Synthesis

A review of emerging ideas in the media

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Leading with Humor

by Alison Beard

The workplace needs laughter. According to research from institutions as serious as Wharton, MIT, and London Business School, every chuckle or guffaw brings with it a host of business benefits. Laughter relieves stress and boredom, boosts engagement and well-being, and spurs not only creativity and collaboration but also analytic precision and productivity.

And yet, as the MBA candidate Eric Tsytsylin recently put it in a video presentation featured on the Stanford website, working adults are "in the midst of a laughter drought." Babies laugh, on average, 400 times a day; people over 35, only 15. A recent study of Gallup data for the U.S. found that we laugh significantly less on weekdays than we do on weekends. Work is a sober endeavor.

So how, exactly, can organizations and individual leaders get their employees to laugh more? Screen Will Ferrell movies in the break rooms? Schedule off-site improv sessions? Start every meeting with a joke?

The problem, most would say, is that humor is subjective: What you find amusing or side-splittingly hilarious, Mary in marketing and Amir in accounting most certainly do not. But the authors of two recent books on the subject—*The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny* and *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*—disagree. They believe that there's a formula for what makes all people laugh, and they work extremely hard, in very different ways, to prove their cases.

In *The Humor Code,* Peter McGraw, a marketing and psychology professor at the University of Colorado Boulder, and the journalist Joel Warner travel from the comedy clubs of Los Angeles to the remote villages of Tanzania and the Amazon to (casually) test their theory that humor rests on "benign violation": That is, something provokes laughter when it is "wrong, unsettling, or threatening" but also seems "okay, acceptable, or safe." Think of tickling, teasing, a mix-up that seems funny after the fact, or a dirty joke. The authors acknowledge that "it's easier to fail with humor than succeed" (indeed, some of their own attempts fall horribly flat) and

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that comedy is context-dependent—"a delicate operation built on layers of shared knowledge...and innuendo." But they still contend that if you know your crowd, the benign violation formula will work.

The men behind *Inside Jokes*—Matthew M. Hurley, of Indiana University; Daniel C. Dennett, of Tufts; and Reginald B. Adams Jr., of Pennsylvania State University—take a much more academic approach and arrive at a different, though perhaps related, theory. They say (in typically arcane prose): "Humor happens when an assumption is epistemically committed to in a mental space and then discovered to have been a mistake." Translation: We laugh when we find that something we've momentarily believed to be the case isn't in fact true, and at others in the same predicament, and at stories about such situations, especially if they are linked to pleasures of other kinds, such as insight, schadenfreude, superiority, or sexual titillation. The simplest examples are puns and pranks, but the authors spend a lot of pages applying their analysis to various types of humor, and they definitely bored me into submission.

Unfortunately, these books offer little practical advice for those seeking to ramp up laughter levels at work. That's because they focus mainly on jokes—the kind you hear at stand-up shows or on *Saturday Night Live.* As a manager, you might be able to slip one of those into a speech or a presentation from time to time, but you're certainly not going to walk around the office lobbing one-liners like Bob Hope, cursing like Richard Pryor, or slinging insults like Ricky Gervais.

How, then, can you put the work of these authors to good use? I do think their theories can help us understand what kind of humor works at the office and why. Self-deprecating stories shared between peers—check. Light teasing among longtime colleagues—check. Even privately poking fun at outsiders who prompt the same reaction from your entire group (for example, arrogant consultants or clueless interns)—check.

> "A priest, a rabbi, and a nun walk into a bar, and the bartender says, 'What is this, a joke?'"
> Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes*

Of course, all of this must be done with extreme care. While both books note that humor emphasizing superiority is universally effective (every culture has its own version of the dumb blonde joke), discriminatory comments are obviously a punishable offense. New research from Gang Zhang, a doctoral candidate at LBS, shows that although employees admire and feel more motivated by leaders who use humor effectively, they have less respect for those who try to be funny and fail or who make fun of themselves. And, needless to say, workplace comedy flies in some countries a lot better than it does in others; as McGraw and Warner note, in Japan "hilarity...is reserved for certain locales....Don't try joking in the office."

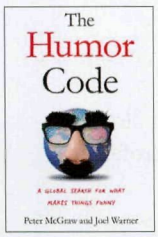
Perhaps it's best, then, to look at some of the broader recommendations summarized at the end of *The Humor Code*:

- It's not whether or not you're funny, it's what kind of funny you are. Be honest and authentic.
- If you can't be "ha-ha" funny, at least be "aha!" funny. Cleverness is sometimes good enough.
- Good comedy is a conspiracy. Create an in-group.
- Don't be afraid to chuckle at yourself. It signals everything is okay.
- Laughter is disarming. Poke fun at the stuff everyone's worried about.

(One more useful tip: To tell whether a workmate's amusement is real, not faked, look for crinkling around the eyes; if it's there, you've got true "Duchenne" laughter, named for the French physician who identified it.)

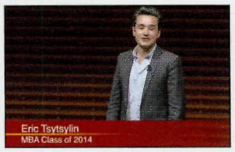
Tsytsylin offers similar directives in his talk, along with some concrete examples of companies that carry them out—for example, Yahoo and IBM have crazy names like Kajagoogoo for their meeting rooms, Hulu hosts taco-eating contests and Airzooka tournaments, and Southwest chose the whimsical stock symbol LUV. He encourages those of us in the business world to think about the power of laughter a lot more than we do now. It should factor into how we communicate, allocate our time, and even recruit and hire.

I agree. My favorite meetings start with some witty banter—jokes about the latest IT upgrade, a funny story about a difficult author, some gentle ribbing over a missed deadline. My favorite colleagues make me laugh with personal stories, random e-mails, and occasionally off-color comments. And my favorite bosses know how to be funny and elicit the same fun-loving behavior from their employees. McGraw and Warner cite a line worth remembering from the anthropologist Edward Hall: "If you can learn the humor of a people and really control it, you know that you are also in control of nearly everything else."



The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny
Peter McGraw and Joel Warner
Simon & Schuster, 2014

Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind
Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams Jr.
MIT Press, 2011



"Laughter: Serious Business"
Eric Tsytsylin
www.gsb.stanford.edu/lowkeynotes

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