

Faking it with the Boss: Leader Humor can Increase Employee Emotional Labor at Work

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Abstract

Leaders are often advised to use humor at work because research suggests it promotes positive employee emotions, reduces emotional strain, and enhances job satisfaction. Much of this research and theory, however, fails to fully consider the power dynamics inherent in leader-employee interactions. Here I look specifically at beliefs about leader-employee power differentials and how that affects employees' reactions to leader displays of humor. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that humor relieves emotional strain in organizations, I theorize that leader humor expression can actually increase employee emotional strain and lead to a group of negative workplace outcomes via emotional labor of surface acting, particularly when employees hold high power distance values. Results from three studies provide consistent evidence for these hypotheses and are replicated across three distinct cultural samples (China, India, and the USA). This research identifies the potential cost of a positive leader behavior and has important implications for management scholars and practitioners.