

Why We Need More Humor at Work with Jennifer Aaker + Naomi Bagdonas (transcript)

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Chris Congdon: We could all use a little more humor in our lives, especially at work. It feels like work can be pretty serious stuff and that we have to behave seriously. But our guests today laugh at that idea literally because they have the research to back it up. Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host, Chris Congdon, and I'm with our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Rebecca Charbauski: Chris, I might be one of those people who takes life a little too seriously, I know I get that a lot. So, when I saw the TED Talk with Naomi Bagdonas and Jennifer Aaker about humor at work, it really did open my eyes.

CC: Well, our conversation today did have me laughing a lot, but it's also serious business. Naomi and Jennifer wrote a book called "Humor, Seriously: Why Humor is a Secret Weapon in Business and in Life," and they actually teach a class about humor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

RC: I wish I'd had that course in college.

CC: I think most of us could have used it.

RC: In addition to being an author and an educator, Naomi's an experienced designer. She coaches executives and celebrities on everything from Saturday Night Live to corporate meetings. Jennifer speaks on the application of behavioral science to help companies and leaders impact wellbeing. And she's published in leading scientific journals and co-authored even more books including The Dragonfly Effect.

CC: And maybe more important than that, they have a really cool quiz on their website, and you can identify your own humor style, which we all have.

RC: And I think they guessed yours, right, Chris?

CC: Yes, they did right away.

RC: Very cool. So we're going to link to that in our show notes. Everyone should give it a try. And if you like this episode with Jennifer and Naomi, pass it on to a friend or a colleague who needs a laugh.

CC: Naomi and Jennifer, thank you for joining us on Work Better Today.

Jennifer Aaker: Hello. Thanks for having us. We're so happy to be here.

CC: I am happy that you are here too, because I could use a little more humor I think in my life and I'm excited to talk about that. But before we get into that, I really want to know your backstory a little bit because you're both teaching at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. And I remember when I was working on my MBA a million years ago, there was not a lot of laughter that I remember. There were other emotions, perhaps a lot of fear and other kinds of experiences, but I'm just curious how you got started, I'm going to say the funny business. Excuse the pun, that was like a bad dad joke, but you're

JA:....Starting off strong!

CC: Alright, Jennifer, why don't you start? How did you get started on this path?

JA: Oh gosh. Naomi and I had been working together for 10 years, but the 10 years or more prior to that, I was uniquely unfunny. I did not have a sense of humor. I was voted the least funny person in my family. The dog is at the top of the list, but I'm decidedly at the bottom rung and I was fine with that. As a scientist, you're trained to not necessarily prioritize humor, but I found myself in a place where I was really burned out doing very meaningful things, but burned out. And when I asked Naomi to actually guest lecture in my class, which was the Power Story class, I noticed how she taught the class for an hour and a half. She had the students laughing wildly. And more importantly, eight weeks later when they did ratings, they not only loved her content, they retained her content. And it put me on this path of understanding, wait, when does humor help in our own lives and also in business? And that started our collaboration.

CC: Cool. Naomi, what about you?

Naomi Bagdonas: I came from the opposite angle of Jennifer where humor was always super, super important to me and to my family. We had a long tradition of generations of my family members that really, really embraced humor from hosting skit nights in the basement during the Depression to having really serious illnesses in the family and having humor be part of the way that we cope. And so growing up, I was raised with this family or with this value that humor's a really important thing to foster in your life. And so, I was doing improv comedy, but I realized that in going into a professional job out of college, as many of us do, I had the experience that now we have research-backed, we have data that shows that this is a really common experience for people. But I essentially started leading a double life where at work I was serious and professional, extremely poised and completely humorless, and then outside of work as having so much fun. And I had such a personality as we all do. And so I realized I had been sort of leading this double life. And the result of it was that I had no good friends at work. I didn't feel known. I was burning out, I was feeling really exhausted and it just wasn't feeling sustainable to me. And so when I went to Stanford to do my MBA myself, my mission was really to combine these two things and to say, okay, how do I completely be myself while also doing the work that I'm really passionate about? And then the beautiful timing of it was that Jennifer and I connected at that time and I was really deeply inspired by the work that she was doing. And we just kind of mind-melded after this guest lecture. We had what was supposed to be a 30 minute debriefing call, and we talked for three hours about how, oh my gosh, this is super important. It's something that feels like it's missing, especially in the business world. How might we collaborate on this together?

