The Leader Who Laughs

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Why great leaders create moments of levity, and why it is not a soft skill

This paper was inspired by the Psychology Today article “Finding More Humor, Hope, and Joy in Everyday Life” by Robyne Hanley-Dafoe, Ed.D. (July 10, 2026). Her article explores humor as a contributor to individual resilience and well-being; it prompted me to ask a related question from a different chair: what role does humor play in great leadership? This paper expands that conversation through the lens of the Petersen Philosophy and the Petersen Leadership Model.

The thesis

People may not remember the smartest leader in the room. They often remember the leader who made them feel confident, valued, and hopeful. Often, that leader knew when to smile, when to laugh, and when to help others do the same.

That is not a footnote to leadership. It is closer to the center than most people recognize, yet it is too rarely treated as a serious leadership capability.

The misunderstanding

Somewhere along the way we decided that seriousness and leadership were the same thing. We taught a generation of executives that gravity signals competence, that a leader who laughs is not fully invested, and that levity is what you allow yourself after the results are posted. It is a costly misunderstanding, and it does not survive contact with the historical record.

Abraham Lincoln led the nation through the Civil War, the bloodiest war in American history, and was renowned for telling stories, often at his own expense, even though some contemporaries treated the habit as evidence that he lacked sufficient gravity (Tagg, 2009). Ronald Reagan, awaiting emergency surgery after a bullet entered his left lung, joked with the surgical team (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 1981). Neither man was insufficiently serious. Their humor did not diminish the gravity of the moment; it helped them bear it.

The ability to laugh is not the opposite of discipline. It is very often evidence of confidence; a leader who can be light in a hard moment is telling everyone present that he is not afraid of the moment, and that he does not require the room's deference to know who he is.

Gravity is not competence. It is a costume that competence sometimes wears.

The psychology of laughter

Hanley-Dafoe's argument is worth taking seriously on its own terms. She pairs hope and humor deliberately: hope keeps us moving toward a better tomorrow, while humor lightens the journey we are on today. Neither is a denial of hardship. She is explicit that she does not believe every hardship arrives with a silver lining, and she has no interest in rushing anyone toward gratitude. Sometimes, she writes, the most loving act available is to sit beside someone and acknowledge that the thing is hard.

The physiology offers support. Laughter has been associated with reduced stress hormones, easing of tension, and short-term relief from pain. In a conference abstract, Berk and colleagues (2008) reported that anticipating mirthful laughter was associated with decreases in cortisol and catecholamines, suggesting that anticipation itself may begin to alter the stress response before the joke lands.

The more useful finding, for leaders, is the one about perspective. Hanley-Dafoe cites the comedian and well-being speaker Jessica Holmes, who describes viewing your own circumstances through a comedic lens as a way of creating distance from them. That distance changes the relationship: the stressor stops being something you are buried under and becomes something you are navigating. Read that again as a leadership claim rather than a wellness claim, and it is a statement about the quality of decisions made under pressure.

One technical distinction is worth preserving. Hanley-Dafoe cites Berk et al. (2008) in support of a dopamine claim. The study measured cortisol and catecholamines, not dopamine. It supports the broader possibility that anticipating laughter can affect the stress response, but it does not establish the dopamine mechanism attributed to it.

Why leaders need humor

Well-used humor can contribute to psychological safety. A leader who can laugh, and who can be laughed at, signals that error is survivable in this room. Research has linked leader humor with employee voice through psychological safety, while newer work distinguishes affiliative humor, which can strengthen safety, from aggressive humor, which can weaken it (Potipiroon & Ford, 2021; Lin et al., 2025).

Humor defuses tension. It is the only instrument I know that lowers the temperature of a room without lowering the standard held in it.

Humor makes leaders approachable. The distance between a leader and the truth is measured in how many people are willing to walk up and say the uncomfortable thing. Humor shortens that walk.

Humor strengthens teams. Shared laughter is shared identity. The inside joke is a small, cheap, astonishingly durable piece of belonging.

Humor keeps success from curdling into arrogance. The leader who can still laugh at

himself after winning is the leader who has not yet started believing his own press. That is not modesty; it is self-preservation.

Humor and the Petersen Leadership Model

Here is the point of the paper. Humor is not a seventh dimension of leadership, and it should not be treated as one. It is something more interesting: it strengthens every dimension already in the model. It is a solvent, not a category.

Character. Humility instead of ego. Who you are willing to laugh at is a values statement, and it is delivered faster and more honestly than any framed list on the wall. The leader who can be the butt of the joke has an identity that does not depend on the room.

Style. Connection instead of intimidation. Fear produces compliance, which is the cheapest and least durable thing a leader can buy. Laughter produces willingness.

Judgment. Perspective before reaction. This is the dimension most leaders miss entirely. Levity creates distance from the stressor, and distance is precisely what good decisions require. Fear narrows the aperture; a mind that is not drowning can think.

Culture. Trust grows where people can smile together. A culture is not what is framed in the hallway; it is the set of stories a group keeps telling about itself. Tell me the five stories your organization repeats and I will tell you what it rewards and who it considers one of its own.

Execution. Teams perform better when pressure is balanced with encouragement. Fear and fatigue degrade performance. In my experience, crews that can laugh together often sustain effort, recover from error, and surface bad news more readily; and surfacing bad news earlier is worth more than nearly anything else on the execution ledger.

