

The Utility of Humor in Leadership Communication

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Abstract

The topic of humor in leadership communication has been expounded upon extensively. The purpose of this paper is to compile the findings from previous research and studies into a cohesive summary. Approximately thirty scholarly articles were compared in an effort to discover similarities and common findings. This paper primarily examines the application of humor in leadership communication and the cognitive effects of humor on the audience. The definition and theories of humor are delineated in order to provide understanding of the use of the word *humor* throughout the document. The recurring themes within the articles show that humor has a positive effect on the audience's retention of information; humor facilitates a positive environment within a group, and humor relieves tension, which allows the audience to feel engaged. There can be downsides to the use of humor if it is used inappropriately. Communicators should know their audience(s) and apply humor accordingly; they should avoid the use of disparaging or negative humor, and avoid humor that isolates individuals from a group. To summarize, humor is a tool for the communicator in a leadership position, and -like any other tool- there is an appropriate time and place to use it.

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THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN COMMUNICATION

Humor elicits joy in others; it alleviates pain, eases tension between structured roles, and diffuses stressful situations. Individuals have been known to use humor as a coping mechanism (Kirsch & Kuiper 2003; Priest & Swain 2002) and as a defense mechanism (Meyer 2000), reinforcing the phrase that ‘humor is the best medicine’.

Humor is also a resourceful tool for communicators. In communication, humor is actually a well-developed tool for executing and implementing the objectives of the communicator (Romero & Cruthirds 2006).

Professionals across an array of vocations use humor to convey their messages and to facilitate relationships with their audiences. In fact, numerous organizations believe humor to be so beneficial in the work place that they have decided to integrate it into their standard operating procedures (Avolio et al. 1999; Romero & Pescosolido 2008; Cooper 2005; Stauffer 1999; Ling 2007; Romero & Cruthirds 2006). For example, Southwest Airlines has implemented the use of humor into its daily activities to create a positive environment, for both its staff and its customers (Stauffer 1999). Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream and Sun Microsystems credit humor for the productivity of their employees (Avolio et al. 1999).

The workplace setting is not the only area that scholars have examined in their studies of the use and application of humor. For example, advertising agencies seem to have tapped the resource of humor from their platforms; humor in advertising is no longer an uncommon practice and is now a part of everyday life (Eisend 2009).

Teachers use humor to bridge the gap of reluctance with their students. Integrating humor into teaching difficult subjects has proven to be beneficial to students (Kher et al. 1999). Another study found that students' retention and comprehension is improved when humor is woven into class lectures (Truett 2011).

Doctors use humor in their interactions with patients -which would otherwise be a strictly serious role. This practice helps build relationships with their patients and also aids in the patients' recovery (Berk 2009). Doctors have been using humor in their practice for quite some time now but this is not a new concept; this topic has been studied since the era of Hippocrates (Koven 2012). Humor is often used to heal, not only emotional stress, but physical stress as well -as the movement from laughter can aid in healing muscle tension, fight infections, and interrupt spasm-cycles (Lynch 2002).

Even scientists have been known to use humor to relieve stressful situations. During the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor emergency, scientists were overheard making jokes as they were working to remedy the issue (Duncan 1982). Nobel Prize winners Andrei Geim and Kostya Novoselov recently made momentous breakthroughs in physics and were noted for their 'playful manner' during their experiments (Connor 2013).

Politicians, therapists, public relations practitioners, and law enforcement officials are just a few more of the leadership roles where people benefit from using humor in their communication.

Though the methods and opportunities for study have improved, the study of humor in communication is not a new endeavor. Articles are available from as early as

the 1940s, where researchers have examined this phenomenon. These researchers have studied the efficacy of humor in advertising (Alden et al. 1993; Eisend 2007; Eisend 2009; Madden & Weingberger 1982), persuasive communication (Markiewicz 1974; Lull 1940), politics (Dmitriev 2008), and management (Avolio et al. 1999; Duncan et al. 1990; Duncan 1982; Martin 2004; Stauffer 1999; Ling 2007; Lyttle 2007; Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Some scholars have conducted primary research to understand the effects humor has on the audience (Priest & Swain 2002; Kirsch & Kuiper 2003). Regardless of the profession, scholars generally begin their research by asking these common questions:

- How can humor be used in communication? (Stauffer 1999; Avolio et al 1999; Wanzer et al. 2006)
- Should humor be used in communication? (Priest & Swain 2002; Kaplan & Pascoe 1977)
- Is humor an effective communication tool? (Kirsh & Kuiper 2003; Lyttle 2007; Markiewicz 1974)

These are some of the more prevalent approaches to evaluate and research humor but they do not account for all of the questions that scholars have used to develop an improved understanding of humor. (Eisend 2009)

Humor is ubiquitous in the social context. It permeates nearly every part of society and, perhaps, that is the motivation for extensive studies on the subject (Lynch 2002) and why it has inspired a great deal of public discussion. Research has shown that humor often pushes the boundaries of many disciplines and thereby creates a level of tension with researchers attempting a scientific method of study (Veatech 1998). The abundance of information surrounding this subject is evidence of scholarly interest in

humor relating to communication. By learning from this wealth of available research we have the opportunity to explore and expand on this topic more extensively.

PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

In this paper, the utility of humor in leadership communication will be examined across varying fields of research to compile similar findings. Information will be obtained from studies on the fields of teaching, management, military, public relations, and healthcare, with the focus placed on the leadership roles within these fields for the use of humor.

Since humor has been studied so widely, a brief history of this topic will serve to better understand the point at which scholars are today in their findings. A definition of humor will be provided, in order for the reader to understand the context of the word *humor* throughout this paper; theories and functions of humor will be explored as well.

Following that section, the use and efficacy of humor in leadership communication will be explored. The intent is to demonstrate the situational and also a global understanding of humor from these roles and how these different perspectives might frame the use of humor in communication. This will be followed by scholars' conclusions on the cognitive responses that humor has on the audience.

The goal of this paper is to show that humor -when used effectively- can be a useful tool in the toolbox of any communicator in a leadership role; and that humor can be a *powerful* mechanism, which even the most practiced communicators should deem worthy of developing.

DEFINITION OF META-ANALYSIS

In an attempt to compile a cohesive set of information that further examines this topic, this paper will compile many scholars' findings on the utility of humor in leadership communication. It is a meta-analysis of the plethora of conclusions on the topic.

This paper is in the form of a meta-analysis because of the profusion of information available. A functional understanding of this large quantity of information can be summarized into one concise paper – a meta-analysis. A meta-analysis is defined as:

“...methods focused on contrasting and combining results from different studies, in the hope of identifying patterns among study results, sources of disagreement among those results, or other interesting relationships that may come to light in the context of multiple studies” (Wikipedia).

More simply put, it will be an *analysis of analyses* (Glass 1976). Since primary research will not be conducted for this paper, a meta-analysis is the best option to gain an understanding by surveying the available information. It will assemble the findings across many papers to provide an objective perspective. Of course, there will be some “qualitative contextualizations and understandings of the objective findings” (Neill 2006).

HISTORY OF RESEARCH

There are observable consistencies among the conclusions of the documents researched. Scholars have assessed the role humor plays in the relationship between employer and employee (Stauffer 1999; Lyttle 2007; Romero & Cruthirds 2006; Duncan et al. 1990). Other scholars have evaluated the effect of humor on perception and

understanding in a classroom setting (Truett 2011). Some have created processes describing how to use humor on functional and strategic levels (Stauffer 1999). The research on humor is anything but lacking.

Some of the earliest recorded research on the explanation of humor dates back over 2000 years (Duncan et al. 1990). Both Shakespeare, in his theatrical writing, and Freud, in his psycho-analysis, examined the use of humor in communication. They applied it to their writings and were known to use humor in their messaging (Warnars-Kleverlaan et al. 1996; Duncan et al. 1990). Aristotle is also known for his inquiry on humor through his work and is considered to have provided valuable insight into the subject (Veatch 1998).

In the realm of academia and professional journals, one of the earliest professional articles regarding the use of humor in communication dates back to 1940. P.E. Lull, in his article “The Effectiveness of Humor in Persuasive Speech,” performed some of the original primary research on the effects that humor can have on the audience, and its response to the use of humor in communication. During his research, he found that humor had little to do with the cognitive responses of the audience but that it was a result of variables other than the material itself, such as the audience and the setting (Lull 1940).

The table below depicts some of the findings from Lull’s (1940) research. According to the results, there was no real significant difference in the audience’s response to the humorous and non-humorous speeches. The arrows indicate the speech

that was considered to be more persuasive and it appears that audiences reacted generally the same towards both speeches.

TABLE VI
ILLUSTRATING THE COMPARISONS BETWEEN HUMOROUS AND NON-HUMOROUS SPEECHES WITH RESPECT TO "INTERESTINGNESS," "CONVINCINGNESS," AND PERSUASIVENESS (IMMEDIATE EFFECT).