CC: Well, that is such a great backstory, and I want to ask you in a minute, Jennifer, first, I didn't know families voted on who was the least or most funny, but I think you and I have something in common. I probably would've been definitely beneath the dog on the list for sure. But I want to ask you actually a scientific question first because I am a bit of a nerd, and in your work, you both talk about things that happen in our brains when we laugh. And I would love to hear a little bit more about what happens neurologically when we're engaged in humor.

JA: Yeah, absolutely. So when we laugh together, our brains release a set of hormones. And so even that early strong pun is enough to do this. So when we laugh together, we release endorphins, giving us a feeling like a runner's high, our cortisol is lowered, and that gives us a sense of calmness, kind of like doing a short meditation. And then not just that, but we also release dopamine, which is the hormone released during certain types of physical touch. So as far as our brains are concerned, laughing together is similar to exercising, meditating, and having sex all at the same time. Very efficient.

NB: Yeah, it's logistically much simpler as well.

JA: The thing about that, right, you've got this, the endorphins of the elevation, but you also have the reduced cortisol, this calming thing. And so it has a neurologically significant benefit for us.

CC: So, in your work, you've talked about four pillars behind this, and can you just tell me what those pillars are and how do we kind of break this down? Naomi, do you want to start on

NB: This one? Yeah, sure. So there's four areas where this research really falls. What's wild is we first defined these pillars about 10 years ago, and now there's research into longevity, into all these different areas that are super interesting, but essentially power and influence is one. So our colleagues at Harvard and Wharton, Alison Wood Brooks, Maurice Schweitzer, and a few others that have done really awesome work in this area have found that if you are able to use humor effectively, and by the way, humor effectively just means that someone laughs. And it's not offensive, it's really, it's a pretty low bar that people view you as higher in status as more confident and more competent. There's a ton of research around the impact of humor and negotiations on motivation. People view you as more influential, they're more engaged. So the sort of power and influence category is one.

Second is bonds, and that that humor is an effective way to shorten the distance between two people. We know that when strangers walk into a room together and laugh before engaging in a conversation, they end up connecting in ways that are more intimate and authentic. And this, of course, is super important, especially as people are working remotely.

The third is creativity. So we know that humor loosens our brains essentially. So it helps us overcome functional fixedness. As Jennifer mentioned, it lowers our cortisol. And so when we walk into a room, even if we are anticipating laughing in that room, our cortisol goes down and we are able to be more creative. And so, it's a super powerful tool for organizations that want to create psychological safety and creativity.

And then lastly, resilience. We know that teams that are able to laugh, especially in the face of hardship, bounce back much more effectively from setbacks. And we're actually currently writing a case with the US Navy seals around how important humor is in recruiting and setting the culture for the US Navy Seals because of this, because it's super, super important when it comes to resilience and being able to bounce back from setbacks.

CC: Yeah, I would imagine that that would help with coping skills a lot. So one of the things I just wonder about when we think about, there's great benefits to humor, but there are probably other people who are like me going, but what do I do if I'm not funny? So I just always assume that about myself. I just, because there are other people who always seem to be the ones who were getting the attention, telling the great joke, and having everybody laugh. And in fact, I was actually at a party earlier in the year and talking to this woman I hadn't met before, and during the conversation she says to the table, she's about me like, you are a stitch. She's just a stitch. And I thought, me, who are you talking about? So then in preparing for the interview, I saw that you have a quiz about different types of humor. And so I took it because I was feeling a sense of like, am I going to be at the bottom of whatever the scale is? But fortunately you didn't have a ranking, but I just wondered if you could talk about what are those different humor, personality types?

JA: Wait, do you want Naomi and I to guess?

CC: Oh, that would be more fun. Go ahead and guess.

JA: Okay, so we'll guess. I'll share two of the styles and then Naomi can chime in on the other two styles and then we'll ask you a surprise question and we'll guess.