Life. Joy is not a distraction from leadership. It is part of living well, and living well is the whole point of leading well. This is the dimension I wrote The Sun Will Come Up Tomorrow to defend, and humor belongs squarely inside it.

Hope reminds us that tomorrow will come. Humor helps us make today worth remembering.

Sea stories and coaching stories

A submarine is not a comedy club. It is a steel tube a few hundred feet down, governed by procedures shaped by hard-earned lessons, some of them paid for in lives, and nothing about the mission is funny. And yet I have never served anywhere that laughed harder. The long patrols, the drills at 0300, the endless gray sameness of a world with no windows; the crew answered all of it with humor. Not because they were unserious, but because they were the most serious people I have known, and humor was how they carried the weight.

It took me years to understand what I had been watching. I assumed the laughter was a byproduct of a good crew. It was not a byproduct. It was one of the instruments.

In thirty years of coaching executives since then, I have seen the same instrument in the same hands. The leaders who last are almost never the grimmest ones in the building. They are the ones who can walk into a bad quarter, name the problem plainly, and still find something human to say on the way out of the room; and their people run through walls for them.

I have written elsewhere about my encounters with Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, and there was nothing funny about them at the time. He was the architect of the nuclear Navy, and he interviewed a man for the express purpose of finding the edge of him. In one of those meetings, he asked me to name the characteristics of a leader. I gave him the textbook: integrity, truthfulness, dedication. He asked what else. I gave him more. He asked what else again, and again, until I had emptied the shelf and was reaching for anything left in the room. What came to me was charisma.

Rickover came out of his chair and demanded to know whether I thought he had any. I said yes. Everyone in the room laughed, and he started to laugh with them; then he caught himself, cracked a smile, and told me flatly that he did not.

He recovered in about a second, the way a man does when he has let something slip. But the slip was the lesson. Beneath the hard outer core he showed the world, there was a sense of humor, and in that half second, I learned more about him than the rest of the interrogation taught me. I also learned that the honest answer and the safe answer are occasionally the same word, and that a leader worth working for will laugh when you find it.

Years later, in my own office, I sat with a coaching client through nearly an hour of hard conversation. When he realized he was running late for his next appointment, he began hunting for his sunglasses; an expensive pair, and he had just lost the last set. He asked whether I had seen them. I said, “Do you mean the ones resting on top of your head?” He reached up, felt them, and burst out laughing. The hour had been heavy and necessary, and that one moment let him carry it out of the room instead of leaving under the weight of it. Nothing about the conversation changed. His ability to hear it did.

The third story belongs less to organizational leadership than to the Life dimension of the model, which is precisely why it belongs here. One of my favorite ways to spend a day is walking the Orlando theme parks. I have been doing it since 2018. Over all those years and all those thousands of faces, I had never once run into anyone I knew. Then, rounding a corner at Epcot, I walked straight into a father and his son. It was a man who had worked for me years earlier and became a friend. We stood there and laughed. He told me that he and his boy had nearly stopped for a cold drink a minute before; had they done so, in that crowd, we would have passed within fifty feet of each other and never known it.

I have no way to schedule a moment like that. Nobody does. But I was only in its path because I was out walking, and that is closer to a leadership lesson than it first appears. Joy does not arrive on the calendar. It arrives to people who have put themselves in motion and left a little room for it.

Notice what the three have in common. Rickover laughed, and a formidable man became briefly human. A client laughed, and an hour of hard truth became something he could carry. Two friends laughed in a crowd of thousands, and an ordinary Tuesday became a day I still tell people about. In every case the laughter did not lighten the facts; it made the people carrying them lighter. And in every case, it was with someone, never at them. That distinction is not a nicety. It is the whole difference between building a person up and taking something from him while pretending it was a joke.

The difference between humor and foolishness

None of this is a license, and the same tool that builds trust is the one most easily used to strip it. Responsible leaders understand four limits, and the best observe them consistently.

- They never use humor to belittle. The joke that costs someone their standing is not a joke; it is a demotion delivered with a smile.
- They never hide behind sarcasm. Sarcasm is contempt with deniability built in, and everyone in the room can hear both halves of it.
- They never joke to avoid accountability. When the laughing stops, the watch still must be stood and the report still has to be true.
- They use humor to build people up. That is the test, and it is the only one that matters. Ask who was lifted by the remark. If the answer is only you, it was not humor; it was appetite.

Power complicates even good intentions. Hu et al. (2024) found that frequent leader humor can pressure followers to fake positive reactions, increasing emotional exhaustion and reducing job satisfaction. People may laugh because a remark is funny; or because the leader made it.

Timing is the whole skill. The remark that steadies a watch team at 0300 will end you in a debrief with grieving families, and knowing the difference is not comedy. It is judgment, which is why this belongs in a leadership paper and not a wellness column.

Conclusion

Hanley-Dafoe is right that the hard is never the whole story and that we were never meant to carry it alone. In organizations, people take cues from authority. Bad news surfaces when leaders show it can be spoken. Weight is shared when the person carrying the most demonstrates that it can be set down briefly without the standards falling with it.

Creating that permission is a leadership function, and it cannot be delegated.

Hope reminds us that tomorrow will come. Humor helps us make today worth remembering. The greatest leaders I have known possessed both, and the people who served with them are still telling the stories.

People may not remember the smartest leader in the room. They remember the one who made them feel confident, valued, and hopeful.

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