

The Importance of Humor as a Leadership Skill

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Abstract: Humor is an important skill for leaders. This paper examines the underappreciation and underutilization of humor as a tool that studies conclude can improve relationships, decrease stress, and enhance productivity in the workplace. While inappropriate humor, such as aggressive humor, can have a negative effect, effective use of humor by leaders, supervisors, and subordinates can have multiple positive effects on organizational culture. Understanding what humor is and how it can be implemented as an impactful organizational and leadership tool is the purpose of this scholarship. Leadership is as important for the success of an organization as it is misunderstood and misused by “leadership training programs”. There is no debate that many definitions of leadership exist, but too often the approach to teaching leadership contradicts the consensus that distinguishes leadership from management. Current scholarship contends that leadership can be taught, leadership is an influencing process, and effective leadership depends on the leader, the follower, and the situation.

Key words: leadership, humor, productivity, creativity

JEL codes: M1, M5

1. Introduction

According to a June 2018 survey across 22 industries, “has a sense of humor” was cited as an important trait of good leaders by 79% of the 4273 respondents (Daft, 2022). Having a sense of humor was rated higher than “has a good grasp of the entire business” (75%), “is highly knowledgeable in the area they manage” (75%), and “makes good decisions” (78%). Pundt and Herrmann (2015) found that humor could support the development of positive relationships between the leader and follower, depending on the type of humor exhibited. Research by Gurubaxani and Gurubaxani (2023) concluded that leader humor could play a vital role in rebuilding employee trust and work efficacy in a post-pandemic workplace. This research raises questions about what type of humor is most effective in the leadership process and whether a sense of humor is valuable; Can a sense of humor be taught or developed? Can Dan Ball learn to be funny?

2. Humor? Seriously!

The idea of humor may seem diametrically opposed to work. As More and more businesses are recognizing that appropriate well-placed humor in the workplace can create a competitive advantage. Aaker and Bogdonas (2021) argue that humor in the workplace can relieve stress, create meaningful connections among colleagues, and facilitate innovative problem solving.

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The recent COVID-19 pandemic created substantial havoc in the world as well as in the workplace. Gurubaxani and Gurubaxani (2023) found that humor allowed leaders to more effectively rebuild employee trust and work efficiency in the post-pandemic workplace. Humor was found to create a positive mood among employees and act as a stress-reduction technique (Cooper et al., 2018). Stress caused by work-related obstacles or crises was mitigated by leaders employing humor. Lowering workplace stress through humor may relieve worker burnout and allow coping and improved productivity (Gurubaxani & Gurubaxani, 2023).

3. The Humor Cliff

So, if humor is so valuable, why do we laugh less as we advance into the workforce? A 2013 Gallup poll of 1.4 million people in 166 countries reveals people laugh or smile less each year after the age of 23 (Aaker & Bogdonas, 2021). Many humor scholars (I aspire to earn that description someday) blame misconceptions about work and success. Pundt and Herrmann (2015) found that many leaders are hesitant to utilize humor. They reference the differing opinions of President Dwight Eisenhower and Senator Thomas Corwin. Eisenhower said, “A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done.” This is contrasted with Corwin who said, “Never make people laugh. If you want to succeed in life, you must be solemn...as an ass” (p. 120).

Aaker and Bogdonas (2021) conclude that the four reasons people are reluctant to use more humor in the workplace are business requires a serious environment, people have a fear of failing at being funny, using humor and levity in the workplace requires you to “be funny”, and humor is something you are born with. These are all myths, argue Aaker and Bogdonas.

Inexperienced workers are hesitant to use humor early in their careers. New employees are often concerned that humor will impact their perceived credibility. The scrutiny of a new worker creates increased self-consciousness. The stress of a new time-pressured stressful work environment is not conducive to humor or laughter (Martin & Kuiper, 2016; Provine, 2001). A casual or relaxed environment does not sound like a productive workplace, but research concludes differently. Chen and Ayoun (2019) found that a workplace characterized by workplace fun and humor, particularly when supported by the supervisors, led to increased job embeddedness and decreased turnover. Surveys of executives by Robert Half International report 98 percent of leaders prefer employees with a sense of humor. The same study went further in that 84 percent believed employees with a sense of humor “do better work” (Aaker & Bogdonas, 2021, p. 24).

The second reason people are hesitant to use more humor in the workplace is a “deep paralyzing fear that their humor will fail” (Aaker & Bogdonas, 2021, p. 27). Humor fails are not created equal. There is a difference between silence after an attempt at humor and offending someone. Pundt and Herrmann (2015) studied affiliative and aggressive humor by leaders in the workplace. Their study concluded that leaders should use affiliative humor and avoid aggressive humor. Emphasizing that relationships are a key element of organizational life, leaders should be trained to avoid aggressive humor and engage in affiliative humor which fosters positive relationships between leaders and subordinates.

