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Goofing off at the office doesn't do you any good. Milan Markovic/E+ via Getty Images

Why you seriously need to stop trying to be funny at work

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How can you get ahead in your career and still enjoy the ride?

One solution offered in business books, LinkedIn posts and team-building manuals is to use humor. Sharing jokes, sarcastic quips, ironic memes and witty anecdotes, the advice goes, will make you more likable, ease stress, strengthen teams, spark creativity and even signal leadership potential.

We are professors of marketing and management who study humor and workplace dynamics. Our own research – and a growing body of work by other scholars – shows that it's harder to be funny than most people think. The downside of cracking a bad joke is often larger than what you might gain by landing a good one.

Fortunately, you don't have to tell sidesplitting jokes to make humor work for you. You can learn to think like a comedian instead.

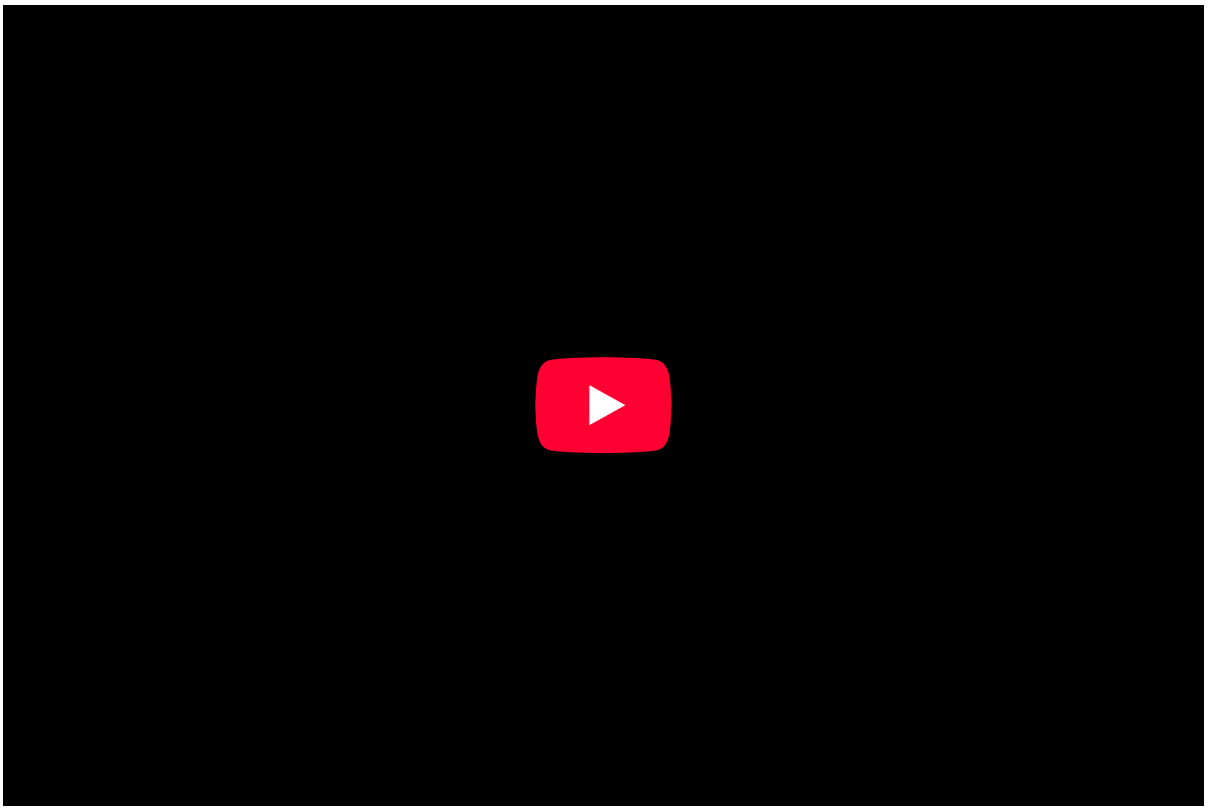
Humor is risky business

Comedy works by bending and breaking norms – and when those rules aren't broken in just the right way, it's more likely to harm your reputation than to help your team.