CC: Okay.

JA: Okay. The first two styles. So number one, Naomi and I have done research for these last 10 years on hundreds of thousands of people across the world. And these four styles are really robust across these cultural contexts. The first style is stand up, and they are loud and boisterous. They are often what we think of when we think of a funny person. They're more extroverted, they'd be great at roasts, they have a battery of jokes at their whim and they're at ease in front of others. The second style is sweetheart, and they are earnest, honest, and understated. They would not necessarily view themselves as funny or want to, but if you look at their humor, they use it to often uplift others. It's often PG 13. A lot of puns are in there, but they keep things really light.

NB: Alright, next we have the sniper. So snipers are dry, witty, sarcastic, they're masters of the unexpected dig. They'll give that one-liner, they'll be silent in conversation for 90% of it, and then they'll give a one-liner that just crushes. They don't need to be the center of attention. So oftentimes snipers feel like if just one or two people get my joke, then I know who my people are. They also say that their humor is an acquired taste, one that not everyone acquires. So that's the sniper. And then lastly, we have the magnets. Magnets are charismatic-effusive. They are more expressive in their humor, both physically and also in terms of their intonation. They don't mind being the center of attention. And the sweethearts, they also use humor that tends to be more uplifting, positive. Also, tertiary research shows that this person is most likely to buy a round of drinks at the bar, so good person to follow into a social setting. So these are the four styles. And let's see here. I have Jennifer, do you want to guess first? Do you want me to guess first?

JA: Okay, let's guess at the exact same time. Okay.

NB: Ready?

JA: 1, 2, 3. Sweetheart.

NB: Sweetheart.

CC: Well, magnet. You're pretty good at this. I'm half and half, apparently. I'm between sweetheart

NB: And sniper. Sniper.

CC: No, sweetheart, I'm a sweetheart and a magnet.

NB: Okay, okay.

CC: Yeah. And I was like, oh, well, first of all, I'm something. I mean, I just felt good about that. I was on the chart somewhere, but that just really surprised me because I don't think of sweetheart as being a term that I would be described as, but maybe that's because I don't know. When I think about things that are funny, I do like silly puns and silly things that'll just make people smile, I guess. So we all have a humorous style.

NB: Absolutely.

CC: Even people who feel like they're not funny.

NB: Absolutely. And part of why this is so powerful to understand, one is it is really empowering to understand that everyone does have a humor style and we all can tap into our emotions in different ways. And it also is really helpful because especially when you think about the risks of humor, a lot of people say that they're held back from using humor because of those risks. And your risk is really defined by your humor style. So you Chris, because you're a sweetheart magnet, we know that sweetheart magnets are super focused on uplifting other people. But what that means is that they sometimes over index on self-deprecation. They can take themselves down to a degree that unless they're in the high status position at work, it can actually come across as taking away power from themselves. On the other side, the snipers and standups, they use teasing style humor to build intimacy. So this is the style that says, if I'm making fun of you, it's because I really like you and we all know this style. But if you're using that style of humor with someone who's a sweetheart, a magnet, or you don't have the relationship quite yet, then that humor style can backfire. It can feel off-putting or it can hurt feelings. So it's a really powerful tool to both bring out your own style to have more empathy for other people and appreciate their styles, and then also, of course, to mitigate some risk.

CC: So what advice do you have for people who say, yeah, I think it would be good if we all laughed a little bit more and didn't take ourselves so seriously. What advice do you have for people at work about how to bring humor into the workplace in a way that's going to work for everybody?

JA: The first thing to know is this is not about being funny. And that sounds easy to internalize, but it's actually really hard because we often equate being funny with humor, but they're actually really different. There's very different types of humor that help you understand how humor and funny are different. It's also a couple of other insights that we share with our students. Number one, this is more about finding truth and then being able to share that truth, which is often quite funny with a sense of levity. We talk about being on the precipice of a smile. So it's like you're walking around and you're noticing truths and observations in the day-to-day, and often they're quite funny. And so if you take that mindset of walking through life on the precipice of a smile, expecting to be delighted rather than disappointed, you will start to observe these truths that you can note to yourself or share with others with a little bit of levity.

