

BOOK REVIEW

Humor, Seriously: Why Humor is A Secret Weapon in Business and Life

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An often-quoted axiom, “Laughter is the best medicine,” is attributed to various sources including Henri de Mondeville, a professor of surgery in the 1300s, and in a longer form traced by some back to Biblical times. With recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, supply chain issues experienced worldwide, and the rise of inflationary pressures, some may believe that there is not much cause for laughter. Engaging in laughter has been used as form of therapy by many individuals such as Norman Cousins, who watched humorous television shows and movies that evoked laughter to decrease his pain (Cousins, 2005).

Through my decades-long yoga practice and interest in mindfulness, I have experienced a touch of laughter in yoga classes. Many yoga instructors lead students in a minute or two of forced laughter, which soon becomes contagious and natural, because of the health benefits that arise (Briar, 2016): reduced cortisol and adrenalin levels resulting in lower stress levels and “boosts self-confidence, promotes compassion, and deepens creativity” (p. 13). According to yogic tradition, happiness is available to everyone if they engage in four daily practices: dancing, singing, playing, and laughing (P. Wildasinn, personal communication, February 15, 2022). As a result of these experiences, I was delighted to discover *Humor, Seriously: Why Humor is A Secret Weapon in Business and Life* (2021), in which authors Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas provide an argument for using humor in business along with strategies for introducing levity in the workplace. The authors teach the course *Humor: Serious Business* at the Stanford Graduate School of Business with the goal to “engender a greater sense of levity in your day-to-day life” (p. 35). The authors completed improv training in preparation for teaching their very popular course.

Humor, Seriously is organized into eight chapters accompanied by an interview with Michael Lewis, a comedian. Aaker and Bagdonas provide a strong case for fostering workplace humor. About 98% of executives prefer employees who possess a sense of humor. More specifically, 84% of those executives believe employees with a sense of humor perform better than employees who do not demonstrate an appreciation for levity. *Humor, Seriously* provides context for readers: at about age 23 an individual’s sense of humor begins to decline. Consider these compelling statistics: “The average four-year-old laughs as many as three hundred times per day. (In comparison, the average 40-year-old laughs three hundred times every two and a half months)”

(p. 23). Four humor myths are dispelled for readers: humor is very serious, humor is inappropriate in the workplace, humor use will most likely result in a humor fail with hurt feelings or anger, and humor is an innate trait that is not learnable (in other words, humor is viewed through the lens of a fixed mindset by those who believe this myth). Readers are encouraged to complete the Humor Audit devised by the authors, an insightful exercise that promotes self-awareness about one's relationship with humor. The exercise is helpful not only for individuals but also for work teams. Educators could implement the Human Audit activity to launch a discussion about using humor in business.

The appendix contains a Humor Styles Mini Quiz to enable readers to identify their humor styles. Then humor styles are described and strategies for adapting humor styles are presented. Recognizing the humor styles of others provides knowledge for adapting humor to various audiences. Another useful feature of the book is a three-step process for recovering from an attempt at humor that bombs or fails. This process involves recognizing the humor fail, determining the reason for the humor fail to prevent recurrences, and correcting the fail by apologizing. A growth mindset enables individuals to learn from the humor fail situation to avoid repeating the fail in the future.

Aaker and Bagdonas have written a book that fills a gap in the business literature with a volume that is insightful, practical, and humorous—a book that you should consider adding to your summer reading list.

References

- Aaker, J., & Bagdonas, N. (2021). *Humor, Seriously: Why Humor is A Secret Weapon in Business and Life*. Currency, a division of Random House, New York.
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