



IdeaWatch

When **Magdalena Cholakova**, an associate professor at the Rotterdam School of Management, studied how one organization pushed through a transformation effort, she made a surprising discovery: By taking a playful approach to the rollout, which included poking fun at the change program, leaders were better able to persuade employees to go along with it.

The conclusion:

Mocking Can Help an Initiative Succeed



Professor Cholakova, DEFEND YOUR RESEARCH

CHOLAKOVA: I'm interested in understanding how organizations that are trying to implement change cope with the challenges and the pushback that their efforts often provoke. In this study one of my graduate students, Marc Gijsbers, and I focused on an initiative that the Netherlands office of PwC—the accounting, tax, and advisory firm—was launching in 2015, called Vision 2020. The organization had traditionally been keenly focused on meeting its financial targets. But this new “vision”

involved telling employees, among other things, that they should also “care” and “make a difference,” which had the potential to feel like a contradiction. Instead of ignoring that challenge, the leaders at PwC chose to acknowledge and even make light of it. And it worked. Vision 2020 was embraced. Of course, PwC also used traditional best practices for change management along the way. But it's clear from our research that humor helped accelerate the process.

HBR: But why did it work? Usually when you make fun of something, you don't help it. You undermine it. Well, a leading explanation of how humor works is that it combines concepts that are incongruous at first. At PwC, employees had been operating under one set of norms and practices for a long time but were now suddenly confronted with another. Jokes about this situation allowed people to accept the coexistence of two different sets of goals without necessarily resolving their underlying tensions. This then gave people a chance to make sense of the goals together and gradually understand the tensions and find ways to resolve them.

Remember why humor is used in advertising: Because in many cases it can make consumers more likely to pay attention to the brand and can help build positive associations with it. Advertisers publish the ad or air the commercial many times as a reinforcement for consumers. Managers can use humor in the same way to drip new values into an organization slowly and pleasantly so that they gain acceptance and remain top of employees' minds.

Can accountants really be funny?

It seems that Dutch accountants can. In fact, humor was already a big part of the culture at PwC Netherlands. Even before Vision 2020, associates held regular “cabaret nights” at which they would roast partners and directors. The rollout of Vision 2020 built on that tradition. For instance, one of the new values was “reimagine the possible.” This didn't mean that PwC was going to become, say, an IT company, but it



Remember why humor is used in advertising: Because in many cases it can make consumers more likely to pay attention and can help build positive associations.

would mean redefining core values. Managers used the slogan in a gently satirical way: “Jack, the team really appreciates your attempt to reimagine the possible by putting the PowerPoint slides in the wrong order, but perhaps you can be more careful next time!”

How exactly did the staff members respond? They used humor too. It gave many of them a safe way to voice their frustration, and sometimes their cynicism, with this big change initiative, by resorting to sarcasm and irony, which prior research has shown can help people process seeming contradictions. For instance, “I guess we have to reimagine the possible if we want to get all our work done” became a way to express frustration with the challenge of integrating the new demands created by Vision 2020 with their normal responsibilities. The cabaret nights also allowed employees to vent in a nonthreatening way, following the long tradition of using humor to safely speak truth to power. Think of court jesters and fools. As the humorist Mary Hirsch has noted, “Humor is a rubber sword. It allows you to make a point without drawing blood.”

This study looked at one change initiative in one company in one country in one industry. Do you think you’d find the same results in different settings? That is a great question. As Bauke Sprenger, a PwC partner and our collaborator on the research, initially related to us, even within PwC Netherlands you can hardly expect to find a single organizational culture. You have different types of people working

for the audit, tax, and advisory arms of the company and variety that stems from the industries and clients the firm works with. An auditor working in health care is by no means similar to an M&A adviser in private equity. Humor may therefore need to take a different shape and expression in each unit in each country, but the key is that it’s there.

I’m worried your advice will turn managers into *The Office’s* Michael Scott. We’ll see cringeworthy attempts at humor. Yes, we’ve all had experience with managers’ trying to make jokes and falling flat, and it can be awkward. If you can’t be funny yourself, you can still partake in some of the humorous exchanges happening around you or facilitate others’ use of humor. We didn’t set out to study humor per se, but if you want specific advice on this, the recent book *Humor, Seriously*, by Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, is a good place to start. What matters most is that the humor matches a person’s own style, so it feels authentic, not canned. In general I think leaders underuse humor. Research has shown that it not only can improve your mood but, more important, also can break the cycle of unproductive thoughts and trigger more-creative problem-solving.

Isn’t the biggest risk with humor offending someone? Yes, some jokes are or can be perceived as aggressions toward minorities and protected classes of workers. But we’re not telling people to show up at work to do stand-up. We’re talking about finding humor in the internal workings of the company. At PwC this meant pointing to the

contradiction inherent in a buttoned-up company’s suddenly shifting its attention to aspirational values.

But in a case like that, aren’t you still offending the person that suggested the change initiative you’re mocking? For instance, how did the person who came up with the “reimagine the possible” slogan feel? PwC was not mocking the initiative itself but, rather, the incongruencies that it brought about in employees’ day-to-day activities. It was a safe, nonaggressive way of allowing for the fact that we don’t have to agree on everything right here and now and that change is uncomfortable.

What are some other rules for using humor well? Humor should be used carefully—so make sure that most of it is positive and not negative. Research calls this “affiliative” humor as opposed to “aggressive” humor. Think of having a consultant stuck in the red tape of a client, which can engender sarcastic comments such as “We are in *Catch-22*, the sequel,” or “Kafka must have been impressed with the bureaucracy.” That’s different from aggressive humor, which would target specific people and may belittle or offend them. The good news is that it’s fairly easy to distinguish between the two.

Want to hear a change management joke? I think so?

Don’t fear change, my friend....It’s just nickels and dimes. Oh no. No, no, no. Please don’t print that. ☹

Interview by **Eben Harrell**
HBR Reprint F2102B

Copyright 2021 Harvard Business Publishing. All Rights Reserved. Additional restrictions may apply including the use of this content as assigned course material. Please consult your institution's librarian about any restrictions that might apply under the license with your institution. For more information and teaching resources from Harvard Business Publishing including Harvard Business School Cases, eLearning products, and business simulations please visit hbsp.harvard.edu.