written by Pradeep Kumar

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**By V Pradeep Kumar**



The concept of humour in management is one of the least researched and written about aspect. Many organisations have been using group 'laughing exercises' in the morning of a typical working day to achieve positive benefits of promoting health, creating a strong sense of belonging and community.

Who doesn't like jokes? Even 'god likes jokes' as said by Greek philosopher Plato. Yet, the concept of humour in people management is one of those least researched and written about. Humour is rather misunderstood or misinterpreted to mean only common office jokes. There is a lot of scientific reasoning behind humour to understand and implement at the workplace. Humour is an important emotion, and considered an intangible benefit with a very positive mental effect. If someone is making a 'mistake', which even we could make, generally triggers humour. The more common the mistake, greater is the effect of 'voluntary laughter'. The laughter has to be voluntary and not encouraged.

## **Psychology rank**

A joke or a comedy generally reduces what is called in psychology 'rank' or 'status' of the person committing the mistake. Imagine the most common mistake all of us would have witnessed at some point of time or the other of someone slipping on a banana peel and falling off. This has a positive effect of making us more conscious to avoid such a mistake.

The humour is triggered generally when the mistake happens for the first time and the impact

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gradually reduces, with repetitive mistakes. The opposite effect of humour is humiliation. Humor is triggered when we hear a joke, gossip, witness a comedy, see a prank, watch a comedy on television, read spicy news in a tabloid etc. Peter Ustinov, the British actor, writer and director said very appropriately, "Comedy is simply a funny way of being serious".

## Different kinds of humour

**Gossip:** Gossip is an integral part of an office environment irrespective of whether it is an MNC or family managed; a large or a small enterprise; an IT company or a construction company and takes away hours of productive time, day after day. Further, even though all gossip is not negative, the perception is so, in the minds of the superiors who continuously try to eliminate office gossip. However, gossip triggers humour and actually helps relieve office tension and helps in lightening the atmosphere. Gossip is generally about others not present in the group that is gossiping and there is a reduction in the 'status' or 'rank' of others and hence the humour. Gossips triggers more humour and laughter than jokes or comedies.

**Jokes:** People joke about others or criticise others about the mistakes they make. Subconsciously, the possibility of themselves making such mistakes worries them.

**Witty jokes:** Witty jokes are special because they trigger not just humour but also 'pride' as they require a certain intelligence to understand and hence the element of 'pride'. Will Rogers, American humorist and actor once said, "I don't make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts".

**A punch line:** Punch lines also trigger humour but the special element here is the 'surprise' or the 'unexpected'. The punch lines are generally oneliners but they create the impact. George Bernard Shaw, the witty dramatist and noble prize winner, once remarked "He knows nothing; and he thinks he knows everything. That points to a political career".

**Putdowns and pranks:** Putdowns and pranks, also trigger a feeling of humour in us, when we are witnessing it and not the 'object' of it.

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**Self effacing humour:** Self effacing humour is a very effective method in 'speeches' to trigger laughter whether it is for a comedian or a politician or managers. Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, known for his self effacing wit, once said, "I have taken more out of alcohol than alcohol has taken out of me".

Benefits of humour in biz Humour can be used to great effect in management of people and customers. The following are some specific situations.

**Defusing tension:** Tension in an organisation is a common phenomenon and could be between individuals or groups. Humour can provide relief in a tense atmosphere, enabling the return of normalcy.

**Winning an argument:** Arguments tend to prolong as no one wants to lose. A good way to end an argument is humour without anyone losing.

**Praising others:** Similarly, in one to one or even in a group communication, a bit of humour of the right kind can help in boosting the morale or ego of people.

**Build rapport:** Humour also helps to build instant rapport when we meet people whether in a social gathering or in a formal setting.

**Saving face:** Sometimes we could be caught in an embarrassing or a difficult situation and one good way is to use humour, to save face.

**Convincing/pacifying customers:** Often we have to deal with customers, suppliers and others, who are irritated and nasty. Sometimes, humour can help to get out of such situations. However, this should only be done, after listening to the aggrieved person. Therefore, humour

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has physical, psychological and social benefits. Humour is also credited with 'problem solving' or cognitive benefits as well, as demonstrated in situations such as handling a difficult customer or a situation.