<i>Interestingness</i>		<i>Speaker Groups</i>				Hum. Mean		N.H. Mean	
		SPKR.	Hum. Mean	N.H. Mean	Hum. Mean				
For	WIS	M-M	75.0	→ 83.4	82.2	← 82.6	77.4	→ 78.0	
		E-E	87.2	← 81.7					
	PUR	E-E	76.8	→ 75.5	73.8	→ 73.9			
		R-Z	72.3	→ 72.2					
Against	WIS	N-N	78.7	→ 79.6	81.8	→ 81.8	80.9	← 80.9	
		E-E	85.9	← 84.2					
	PUR	E-E	82.3	→ 82.9	80.2	← 80.3			
		H-T	78.7	← 78.5					
<i>Convincingness</i>									
For	WIS	M-M	68.6	→ 77.8	76.7	← 78.9	76.5	→ 77.1	
		E-E	82.4	← 80.0					
	PUR	E-E	73.8	→ 76.8	70.2	→ 75.4			
		R-Z	68.4	→ 74.4					
Against	WIS	N-N	59.0	→ 65.2	65.1	→ 64.8	74.1	← 74.9	
		E-E	73.2	← 64.4					
	PUR	E-E	79.0	→ 81.4	79.8	← 79.8			
		H-T	80.4	← 78.7					

(Under the column labelled "Spkr" the first letter refers to the speaker who spoke to the group whose rating scale score (Mean) is given in the left-hand column under "Speaker Groups." The second letter (speaker) is paired with the group whose score is indicated in the right hand column. The arrows point toward the speech which was found to be more persuasive according to the analysis of the attitude scales.)

Table 1 – Comparisons between Humorous and Non-Humorous Speeches

Similar research was conducted in the years following, with both comparable and contradicting conclusions (Markiewicz 1974; Kaplan & Pascoe 1976).

In 1953, Gregory Bateson presented his assessment of humor in human communication. He may not have pioneered research on the subject, but Bateson made a point that could serve as a foundation for this topic: laughter is one of three compulsive acts unique to *Homo sapiens* (the other two are grief and orgasm -but those topics can be explored in many other online resources). He also notes that laughter is partially

involuntary (Bateson 1953). Basically, humor in communication is purely *human*. It's natural that people would want to laugh, especially in a professional atmosphere (Lynch 2002). Unfortunately, as natural a phenomenon that laughing and humor might be, it is can be negatively perceived in professional communication (Veatch 1998). As research on the topic grew, this idea was contradicted.

It was difficult to find research that expanded on the topic over the next decade, but in 1967, new research was conducted. It studied the effects that humor has on the credibility of the speaker and whether the audience benefited from its use. The study explored the *effects* that humor has on the communicator and the listeners. The author points out that there was very little coverage of this topic at that point (Gruner 1967). Fortunately, it looks as though there was a paradigm shift around this time; soon after this research, the resources became plentiful as evidenced by the influx of information available (Markiewicz 1974; Kaplan & Pascoe 1977; Bryant et al. 1980; Madden & Weinberger 1982; Duncan 1982; Duncan et al. 1990; Alden et al. 1993; Warnars-Kleverlaan et al. 1996; Veatsch 1998; Kher et al 1999; Meyer 2000; Lynch 2002; Priest & Swain 2002; Aylor & Oppliger 2003; Stirling 2004; Wanzer et al. 2006; Lyttle 2007; Romero & Pescosolido 2008.)

Similar to Lull's findings, Dorothy Markiewicz compared the results of several different studies on the effects of humor in persuasive communication. Markiewicz, too, found that the addition of humor to a message did not enhance the persuasiveness of a communicator's content, nor did it make it more memorable (1974). Her paper also concluded that there are contributing factors that should be considered in this subject,

such as: the type of humor, the message type, humor manipulations, and the inappropriate setting for the reception of humor (Markiewicz 1974).

Years later, primary research was conducted in university classrooms to study the effects of humor on retention and comprehension. Robert M. Kaplan and Gregory C. Pascoe (1977) conducted research with 508 undergraduate students in 16 different introductory psychology classes. The main difference of this study from previous work is the conduction of follow-up research; Kaplan and Pascoe gathered the delayed responses of the audience three weeks after the initial experiment. However, as with previous studies, they found that humor did not necessarily have an *immediate* effect on the subjects' retention of material compared to non-humorous material. Although, in follow-up research, the findings showed that students who were presented with humorous material had a better recall of the information in delayed post-test results (Kaplan & Pascoe 1977). This research provided a positive view in favor of humor in communication and proved beneficial to later work conducted on the topic (Kher et al. 1999).

