

# Laughing your way to the top

## WHY HUMOR IS VITAL IN LEADERSHIP

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When was the last time you laughed a lot at work? I'm not talking about forcing a big smile or fake laugh to appease your boss. I'm talking about a true belly laugh. If you're like most of us, laughing is usually reserved for time when you're not working.

Data show we smile and laugh much more on weekends than on weekdays.<sup>1</sup> But using humor at work can help you be more successful as a leader:

- Research shows that managers with a sense of humor are 25% more respected by their direct reports.<sup>2</sup>
- Employees who rate their bosses as having any sense of humor were 15% more satisfied in their jobs and rated their bosses 27% more motivating.<sup>3</sup>

Humor doesn't only apply to those reporting to you. A survey of more than 700 chief executive officers (CEOs) showed that 98% reported preferring employees with a sense of humor. The survey also found that 84% of CEOs felt that employees with a sense of humor were better at their jobs than their less-funny counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

I previously worked in a \$14-billion integrated delivery system where I was selected to take part in its prestigious leadership academy. The program culminated in a graduation ceremony with the organization's top executives in attendance. Our graduating class elected me to open the ceremony. After introducing the graduates and thanking our sponsors, I finished with a joke:

*Two 4-year-old boys named Tommy and Billy are laying in hospital gurneys outside the operating room. Tommy looks at Billy and asks, "What are you here for?" Billy replies, "I need to get my tonsils out." Tommy smiles and says, "Oh, that's no big deal. I had mine taken out last year. When you're in the operating room, they'll put a mask on you and you'll go to sleep. When you wake up, you get to eat as much ice cream as you want!" Billy instantly feels better. Wanting to reciprocate, he asks Tommy, "What are you here for?" Tommy responds, "I need to get a circumcision." Billy's eyes open wide, and he says, "Wow! That's tough. I had a circumcision the day after I was born... I couldn't walk for a WHOLE YEAR!"*



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Given the provocative nature of the joke, the response could have gone either way. Fortunately, the audience erupted in laughter, and I happily stepped off the stage. A few weeks later, one executive contacted me to compliment me on my sense of humor. He then offered me a director seat for one of the top boards in the enterprise. I accepted without hesitation.

### BENEFITS OF HUMOR

In their book, *Humor, Seriously: Why Humor Is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life*, coauthors Jennifer Aaker, PhD, and Naomi Bagdonas, MBA — Stanford professors who teach a graduate business course called “Humor: Serious Business” — list multiple benefits of humor at work:

- **Benefit to employees:** Humor boosts well-being, creativity, job satisfaction and work performance.
- **Benefit to teams:** Humor enhances group communication and cohesion while

fostering creativity and innovation. It also makes teams feel psychologically safe.

- **Benefits to communication:** Humor makes messaging more memorable and makes others more receptive to your message.<sup>5</sup>

Humor also has health benefits. Laughter releases oxytocin, which helps us to facilitate social bonding and increases trust and generosity. Laughter decreases cortisol, leading to less stress. It also increases dopamine, so we feel happier, and releases endorphins so we feel slightly euphoric.<sup>6</sup> Studies show that women and men with a strong sense of humor live longer, even despite illness.<sup>7</sup>

### WAYS TO BE MORE HUMOROUS

Many think that being humorous is more a matter of genetics than development. This is partially true. Studies link smiling and laughing behaviors to the 5-HTTLPR gene, which is a serotonin receptor.<sup>8</sup> However, much of being funny can be learned. Below are three ways based on Aaker’s and Bagdonas’ research:





### 1. Notice oddities

Humor is based on truth and incongruities. Noticing these oddities and calling them out makes them funny. Years ago, I attended an event focused on clinician satisfaction. One speaker was an executive presenting on how his group increased response rates on clinician satisfaction surveys. The first enticement was a \$500 raffle for clinicians who completed the survey. The second rewarded departments with the highest clinician response rates. Those departments were provided free lunch. The last was tying completion of the survey to the clinicians' end-of-year incentives.

He ended his presentation by revealing that the three enticements increased survey response rates from 30% to 90%. The attendees all applauded his efforts, and he opened the session for questions. I raised my hand and inquired, "Given the high response rate, how did you use the results to improve clinician satisfaction?" He looked at me without blinking and said, "Well, our executive bonus is based on response rates, not on the actual clinician satisfaction survey results." I leaned over to a physician sitting next to me and said, "You can't make this stuff up!"

