How Transformational Leaders Use Self-deprecating Humour

Key Concept
Transformational leaders, who are focused on helping others advance and succeed, know how to use self-deprecating humour to earn the respect and trust of their followers.

Idea Summary
While a sense of humour can be an effective leadership tool, it depends on how that humour is used. Humour that targets or belittles followers undermines the leader’s influence. On other hand, humour that is self-deprecating can increase the connection between a leader and his or her followers.

Self-deprecating humour is especially potent for transformational leaders, defined as leaders who are focused on the advancement and success of their people. Transformational leadership consists of these four components:

- **Idealized influence** (by treating followers fairly, leaders are trusted and respected, thus serving as a role model)
- **Inspirational motivation** (motivating through a clear vision enables followers to surpass their expectations)
- **Intellectual stimulation** (encouraging followers to think independently and explore new and creative ways of doing things and solving problems)
- **Individualized consideration** (being attentive and sensitive to each person’s needs and skills)

Pseudo-transformational leaders, in sharp contrast to transformational leaders, are focused on themselves and not others. Instead of a transformational leader’s humility, the pseudo-transformational leader revels in attention and credit.

This narcissism/humility dichotomy is evident in a leader’s sense of humour. The humble leader will use self-deprecating humour; the narcissist leader will focus his or her humour on others. However, it’s important to note the difference between self-deprecating and self-defeating humour. Self-deprecation is humble and honest, but it is not depressed or negative. Depressed and defeated people do not make good leaders.

The constructive outcome of self-deprecation is to reduce the status differences between leaders and their followers. Followers not only like these types of leaders, but feel ‘closer’ to them. This closeness or connection is important because it makes followers more willing to listen to the leader’s message. Thus, humour is a key element of persuasiveness.
More specifically, the attributes of self-deprecating humour — an honest and humble view of self and an appreciation and respect of others — reinforce the four components of transformational leadership: the honesty and humility that earns the respect of followers is required for idealized influence; the respect and appreciation for others that is at the root of a transformational leader’s individualized consideration; the positive emotions that self-deprecating humour generates helps the leader to provide inspirational motivation; and even the example of a leader who is not afraid to reject the traditional top-down relationship of leaders and followers can support intellectual stimulation by helping followers reject conventional thinking and challenge assumptions.

Business Application
Transformational leadership is no laughing matter. The difference between an organization that stagnates and one that evolves and innovates often lies with the attitudes of employees and managers toward top leadership. While today’s executives will state that they (and their organizations) reject the top-down, command-and-control leadership style of previous generations, applying the theory of inclusion and unfettered delegation under the pressures of real-world leadership is not an easy task. Leaders must create a culture of mutual respect and trust, which can only result from top management’s commitment to egalitarian relationships.

In sharp contrast to aggressive humour that can destroy a leader’s credibility and effectiveness, humour that is self-deprecating without being defeatist is an extraordinary tool for communicating and reinforcing a culture based on these egalitarian relationships. There is a fine line, however, between self-deprecating and self-disparaging, and leaders must walk it carefully.

Also, use such humour sparingly. Repeated use of self-deprecating humour can start to undermine confidence or might appear as insincere, destroying the connection and trust that form the basis of an egalitarian relationship.

Further Reading

Further Relevant Resources
Colette Hoption’s profile at Seattle University Albers School of Business and Economics;
Julian Barling’s profile at Queen’s University School of Business
Nick Turner’s profile at University of Manitoba Asper School of Business
Queen’s University School of Business Executive Education profile at IEDP