W. Jack Duncan (1982) wrote an article on humor in management, covering the influence that humor may have on group characteristics, such as power, status, cohesiveness, and communication. Duncan used a formula created by Craig Lundberg to analyze humorous communication in management. It is as follows:

1. Lower case letters (i.e., a, b, c) represent group members and capital letters (i.e. A, B, C) represent the groups to which the members belong.
2. Members of the same group (i.e. A) are differentiated by primes (i.e., a, a', a").

3. An arrow (→) illustrates the direction or flow of the joke from the initiator to the target. If *a* tells a joke to *b*, it would appear as *a* → *b*.
4. Parentheses () enclose the focus or "butt" of the joke. If the focus is not present, the letter representing the person is underlined (i.e., d).
5. Brackets [] enclose the publics or people beyond the initiator, target, and focus who observe the joking behavior (i.e., [A, B, C]) (Duncan 1982).

This formula is used to evaluate varying situations in management communication that use humor. Contributing factors in each situation are placed into the scheme to illustrate humor usage. Duncan exemplified it with the following situation:

“An employee (a') appeared at work on the first day of the job with a beard and wearing sandals. John (a), the supervisor of work group A saw the new employee and told Mary (b), the supervisor of work group B, the following joke so that all members of groups A, B, and C could hear. John says "Mary, did you hear about the hippie who arrived in court wearing only one sandal?" Mary responds that she did not hear the story. John then says, "The judge asked him if he lost his sandal. The hippie answered 'no, I found one.' "All members of A, B, and C laugh.”

The situation can be illustrated as follows:

John (Initiator)	Mary (Target)	New Employee (Focus)	(Publics)
a	→ b	(a')	[A, B, C]

Figure 1 – Illustration of Humor Formula

Duncan concluded that humor can be beneficial to the leader if it is utilized in the situation correctly (1982). This is yet another example of how humor is a tool and the communicator should understand the application of it in order to effectively incorporate it into their communication. Duncan later went on to expand on this topic in the *Journal of Management* (Duncan et al. 1990).

In 1993, research was conducted to gain an understanding of the global and cultural implications that humor has on an audience in advertising communication (Alden et al. 1993). The goal of this study was to find out if there were variations between multi-national advertising campaigns, and if diverse cultures (Korea, Germany, Thailand, and the United States) responded differently to humorous communication in advertising. The findings suggested that the varying cultures did not require unique messaging in humorous advertising to appeal to the audience and that the structure of humor was not culture specific. The content of the advertisement was likely to vary depending on the collective-individualistic dimension of the society (Alden et al. 1993).

In an article for the *Harvard Management Update*, David Stauffer (1999) wrote a guide to using humor in management positions. The article promoted the use of humor in leadership communication and provided a guide for the application of humor in the workplace. This article was succinct and favorable to the utility of humor in management. It suggested that there is always an opportunity to use humor and the key is to apply it in a manner that is comfortable to the leader and considerate of coworkers (Stauffer 1999). Stauffer's article appeared to be a useful guide for leadership communication research and studies (Ling 2007).

Bruce J. Avolio, Jane M. Howell, and John J. Sosik (1999) wrote what has proven to be one of the most useful papers for this meta-analysis and for numerous other articles in the topic of leadership communication (See also Priest & Swain 2002; Lyttle 2007; Romero & Cruthirds 2006; Cooper 2005; Romero & Pescosolido 2008). They conducted independent studies to test their hypotheses that humor has positive effects on leadership communication. The results of the research confirmed their hypotheses, and this article

brought favorable insights into the use of humor in leadership communication (Avolio et al. 1999).

John C. Meyer (2000) wrote “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication”. Unlike previous research, this article didn’t research the quantitative effects that humor has on communication but its theoretical role in communication. After exploring the three theories of humor: incongruity, superiority, and relief (these will be defined in the next section), Meyer stated that humor has four functions in communication: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. Each function can create positive and adverse outcomes, thus causing a paradoxical approach to the use of humor in communication (Meyer 2000).

Research grew significantly over the next decade. Studies examined humor in otherwise serious roles like those of leaders in military (Priest & Swain 2002) and political (Dmitriev 2008) roles. Some of the findings proved that a good leader usually possessed a higher sense of humor; a bad leader often lacked it (Priest & Swain 2002). Other results indicated that humor was essential; and the ambivalence created by the juxtaposition of serious roles and laughter was overcome in professions such as politics (Dmitriev 2008). For example, politicians might use humor as a tool to connect to their audiences and distance them from competition (Meyer 2000).