While there are these important and crucial benefits, in using humour at work place, we should be also conscious about the dangers of ineffective use of humour. There is a saying, "always laugh heartily at the jokes your boss tells, it maybe a loyalty test and it's worth remembering this to evaluate, the effectiveness of the joke, you narrate."

### **Dangers of humour**

The most important thing to remember is that 'humour' shouldn't be used as a substitute for 'judgment' and should be used only to 'complement'. When used to substitute judgment, it creates an erosion of authority and loss of credibility.

The second danger of careless usage of humour in a work place is that, it can seriously offend an employee or someone who is the 'object' of humour. For example, there can be no humour about who is getting sacked. This can further lead to gossip which could take negative turn and can instigate more grievances.

The third danger is simply with its excess use due to which the context of the joke is forgotten and only the joke is remembered. Years back we hired an experienced consultant to talk to our sales team, on a particular aspect of sales process. He delivered a brilliant and hilarious lecture punctuated with jokes and anecdotes. The next morning, while we were generally checking the feedback of the previous day's session, we were too shocked to find, that most people remembered only the jokes and not the techniques that the consultant had lectured on. Humour therefore works in moderation and in a context.

Fourthly, desist from making jokes about religion, gender, sex etc. Not only they are offensive, they depict you with a poor taste.

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Also, humour has to be carefully and very selectively used to derive a specific purpose as otherwise, it can be a serious distraction in a workplace

While discussing humour, we must not forget that all of us are in a work environment, with a role to play and enable the organisation achieve its business purpose. Humour used ineffectively, inappropriately and illtimed, can be counterproductive to the spirit of business enterprise.

### **Precautions for humour**

There are three things to aim at while using humour in speaking: First to get into our subject, then to get the subject into us, and lastly, to get the subject into our audience. Once we get people laughing, they're listening attentively and we can tell them almost anything. It's worth considering the following few steps, before using humour.

Create an element of mutual trust and positive work environment

Do not target an employee or employees and be conscious not to offend anyone.

If you are the initiator of the joke, or comedy, it's a good idea to plan or rehearse it even mentally. However, if you are in doubt, don't try. A failed comedy is a tragedy, best avoided. Oscar Wilde, the famous British author and one of the greatest wit, once said, "Lots of people act well, but few people talk well. This shows that talking is the more difficult of the two"

A self effacing humour is relatively a safe bet in a work place and being an 'object' of humour ensures greater 'consent' from the audience while ensuring no one else in the audience or group is the object of the intended humour. There are clear benefits of humour at work place and its effective use leads to more focus and less fear particularly in today's recessionary conditions, leading to higher productivity. As managers and leaders, we need to understand the benefits, be conscious of its dangers and use it appropriately in a work place. Therefore, while

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being conscious of the benefits and dangers, we should use humour to great effect and leverage the benefits to complement our other strategies in line with the purpose of our business.

### **About the author**

V.Pradeep Kumar is a publishing and media expert, and a management consultant with diverse local and international experience.

Mr. Kumar holds an MBA [1980] and has strong cross functional knowledge and skills, both strategic and hands on leadership. He has got experience in the arena of both start ups and established operations, with balance of people and task orientation.

After starting the southern operations of Tata Infomedia Ltd, as General Manager [south], in 1993, Mr. Kumar is credited with the successful launch of Tata Press Yellow Pages in southern India. He was part of senior management responsible for diversification of the company into several B2B and B2C magazines such as Overdrive, Better Photography, AV Max, Search and so on.

From 2003 till 2009, Mr. Kumar headed Hawk Media LLC, Dubai, UAE and was responsible for the resurrection of the brand, 'Hawk'.

After 30 years of distinguished corporate experience, he is now based at Bangalore focusing on management consultancy and training services.

Mr. Kumar is also a prominent writer on leadership, management, economy and education. His first book, 'Simple is difficult' was published in 2009 and he is currently working on several new book projects.

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