
How Women Leaders Benefit From Using Humour



By [Ella Miron-Spektor](#), INSEAD

New research suggests that being funny helps leaders gain influence, and that women benefit more than men from using humour in public speaking.

“A sense of humour is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done,” said Dwight D. Eisenhower. The ability to make light of a situation and make people laugh, as the former US President and statesman noted, is undoubtedly a handy skill for managers. But there is a specific group of leaders for whom humour could be even more potent: women.

This is the main finding of a study [Julia Bear](#), [Emuna Eliav](#) and I conducted on the benefits of using humour to influence others. In our analysis of 2,407 TED talks by prominent speakers presenting new ideas in their areas of expertise to live and online audiences, we found that humorous speakers were more influential, especially women. Female TED speakers who used more humour were more popular and perceived as more influential than less funny women and comparably funny men.

Our [study](#), published in *Academy of Management Discoveries* and recently [featured](#) in *Harvard Business Review*, tracked how often the audience laughed to quantify humour. Audience ratings, independent evaluations and online view counts were also used to measure its impact.

Take the [2013 TED talk](#) by Amy Webb, founder of the Future Today Institute and an adjunct assistant professor at Stern Business School. Webb said: “I like the idea of online dating, because it's predicated on an algorithm... I thought, well, will data and an algorithm lead me to my Prince Charming? So I decided to sign on... When I was asked about fun activities and my ideal date, I said monetisation and fluency in Japanese. I talked a lot about JavaScript [audience laughter].”

Our evaluators rated Webb as highly competent, warm and leader-like, while audience members rated her as highly funny. Her talk has been viewed more than 8 million times.

The professional benefits of humour for women are also apparent in other contexts. As part of an ongoing research project, my INSEAD colleagues [Li Huang](#), [Melanie Milovac](#) and [Eric Yuge Lou](#) analysed the use of humour in more than 200 start-up pitches. They found that female founders’ pitches that were rated by an independent evaluator as less humorous were less likely to win and be perceived positively by investors and judges than those by their equally unfunny male counterparts. But use of humour bridged this gender gap: funnier pitches were equally likely to win, regardless of gender.

The two studies described above explored authentic expression of humour in real-world contexts with genuine stakes. In both cases, female presenters who violated the “women aren’t funny” stereotype by using humour effectively benefited more from humour than men. The reason could be attributed to women being perceived favourably when they defy gender stereotypes, such as assumptions that women are less intelligent or competent. Humour is associated with intelligence and competence, so women presenters who used humour effectively are seen as competent, diligent and independent.

Humour, warmth and competence

The findings from our TED talks study also suggest that humour can help female presenters overcome the [warmth-competence double bind](#) that women often face. [Research](#) has shown that unless they go out of their way

to appear warm and friendly, women who speak in an assertive manner are often perceived as less likeable, less influential and more threatening than their male counterparts. But when women do appear warm and friendly, their competence often comes into question.

Prior [research](#) has also demonstrated that humour can convey both warmth and competence, regardless of gender. We found that the funnier speakers in our TED study were perceived as both warm and competent, suggesting that effective humour may be the key to helping female leaders wield greater social influence.

Authentic humour expression

The most effective jokes are those that are authentic, meaning they fit the teller's own style and identity. The women who utilised humour in our studies didn't tell the same jokes as their male counterparts; rather, their humour was unique, personal, specific to the situation, and based on their experiences.

Our findings may seem surprising in light of previous [research](#) that advises women against using humour in work presentations if they want to be taken seriously. While prior research explored whether men and women telling the same jokes in the workplace were judged as equally competent, we examined the effect of authentic humour of various kinds on the individual's popularity and success. In these settings, we found that humour helps women overcome resistance and gain influence by increasing their perceived warmth and competence, two qualities that are often seen as mutually exclusive in female leaders.

Humour is an important tool in a leader's communication toolbox. But all too often, the [pervasive stereotype](#) that "women aren't funny" becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: women are told that they're not funny, and so they're deterred from using humour in professional settings. Hopefully, our studies can encourage more women to cultivate this aspect of the art of communication.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/how-women-leaders-benefit-using-humour>

About the author(s)

Ella Miron-Spektor is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. She is broadly interested in how individuals and teams innovate and learn, as well as how they cope with tensions and competing demands.

About the research

"Think Funny, Think Female: The Benefits of Humor for Women's Influence in the Digital Age" is published in *Academy of Management Discoveries*.