We developed the “benign violation theory” to explain what makes things funny – and why attempts at humor so often backfire, especially in the workplace. Essentially, humor arises when something is both wrong and OK at the same time.

People find jokes funny when they break rules while seeming harmless. Miss one of those ingredients when you tell a joke and your audience won’t appreciate it. When it’s all benign and there’s no violation, you get yawns. When it’s all violation and not benign, you could end up triggering outrage.

It’s hard enough to get laughs in the darkness of a comedy club. Under fluorescent office lights, that razor-thin line becomes even harder to walk. What feels wrong but OK to one colleague can feel simply wrong to another, especially across differences in seniority, culture, gender or even the mood they’re in.



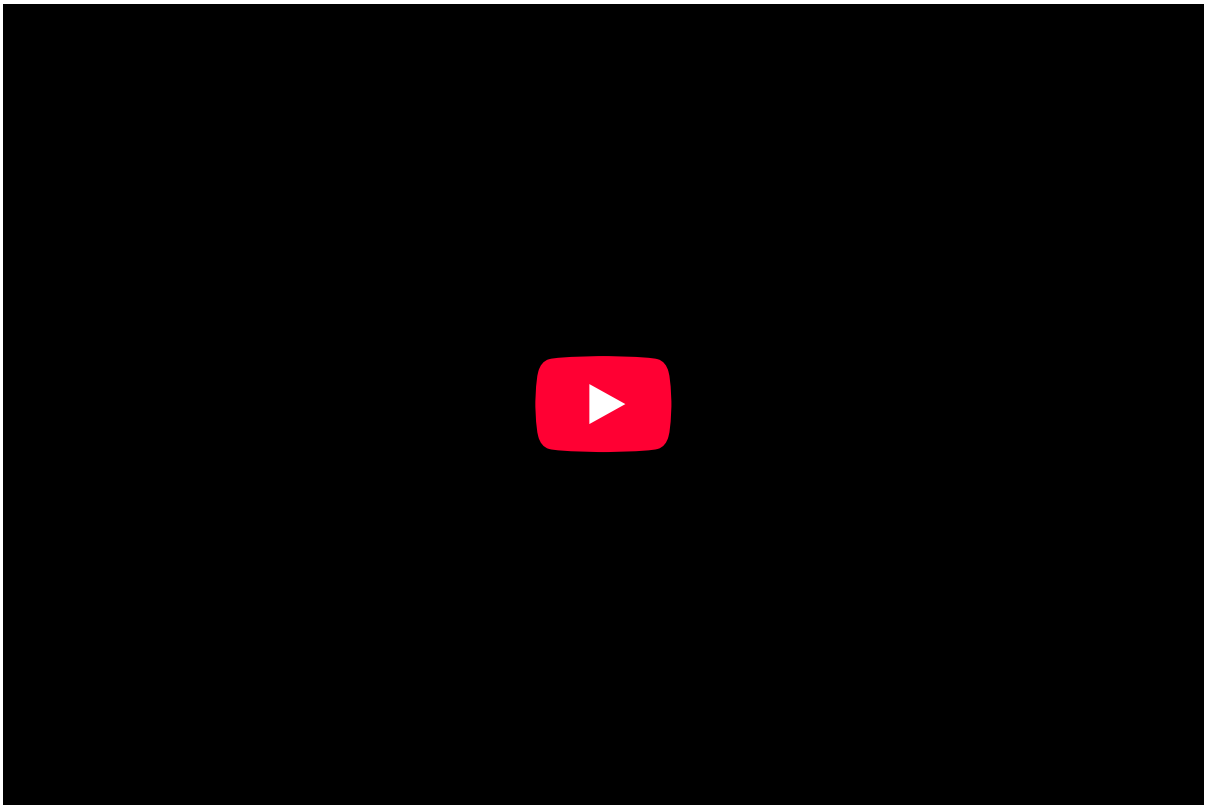
The hit sitcom ‘The Office’ pokes fun at the cringeworthy jokes cracked by a hapless boss.

An advertising study

In our experiments, when everyday people are asked to “be funny,” most attempts land flat or cross lines.

