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## How to Use Self-Deprecation

# as a Leadership Tool

When NOT to use self-deprecation.

In a previous *Psychology Today* post (2022), we viewed humor from a continuum perspective. At one end of the continuum is humor directed at someone. The goal is a collective laugh “at” the person. Comedian Chris Rock is an example of a level-1 sense of humor. At the high end of the continuum is humor directed at someone or some situation.

The goal is to laugh “with” the speaker collectively. We consider that Jerry Seinfeld often operates at a level-10 level sense of humor.

Self-deprecation humor is a collective laugh “with” the speaker. In that sense, it is on the high end of the humor spectrum. What is unique is that the target of the amusement is the speaker.

## **Abraham Lincoln’s Use of Self-Deprecation as a Leadership Tool**

Richard Carwardine (2017) noted that young Abraham Lincoln was a bright and sarcastic speaker who loved to use a level-1 sense of humor. One day, the object of Lincoln’s public derision challenged Lincoln to a duel. That experience taught Lincoln the value of moving his humor up the humor continuum.

A classic example of Lincoln’s use of self-deprecation as a leadership tool is when one of his political antagonists accused the president of being “two-

faced” about a policy issue. Lincoln’s classic response was, “If I had two faces, would I show the world *this* one?”

## **John F. Kennedy and Self-Deprecation**

On June 2, 1961, President Kennedy held a news conference to provide his perspective on his visit to French President Charles de Gaulle. He approached the podium and said, “Allow me to introduce myself. I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris.”

Former President Barack Obama began his 2024 address to the Democratic National Convention this way: “I am the only person stupid enough to speak after Michelle Obama.” (2024).

## **Self-Deprecation and The Pratfall Effect**

Social psychologist Elliot Aronson (1966) conducted research into what he called "The Pratfall Effect:" If a high-status individual makes a mistake, that person becomes more likable to others. But if an average or low-status person makes the same mistake, that person becomes less likable. We hypothesize that self-deprecating statements from high-status individuals create a positive pratfall effect. The same or similar statements from a person of average or lower status will reduce that person's likeability.

### **Sample Self-Deprecating Statements**

These statements are taken from the Internet and are meant to suggest

models for creative ways to employ self-deprecation in business settings.

*I may be wrong about this. If I am wrong, it wouldn't be the first time.*

*The good news about me is "what you see is what you get." The bad news about me is "what you see is what you get."*

*My boss asked if I take constructive criticism. I said yes while wiping away my tears.*

*People ask me if I am an early bird or a night owl. I'm neither. I'm an exhausted pigeon.*

## **Summary and Conclusions**

Humor exists on a continuum. Self-deprecation is an extreme example of

humor, in which you and your audience collectively laugh at the speaker's real or imaginary foibles.

Self-depreciation can increase likeability if the speaker is perceived to be of high status. Presidents Lincoln, Kennedy, and Obama have used self- as a tool to create emotional bonding.

However, self-deprecation is counterproductive if the speaker is perceived as having average or below-average status.

## References

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