

THE LAST WORD

LAUGHING OUT LOUD FOR LEADERSHIP

Humour, argues Iain Martin, should be an integral part of every CEO's leadership toolbox.



AS WELL AS THE BASIC TOOLS IN THE LEADERSHIP BOX, TODAY'S LEADER NEEDS MORE OPTIONS, INCLUDING THE JUDICIOUS USE OF HUMOUR

-IAIN MARTIN

A rabbit and a snake bumped into each other in the forest. Both were blind since birth and unsure of their own identities.

"Let's help each other," hissed the snake. "I can't see you, so I'm going to slide all over you and guess what you are."

"Well, you're furry all over," he reported, "You have a cute little tail and long ears. You must be a rabbit!"

The rabbit rubbed its paws over the snake.

"You're cold and smooth and slippery," she said. "You have a forked tongue and no balls. You must be a business leader!"

Do you know a leader like that?

Celebrity CEOs of the last decade (such as Martha Stewart and Bernie Ebbers), bumper bonuses for big-time bankers, and 'too-big-to-fail' financial flops have stained the reputation of leaders and leadership around the world. Now's the time for real leaders to come forward – with a smile!

Leaders play many parts in the ongoing drama of business life. As well as the basic tools in the leadership box, such as an inspiring vision and a solid strategy, today's leader needs more options, including the judicious use of humour.

When the US economy collapsed after the 1979 energy crisis, then President Ronald Reagan joked, "I'm not worried about the deficit. It's big enough to take care of itself!" That was leadership – yes, but a Western version of leadership. The self-assuredness of Western leadership stems from generations of 'show and tell' days in school, and overambitious 'soccer mums'.

While Asia too has its 'tiger mums', who drive their offspring to success, the Asian cultural norm is different. Confucian values – humility, respect for elders and deference to authority, coupled with self-sacrifice in the name of harmony – create a veritable 'bamboo ceiling'. In today's corporate world, Asians are inhibited by these cultural factors.

The humble Asian allows the brash, irreverent Westerner to take the lead. The Asian humourist holds his tongue lest he offend. The Western executive, with no fear of loss of face, just shrugs his shoulders when the joke falls flat. Western humour makes fun of others. Asians, preferring not to show disrespect, poke fun only at themselves.

As such, humour has failed to find a significant place in the toolbox of Asian executives. But humour there is, even if politely concealed behind the mask of inscrutability.

Laughter is universal. Around the world, humour connects and humanises the CEO too! Humour says, "I'm with you! Together we will achieve the impossible!" Sony demonstrated how to unite Western and Asian cultures, when it used humour to bond its culturally diverse team and create an open, sharing atmosphere in its recent successful APAC HR Leaders Conference.

Humour lightens the mood in times of stress. Relaxed people are more creative and find answers, not problems. The leader can ease the tension with a well-timed quip. No one else can do it – it's too risky, maybe inappropriate – but if the boss does it, then things can't be so bad after all.

In future-proofing your Asian organisation in this flat, connected, competitive business world, I suggest adding humour to your leadership toolbox. Laugh... and the world will laugh with you!

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