In a humorous caption contest with business students, described in Peter McGraw’s book on global humor practices, “The Humor Code,” the captions weren’t particularly funny to begin with. However, the ones that were rated by judges as the most funny were often also rated the most distasteful.

Being funny without being offensive is of paramount importance. This is particularly true for women, as a robust literature shows women face harsher backlash than men for behavior seen as offensive or norm-violating such as expressing anger, acting dominantly or even “making asks” in negotiations.



Don’t be that guy.

You might end up getting no respect

Research by other scholars who examine leader and manager behavior in organizations tells a similar story.

In one study, managers who used humor effectively were seen as more confident and competent, boosting their status. Yet when their attempts misfired, those same managers lost status and credibility. Other researchers have found that failed humor doesn’t just hurt a manager’s status – it also makes employees less likely to respect that manager, seek their advice, or trust their leadership.

Even when jokes land, humor can backfire. In one study, marketing students instructed to write “funny” copy for advertisements wrote ads that were funnier, but also less effective, than students instructed to write “creative” or “persuasive” copy.

Another study found that bosses who joke too often push employees into pretending to be amused, which drains energy, reduces job satisfaction and increases burnout. And the risks are higher for women due to a double standard. When women use humor in presentations, they are often judged as being less capable and having lower status than men.

The bottom line is that telling a great joke rarely gets you a promotion. And cracking a bad one can jeopardize your job – even if you’re not a talk show host who earns a living making people laugh.

Flip the script

Instead of trying to be funny on the job, we recommend that you focus on what we call “thinking funny” – as described in another of McGraw’s books, “Shtick to Business.”

“The best ideas come as jokes,” advertising legend David Ogilvy once said. “Try to make your thinking as funny as possible.”

But Ogilvy wasn’t telling executives to crack jokes in meetings. He was encouraging employees to think like comedians by flipping expectations, leveraging their networks and finding their niche.

Comics often lead you one way and then flip the script. Comedian Henny Youngman, a master of one-liners, famously quipped, “When I read about the dangers of drinking, I gave up … reading.” The business version of this convention is to challenge an obvious assumption.

For example, Patagonia’s “Don’t Buy This Jacket” campaign, which the outdoor gear company rolled out Black Friday in 2011 as a full-page ad in The New York Times, paradoxically boosted sales by calling out overconsumption.

To apply this method, pick a stale assumption your team holds, such as that adding features to a product always improves it or that having more meetings will lead to smoother coordination, and ask, “What if the opposite were true?”

You’ll discover options that standard brainstorming misses.

Create a chasm

When comedian Bill Burr has his fans in stitches, he knows some people won’t find his jokes funny – and he doesn’t try to win them over.

We’ve observed that many of the best comics don’t try to please everyone. They succeed by deliberately narrowing their audience. And we also find that businesses that do the same build stronger brands.

For example, when Nebraska’s tourism board embraced “Honestly, it’s not for everyone” in a 2019 campaign, targeting out-of-state visitors, web traffic jumped 43%.

Some people want hot tea. Others want iced tea. Serving warm tea satisfies no one. Likewise, you can succeed in business by deciding whom your idea is for, and whom it’s not for, then tailoring your product, policy or presentation accordingly.

Cooperate to innovate

Stand-up may look like a solo act. But comics depend on feedback – punch-ups from fellow comedians and reactions from audiences – iterating jokes in the same way lean startups may innovate new products.

Building successful teams at work means listening before speaking, making your partners look good, and balancing roles. Improv teacher Billy Merritt has described three types of improvisers. Pirates are risk-takers. Robots are structure builders. Ninjas are adept at both, taking risks and building structures.

A team designing a new app, for instance, needs all three: Pirates to propose bold features, robots to streamline the interface, and ninjas to bridge gaps. Empowering everyone in these roles leads to braver ideas with fewer blind spots.

Gifts aren’t universal

Telling someone to “be funny” is like telling them to “be musical.” Many of us can keep a beat, but few have what it takes to become rock stars.

That’s why we argue that it’s smarter to think like a comedian than to try to act like one.

By reversing assumptions, cooperating to innovate, and creating chasms, professionals can generate fresh solutions and stand out – without becoming an office punchline.