



Psychology

# Sarcasm, Self-Deprecation, and Inside Jokes: A User's Guide to Humor at Work

Some leaders use humor instinctively; many more could wield it purposefully. **by Brad Bitterly and Alison Wood Brooks**

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Adam Voorhes/Gallery Stock

**Summary.** Humor is widely considered essential in personal relationships, but in leaders, it's seen as an ancillary behavior. Though some leaders use humor instinctively, many more could wield it purposefully.

Humor helps build trust, rapport, and high-quality relationships at work.



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**A few years ago, we conducted a** research study in which we asked people to help us create an ad campaign for a travel service called VisitSwitzerland.ch (which we'd made up). We put the participants into small groups and showed them a photo—a Swiss landscape of a lake, a mountain, and the

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country's distinctive flag with its white plus sign against a red background—accompanied by the question: “What made you fall in love with Switzerland?” We gave participants three minutes to come up with a memorable answer and then had them share their ideas with their groups.

A version of this article appeared in the [July–August 2020](#) issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

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