And if we have time, we can share a couple of tactics there too. But the second insight that we share with our students is, again, this is not about being funny. And so never ask yourself before you say something, will this make me sound funny? You always ask, how will this make others feel? And so you're training your brain to be able to read the room and know what is needed in the moment. So much about being competent is about knowing what the room needs. What is the goal of the meeting? How are people feeling? And what is best served in that moment to move that group ahead? And so if you ask yourself, if you get out of this mindset of I'm trying to be funny or someone needs to be funny, and instead really anchor on what is needed in the moment, that will actually move you toward creating this culture of levity with your teams, your family members, and even just with your own self.

CC: And so as leaders in an organization, a lot of our listeners are leaders at all kinds of different levels, but we think a lot about trying to create culture and the kind of culture where people come to work and they're feeling good about their experience. Are there things that leaders can do to help set the conditions for humor, or should leaders just get out of the way and not wreck it?

NB: Oh, I love that question because the answer is both. Oh, okay. Both. There are things that leaders should do, and also it's super important to get out of the way. So I think number one is setting the tone from the top. And rather than thinking about being funny, as Jennifer said, this is really about being human. So if we show up as humans, as leaders who talk about their extracurriculars, who talk about what they're passionate about, who mention, Hey, I went on a run with my, or I took my first backpacking trip with my 11-year-old and it was a complete dumpster fire disaster, and tell the story of that, it's incredibly humanizing and it makes other people feel a lot safer. There's that. A lot of people though, if they're a leader and they don't feel like they're necessarily funny themselves or can tap into that levity, oftentimes you can elevate other people for whom this comes more naturally.

So you can find culture carriers at the organization who are really good at making that energy feel really natural, making other people feel more comfortable, bringing them into the all hands meetings and co-facilitating with them is another thing that leaders can do. But I want to get at your second point, Chris, which is getting out of the way. And I think about an early story from Pixar. Ed Catmull, former president of Pixar, told us this story where he noticed that in the early days of Pixar, there was a lot of sort of rabble rousing rule breaking. People were having fun all the time, but then as people sort of grew up in the organization, and a lot of people who were the rabble-rousers had young kids weren't staying out late or making trouble anymore, the culture sort of shifted. And he had this realization that it's really important that especially the more junior people in the organization feel like they can have fun and break rules.

And so what Ed did was he asked around the more junior people and he said, Hey, who's someone who has a lot of fun, knows how to break rules? And he sort of whispered and he found a couple people, a couple, one woman in particular who was really, really great at having fun and breaking rules. And he said, listen, I want you to know that that's a really important part of this culture too, and you're not going to get in trouble for doing that type of thing. And then a couple months later, they were like shooting water bottle cannons in the parking lot and breaking windows and things like that. And so I think it's a bit of both. It's both setting the tone from the top that you can bring your full self to work here. Not that you can be funny, but you can bring your full sense of work, your full self to work. And then second, really recognizing that part of your job as a leader is just to not kill the fun.

CC: Yeah. Well, so I work with a woman who loves costumes. She loves Halloween, but it doesn't have to be Halloween. On her birthday, she came in the full regalia, the Birthday Crown, and she totally owned it. And I love that about her. And I guess it would seem like as a leader let that happen as opposed to kind of frowning because she wasn't appropriately dressed. Just encourage that kind of stuff when it happens. Right? Yeah, totally. Totally. Just a little bit of physical humor. One of the things I was wondering about is speaking of physical presence. We think about this a lot because it feels like something really good happens when you're all together in a space that seems to create conditions where, I don't know, laughter just seems to happen more. What do you think in terms of your work? Is it a challenge when people are located all over the world, we're on video, we're doing hybrid work, that kind of thing. Does that make it harder to have humor at work?

