

Can you lead without levity?

In the corporate world, laughter often takes a back seat to seriousness. Is this a mistake?

Leadership is no laughing matter – or is it? Throughout history, great leaders have wielded humour as a powerful tool to inspire, persuade and disarm. From Abraham Lincoln’s witty anecdotes to Winston Churchill’s razor-sharp quips, humour has often played a key role in diffusing tension and rallying people behind a common goal.

Research from Stanford University suggests that shared laughter in teams increases cohesion, trust and productivity. It acts as a social lubricant, breaking down hierarchical barriers and encouraging open, authentic communication. Laughter releases endorphins, reduces stress and fosters a sense of belonging – qualities that are critical for team success. Yet many leaders shy away from using humour, fearing it might undermine their authority or come across as unprofessional.

In my work training leaders, politicians and even royalty in the art of communication, I’ve seen first hand how humour can be a superpower when wielded with care. Churchill famously said: “A joke is a very serious thing.” And he was right. Leaders who use humour effectively don’t just lighten the mood; they create memorable moments that stick in minds and hearts, making their message resonate.

However, humour is not without its pitfalls. To be effective, it must be authentic, inclusive and well timed. Misplaced levity can alienate rather than unite. Leaders must tune into their team’s rhythm and culture, using humour as a bridge to foster connection rather than a barrier that highlights differences. The best humour comes from a place of empathy and understanding, not at anyone’s expense.

Beyond lightening the mood, humour can spark creativity and innovation. When people laugh, their mental barriers lower, creating an

By

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environment where ideas can flow freely without fear of judgement. It’s no coincidence that the most innovative teams often describe their workplace as ‘fun’. At Google – where I had the privilege of working with their leaders for many years – levity is actively encouraged as part of the culture, with a clear understanding that humour is an enhancement to creativity and collaboration.

Still, the question remains: can you lead without levity? Perhaps – but will you be as effective without it? As organisations strive for innovation and agility, levity could be the overlooked ingredient that separates good leaders from great ones. The leaders who embrace humour create workplaces where people feel valued, connected and engaged. Take, for example, a leader facing a high-pressure pitch meeting. By opening with a lighthearted remark, they not only ease the tension, but also demonstrate confidence and approachability. That brief moment of laughter sets the tone, allowing the team to perform at their best.

As workplaces continue to evolve – especially with the rise of remote and hybrid models – the role of humour in leadership is more critical than ever. Virtual meetings can feel rigid and transactional, but a touch of levity can transform the atmosphere, making us feel more connected, even across screens.

Leadership isn’t about being the funniest person in the room; it’s about creating an environment where everyone feels comfortable, inspired and able to contribute. As the philosopher Henri Bergson said: “Laughter is life’s great equaliser.” Perhaps it’s time leaders embraced it as a vital part of their toolkit. **E**
Paul Boross MBE is a globally recognised authority on communication and leadership. Known as The Pitch Doctor, Paul is a bestselling author, award-winning speaker, and host of the acclaimed Humourology podcast. He was runner-up for the Leadership Excellence (Individual) Award 2024.