



Leadership Lessons from the U.S. President Who Most Prized Fun



July 15, 2026

by Chip Bell

Theodore Roosevelt skinny-dipped in the Potomac River, owned a pet hyena, boxed in the White House, and drank a gallon of coffee a day. The Teddy bear toy was named for him. At his funeral, a New York police captain said, “It was not only that he was a great man, but, oh, there was such fun in being led by him!”

Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, authors of *Humor, Seriously: Why Humor is a Superpower at Work and in Life*, report that leaders who use fun and humor are 27% more motivating than leaders who do [not](#). “When people laugh,” report Aaker and Bagdonas, “a neuro-chemical response is activated flooding their brains with hormones that make them feel calmer and more confident, resourceful, and creative.”

Fun is the fertilizer that helps work cultures cultivate innovation. People work with less fear, greater support, and higher morale. It produces leaders who are more trusted and yields winning work environments where leaders let go, light up, and turn on. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., our 26th U.S. president (1901-1909), is a shining example of making fun an important attribute of leadership.

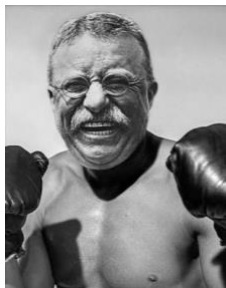
Who Was Teddy?

Roosevelt hunted wild animals in Africa and, as a naturalist, helped establish the U.S. Forest Service. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his successful mediation to end the Russo-Japanese War, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for heroism at the Battle of San Juan Hill. Elected president at 42, he authored 35 books and was fluent in six languages.

He was a carrier of bold joy. He was the first president to host an African American, inviting Booker T. Washington to a White House dinner, and the first to appoint a Jewish person as a cabinet member. He was the first president to fly in an airplane, own a car, or travel outside the U.S. while in office. He was the first American ever to earn a brown belt in [judo](#). But what were the features of this fun-loving leader?



Fun Leaders are Egalitarian



As New York City police commissioner, Teddy Roosevelt walked the streets late at night, talking with all citizens, regardless of their stature. This man of great wealth and privilege learned to connect with ordinary people and demonstrate empathy and understanding. Dropping the arrogance and pugilistic style he had perfected as a boxer at Harvard, he was confident enough to show his humility and courageous enough to show compassion.

Innovation requires settings that nurture power *with*, never power over. Leaders of innovation are egalitarian, promoting inclusion by letting everyone in on the running of the enterprise. They are intently curious about people. They practice realness rather than “roleness”—always showing genuineness. Sometimes tough, they are always kind. They work to make associates feel they are working in a laboratory, not in a courtroom. As such, they never allow any action or attitude that risks eroding the self-esteem of others.

Fun Leaders Are Impeccably Fair

An ill-fated bear hunt revealed a Roosevelt character trait. Invited on the bear hunt by the governor of Mississippi, Roosevelt's guides were committed to giving him a photogenic moment. They cornered a 235-pound bear and tied it to a tree for Roosevelt to shoot. Roosevelt refused, claiming it was unsportsmanlike. Roosevelt later wrote, "I have just had a most unsatisfactory experience in a bear hunt. My kind hosts, with the best of intentions, insisted upon turning the affair into a cross between a hunt and a picnic, which always results in a failure for the hunt and usually in a failure for the [picnic](#)."



Fair dealing is tantamount to a culture that supports innovation. When associates can function in an emotionally unguarded workplace, they are freed to invest energy in bold thinking and playful experimentation. When they believe rules are applied consistently, and decisions are based solely on merit, they are far less restrained.

Fun Leaders Set the Pace



When World War I began, ex-President Roosevelt, now 58, was impatient to get back on the front lines. He pressured President Woodrow Wilson to allow him to go to France and command a 200,000-soldier voluntary force like the Rough Riders he commanded during the Spanish-American War. He even offered to personally finance and train the unit. Wilson refused, sending General John Pershing instead. It remained a major source of conflict between the two [presidents](#).

Leaders of innovation are zealous progress-seekers and bold trailblazers. They take the mission seriously, not themselves. They are courageous enough to be who they are, never fretting over image or status. They demonstrate a strong allegiance to wholesome relationships, spotlighting the works of others over their own. And when smart risk-taking by an associate turns out to fail, they are quick to support learning not blame.

Fun Leaders Show Humor Despite Adversity

When Roosevelt was running for the Bull Moose Party in 1912, he was shot by an assassin soon after Roosevelt began his campaign speech. The bullet went through his folded-up speech and glasses case, stopping short of his lungs. Realizing he was not coughing up blood, Roosevelt announced, "Friends, I was going to make a long speech, but there is a bullet in me now, so that I cannot make



a very long speech, but I will try my best. It takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose.” He spoke for another 84 minutes!

Albert Einstein reportedly said, “Creativity is intelligence having fun.” Leaders of innovation are ambassadors of happiness, willing to shake things up with quirky events, silly signs, and celebratory occasions. Cross pollination of ideas comes from supportive disruption, not sheltered order. They seek moments to convey encouragement for ingenuity. And, even with serious work, they make certain no one is excused from a delicious belly laugh.

The Michael Scott character on the TV program “The Office” summarized it well: “Sometimes you have to take a break from being the kind of boss that’s always trying to teach people things. Sometimes you just have to be the boss of dancing!”

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award winning, best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2025 ranked him for the eleventh year in a row in the top dozen keynote speakers in the world on customer experience. He is also senior advisor with On3, Inc., a company that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field learning programs, as well as an instructor with Fuel (myfuel.ai). He can be reached at www.chipbell.com.