



*We all see and capture various viewpoints on leadership in our green notebooks. Casey Dean, the author of this post, has learned the importance of humor in our day to day interactions with subordinates; as well as those times when tensions are high and morale is low. Casey is an Armor Officer in the United States Army and is currently a student at the Naval War College in Newport, RI.*

**By: Casey Dean**

The Nation was divided and at war. With each day that passed, the outlook for the United States appeared more dismal. Leading the fight to keep our country together was President Abraham Lincoln. To say President Lincoln had a stress-filled four years is an understatement. However, he did not let the setbacks and the pressures of his undertaking defeat his morale. After some initial losses in the 1863 Vicksburg campaign, a group of abolitionists came to the president demanding General Grant's removal. They labeled him a whiskey drinker and "little better than a common drunkard". Reflecting on Grant's successes, Lincoln stated that if he knew where Grant got his liquor, he would send a barrel

of this wonderful whiskey to every general in the army. Throughout it all, Lincoln kept his humor.

Used properly, humor and levity offer tremendous psychological and physical benefits for us as leaders, and for those in our organizations. A good joke or self-effacing parody has cognitive and emotional impacts, such as reducing tension and refocusing your team. A study by the [Mayo Clinic](#) found that there are many short and long term benefits to laughter. It can immediately soothe tension, stimulate organs by increasing endorphins, and activate the body's natural stress response. Long-term benefits include increasing your immune system, improving your mood, and personal satisfaction.

A bit of levity in your leadership style can help a team make it through an extremely tense situation. During the 1989 Super Bowl, San Francisco was down 3 points with only 3:20 left in the game. Their quarterback, Joe Montana, needed to lead his team 92 yards for the victory. Being an engaged leader, Montana saw the extra tension on the faces of many of his teammates. He gathered his team and instead of calling a play, Montana spotted John Candy, sitting in the stands. He then coolly pointed him out to his teammates, "Look, isn't that John Candy?" The guys in the huddle thought his comment was random, but not out of place for the man nicknamed, 'Joe Cool'. Regardless, the distracting comment achieved its intended effect and reduced their anxiety.


Leaders need to know the appropriate time to use levity with their team. [Field Marshall William Slim](#) is one of the most revered leaders in the British and Australian Armies. As the commanding general in the China-Burma-India Theater during World War II, Slim believed that keeping matters light was key to surviving the harsh realities of combat. During one rough stretch of fighting, with his division cut off by the enemy, he saw the need to help lighten the mood among his staff. Slim approached the melancholy group of staff officers and subordinates and told them with his best face, "Well gentlemen, it might be worse." "How?" they responded. "Well it might be raining," and two hours later it was.

Whether turning defeat into victory during the Second World War or developing courses of action for a commander in a garrison cubicle farm today, a staff needs the mental white space to think through problems and generate solutions. In Alison Beard's [Harvard Business Review article](#) she writes that a light-hearted work environment spurs creativity and collaboration, both requirements for staffs to be effective. She also recommends that leaders let humor come naturally into the workplace, and not to force it. The focus of bringing levity into your leadership is to use it authentically. Our subordinates will see right through a fake laugh or forced joke. An "Aha!" moment of sharp wit is just as good as a Will Ferrell quote.

Knowing when to use humor and levity to is part of the art of leadership. There are many situations where humor can lift your team's morale, ease tensions, or break the ice: on the wash rack after 30 days of Hohenfels mud, after an ass-chewing, or in the middle of a stressful course of action development. It's difficult to learn how to tell a joke or the best time for a sarcastic remark, let your instinct guide you. If all else fails...YouTube.

Lincoln, Montana, and Slim were dynamic and out-going leaders, who took their jobs seriously, but not themselves. All three of them leveraged humor in tough situations to refocus their team's energies so that they could accomplish their objectives. They knew the importance of understanding their people and took the time to ease tense situations with a little good humor. The burdens of the Army are hard enough, and as leaders, we don't need to add to them. A little levity, naturally added to our leadership style, can make a world of difference when it is needed the most.

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