The third reason employees contribute to falling off the humor cliff is “that “in order to use humor and levity in the workplace, you have to be funny” (Aaker & Bogdonas, 2021, p. 29). It is important to demonstrate you understand the value of humor. It is important for a leader to show they have a sense of humor. Kerr (2015) contends that having a sense of humor is “about adopting a spirit of playfulness... the need to laugh at ourselves,

to take ourselves less seriously in order to be more effective” at work (p. 2). Kerr references Philosopher John Dewey who described the ideal mental condition as being playful and serious at the same time. Managers with a sense of humor (regardless of whether they themselves were funny) were rated 23 percent more respected by subordinates (Aaker & Bogdonas, 2021, p. 29).

The fourth reason employees give for not attempting humor in the workplace is that humor is something you are born with and it cannot be learned. Researchers have found that humor, like intelligence and creativity, can be learned (Weems, 2014; Provine, 2000). Having a growth mindset and understanding a good sense of humor does not require “being funny, creating an attainable standard for anyone interested in humor as an effective leadership skill.

4. Humor As a Leadership Skill

Leadership is an influencing process by which a leader influences a group of followers to achieve a shared objective (Northouse, 2022). The influencing process may involve numerous actions, behaviors, and interactions. Communication is often a factor on multiple levels. How followers interpret a leader’s communication is significantly impacted by trust. A 2019 Harvard Business Review survey found 58 percent of employees trust a complete stranger more than their own boss (Aaker & Bogdonas, 2021). Aaker & Bagdonas (2021) conclude “humor is serious business” and it is “vastly underleveraged in most workplaces today” (p. 6). Contemporary leadership scholarship agrees that leadership can be learned. The theme of this paper is to examine the appropriateness of teaching a “sense of humor” in leadership education. While leadership traits such as self-awareness, optimism, and communication skills are accepted as meaningful, it is rare that leadership training includes teaching a sense of humor. Learning verbal communication, authenticity, humility, and introspection are common topics in leadership education. Teaching someone to have a sense of humor is acknowledged as important but rarely makes its way into leadership texts or training programs.

Chen and Ayoun (2019) found that supervisors who engaged in affiliative humor created positive relationships with subordinates. This research, done in the hospitality industry, an industry known to have high turnover, concluded that the sense of humor of their supervisors increased the perception of support for workplace fun and employee socializing. This led to increased job embeddedness. Kerr (2015) explains that social cohesion boosts productivity and task cohesion. Nurturing a culture that promotes communication, trust, and respect benefits from authenticity. “We’re never more real than when we laugh” (Kerr, 2015, p. 45).

Laughing, of course may be different for different people and cultures. What makes my environmentalist animal rescuing wife chuckle (e.g., while giving the dog breakfast, my wife asked me if I had seen the dog bowl. I replied, “No, is he any good?”) and my project management engineer colleague guffaw are certainly diverse (e.g., Dan got fired from the M&M factory because he kept throwing out the W’s). Humor, and in particular workplace humor is inextricably context-bound (Kerr, 2015; Weems, 2014). In the workplace, or any social group, humor can create solidarity and a sense of belonging within the in-group that understands the reference. Conversely, ineffective humor can exacerbate power imbalances in the workplace (Holmes, 2000). Navigating the difference can be the difference between humor-enhancing workplace relationships and causing strife that decreases creativity and productivity.

5. Conclusion

Studies conclude that humor is but should not be avoided in the workplace. Levity and humor are skills and tools that can improve and solidify or destroy and divide a workplace. Critical to utilizing humor as a workplace and leadership enhancement is the appreciation that having a sense of humor can be learned and is different than “being funny.” As organizations engage in leadership development programs, having a sense of humor should be included along with the usual communication, motivation, team building, inclusion, leading change, leading innovation, coaching, conflict resolution, and virtual leadership skill development. The bar is not high as to humor training for leaders; Dan may never be funny, but even he can learn to have a sense of humor (for an engineer).

6. Humor Audit

- 1) When was the last time you laughed?
- 2) What is your job/industry you work in (for questions 3 & 4)?
- 3) How often do you laugh at work? (A) Multiple times each day B) once a day C) once every few days, D) once a week or less
- 4) How funny is your boss? 1-10 (1 = unfunny, never laughs at a funny story, and never tells a funny story; 10 = appreciates a funny story, laughs easily at a funny story and is very good at telling a funny story, which they do regularly)
- 5) List the people in your nuclear family. Rank them from funniest to least funny
- 6) Rate your sense of humor (appreciate a funny story) A) Excellent B) Very Good C) above average D) average E) Below average F) poor G) I have no sense of humor
- 7) Rate your ability to tell a joke/funny story (same scale as #6).

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