JA: Well, yes and no. Number one, physical proximity and just being around each other certainly helps you better read the room, understand the energy in the room, understand what someone's actually experiencing, feeling doing, and what the team's goals are. So yes, but that said, one thing that Covid has taught us is that the different modalities of relating with others certainly presents its own opportunities to create humor and levity. One of our co lecturers or our co lecturer, Connor Diemand-Yauman, who was a CEO of Merit America, along with his co CEO of Rebecca, he shares a story right at the beginning of Covid and he shares with our students how he was running his first ever all hands meeting. And he was very nervous, he was very worried. Everyone was sort of scared and nervous. He starts his meeting off and then he passes the deck and the screen to Rebecca, but he pretends to forget to leave the screen to share on.

So everyone's watching him as he goes to Google, starts typing in something, and everyone's petrified for him. And he types in things, inspirational CEOs say during hard times and everyone loses it. And he comes back to the screen and he's like, I just want you to know you can trust me. And he plays with it and everyone's laughing. And they came up to him afterwards and said to both of them that it really was the first time that they had left in so long and it felt like therapy. And so it just kind of illuminates. We know that leaders with a sense of humor are seen as about 28% more admired and motivated. Their teams are twice as creative, they're about 15% more engaged, and the bar is so low. You can do something as funny as a sort of a dad pun or mom pun or something like what Connor did. And it has an extraordinary impact, and it can be done even if you're not together at the same time.

CC: Well, thank you. I will start Googling ridiculous things and letting everybody see those at work. One of the reasons I was really excited to talk with both of you is this season on work better. We're thinking a lot about joy and joy at work, if it's even possible, and we think it is. And so I wanted to wrap up by asking each of you just to tell a quick story about a moment that you've experienced a little bit of joy in your work. So Naomi, why don't you start, I'll put you on the spot.

NB: I think the secret is to find a way to work with people who you love or just relentlessly be yourself with the people that you work with. And eventually enough exposure, you're probably going to end up loving them. But for me, working with Jennifer over the last 10 years has been basically a series of really, really having fun and laughing together. And so I have lots of examples, but one that comes to mind is whenever we are teaching, and we'll be on a Zoom with 200 executives from all over the world, and one of her kids will accidentally walk by in the background, and most people would just be like, oh, okay, my kid is passing in the background. No big deal. Jennifer, without fail will stop everything and go, wait, wait, coop, coop, come here, come say hi, and then stop everything. And the whole zoom is laughing because now Cooper has to come over and say hi. And she's like, oh, this is what happened. Cooper, she'll ask him a question that the students have to answer, and he's sort of wanting to get away from the screen, but also is the best sport ever and the most intelligent kid anyways. So yeah, anytime, anytime we're on Zoom with Jennifer in, anything goes wrong in the background, whether it's a kid walking by a dog barking, she just embraces it and it always cracks me up.

CC: That's awesome. Jennifer, what about you? Have you ever had a moment of joy at work?

JA: Oh, absolutely. I bring my dog to work all the time. Who's by the way, Naomi's God dog. And anything he does, it brings about joy, not just to me, but everyone around him. He remains the number one humor hero in the family, and I am still lost.

CC: Well, I think both of you have brought a little bit of joy to my work today, so I really appreciate you coming on the show and telling us a little bit more. And I just really want to thank you for bringing some of your ideas and your work and your senses of humor to work better today. So thanks for being here.

NB: Thank you so much for having us.

CC: Thanks for being here with us today. This season has been full of fantastic conversations. It really has.

RC: And if any of our listeners have missed past episodes, they stand the test of time. It's worth going back and taking a listen. We talked about why we need more women on teams...

CC: Very important.

RC: How we can get more done by doing less.

CC: Also important.

RC: And we talked about how we can think about our environments differently to actually bring us more joy at work. Lots of ideas for finding, creating, and designing joyful moments.

CC: Absolutely. And if you enjoyed this conversation or any of the others throughout the season, we'd really appreciate it if you could help spread the joy and share it with a friend or a colleague, rate it or write a review. And of course, visit us at steelcase.com/research and sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered right to your inbox. Thanks again for being here, and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better. Many thanks to everyone who helps make work better. Podcast possible creative art direction is by Aaron Ellison, editing and sound mixing by Soundpost Studios, technical support by Mark Caswell and Jose Jimenez and Digital Publishing by Aralee Ariano and Jordan Marks.