You can practice finding humor by writing 10 observations of incongruities from your life every week. In my case, these incongruities gave birth to *Doc-Related*, my satirical comic about the challenges of practicing medicine today, as seen through the eyes of clinicians and administrators. Recently, I incorporated my "Dilbert for Health Care" comics, as they have affectionately been called, into a bestselling

Amazon book, *Doc-Related: A Physician's Guide to Fixing Our Ailing Health Care System*.

### 2. Self-deprecation

Making yourself, your abilities, or your achievements seem less important is another way to be humorous. Remember, it's better and safer to mock yourself than to mock others at work. Leaders who use self-deprecating humor are rated higher on measures of trustworthiness and leadership ability by their employees.<sup>9</sup> Self-deprecating humor also reflects self-awareness and emotional intelligence.

Over the years, I've been invited to speak at events on topics pertaining to innovation, creativity, leadership and well-being. I often share with the audience how I never thought of being a physician growing up. My initial dream was to be an architect. I spent much of my childhood drawing houses and buildings with atypical shapes, windows, and entryways. A few years after entering medical school, I showed these sketches to my girlfriend, who is now my wife. I asked for her honest feedback on whether she thought I would have made a brilliant architect. She reviewed each page and after a long pause said, "It's a good thing you decided to go into medicine." All of us have someone in our life who keeps us humble. They will be more than happy to provide you with fodder for self-deprecation.

### 3. Humor ambassadors

If noticing incongruities or self-deprecation are not in your comfort zone, you can find humor via proxies or "humor

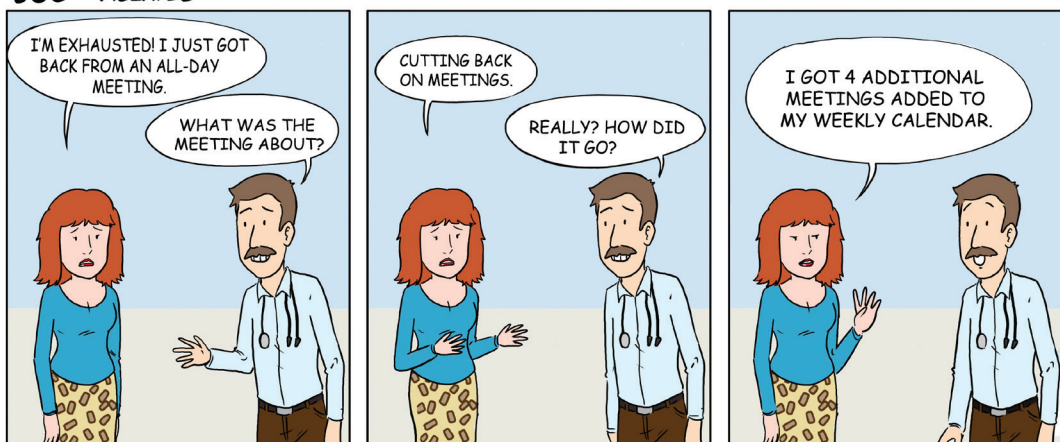


**Humor boosts well-being, creativity, job satisfaction and work performance. Humor enhances group communication and cohesion while fostering creativity and innovation.**

# DID YOU KNOW?

## DOC-RELATED

Dr. Peter Valenzuela



Peter Valenzuela's focus on humor and creativity throughout his career spurred him to create a satirical comic, "Doc-Related," which led to him authoring a book, ***Doc-Related: A Physician's Guide to Fixing Our Ailing Health Care System***. Hear more about his work on a 2021 MGMA Insights podcast: [mgma.com/doc-related](https://mgma.com/doc-related).

ambassadors." Most often, these ambassadors exist within your organization. If no one readily comes to mind, you can invite ambassadors in to improve morale and build your credibility as someone with a sense of humor. Consider the examples of Zubin Damania, MD, ("ZDoggMD") and Will Flanary, MD ("Dr. Glaucomflecken"): Both are practicing physicians with millions of subscribers on their social media platforms. They do excellent jobs of pointing out the incongruities and insanities of our healthcare system via creative skits, jokes, videos and musical parodies.

### SUMMARY

Mark Twain said, "Humor is mankind's greatest blessing." It shouldn't just be reserved for home. Humor enhances our working environment by improving team building, morale and communication. Humor also has a significant impact on our health and well-being. When done correctly, it can make you a more inspiring and trusted leader. It can also lead to promotions. Who knows? It may even land you a dream job where people look forward to hearing what you have to say just because of how you say it. ■



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### NOTES

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