Of course, humor in leadership communication was not always viewed favorably. Some researchers believed that humor detracted from professionalism and often created unnecessary tension (Berk 2009). This was a result of leaders often using negative humor to communicate with their audience, therefore making it difficult for the audience to learn

from its leaders (Berk 2009). This study provided examples of the inappropriate uses of humor and showed that, in order for humor to be effective, situation analysis and appropriate humor should be applied (Wanzer et al. 2006).

Seventy years of researching humor as it relates to leadership communication has provided manifold conclusions. To properly utilize humor, the leader must establish a basic comprehension of humor in communication (Meyer 2000). This knowledge can be ascertained through the definitions and examples of varying types of humor. The next section explores the definition of humor in detail.

DEFINITIONS OF HUMOR

Humor is often used as the channel to create a bond and as a tool for engaging the audience (Vorhaus 1994; Truett 2011). But how is humor *defined*? According to dictionary.com, humor is defined as a comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement (Dictionary.com). As straight-forward as that definition is, humor in the context of communication is not as easy to define (Warnars-Kleverlaan et al. 1996). Perhaps this is because what may be considered funny to one person may not be funny to another.

Contributors to the Wikipedia page have encapsulated the difficulty in defining humor because there are an abundance of theories offered in explanation of humor, its role in the societal context, and just what is actually humorous. The page explains that “...it would be very difficult to explain humor to a hypothetical person who did not have a sense of humor already. In fact, to such a person humor would appear to be quite strange if not outright irrational behavior” (Wikipedia 2013).

Initially, the word humor meant fluid and is still used in modern medical terminology for the aqueous and vitreous humors located in the eye (Lyttle 2007). As the word developed it became positively known and defined as a cause of enjoyment (Meyer 2000). Therefore, humor is generally known as anything that is interpreted as funny - intentionally or unintentionally (Lynch 2002). In the setting of the organization, humor can be defined as consisting "...of amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization" (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Humor has also been succinctly defined as "affective absurdity" (Veatch 1998).

Humor is prevalent in our social interactions, and tends to be captivating in its roles as a communication tool, but has managed to remain somewhat of an enigma (Meyer 2000). Humor can be categorized into a multitude of definitions (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). In fact, there are many different forms of humor; one source (Nichol 2011) states that 20 distinct varieties of humor exist, such as anecdotal, blue, burlesque, stand-up, epigrammatic, ironic, satirical, mordant, hyperbolic, and dry. Aristotle, Freud, and Darwin tried to grasp the function of humor in its societal roles by attempting to define it and scholars still do so to this day (Warnars-Kleverlaan et al. 1996).

Theories have also been formulated to understand humor. In the academic world, humor is commonly categorized into three theories: superiority, incongruity, and relief. There are several theory types that attempt to explain humor but these three are most often referenced among peer-reviewed articles (Duncan et al. 1990; Veatch 1998; Meyer 2000; Lynch 2002; Stirling 2004; Lyttle 2007; Romero & Pescosolido 2008).

SUPERIORITY THEORY

The Superiority Theory states that laughter is an expression of superiority over something, someone, or a situation (Morreall 2012; Lyttle 2007). Believed to date back to the Bible and the work of Plato, this theory was identified and given a name in the 20th century (Morreall 2012).

If the humor provokes laughter, either inward or outward, the theory proposes that it is because of a sense of triumph over the person or situation. Adults laughing at children or people laughing at the mishaps of others are both examples of the Superiority Theory (Meyer 2000). Teasing someone is an example of the Superiority Theory. In fact, most hostile humor is thought to be explained by the Superiority Theory (Meyer 2000). Because these humor types are perceived as negative, some researchers found humor them to be an unfavorable contribution to humor in leadership communication (Lyttle 2007). Plato and Aristotle both wrote of humor as a form of mockery or disdain, alluding to the Superiority Theory, and expressed that it should be kept to a minimum (Lynch 2002).

This theory is often argued because laughter can also be caused from someone finding humor in situations that surprise him or her or from amusement of skills that they, themselves, lack. Humor might be caused by irony or feelings of inadequacy. As information on humor theories developed, the Superiority Theory was even further discredited by the introduction of the Relief Theory and Incongruity Theory (Morreall 2012).

INCONGRUITY THEORY

This theory dates back to the 18th century and was created as a challenge to the Superiority Theory. Even though the word *incongruity* was never used, Aristotle also wrote of humor that shared similar characteristics of the Incongruity Theory (Morreall 2012).

Incongruity Theory posits that humor is something that is both unexpected and clashes with preconceived expectations and mental patterns (Meyer 2000; Morreall 2012). Stand-up comedy with the use of a *bit* and a *punch-line* is an example of this theory. The communicator (comedian) will lead the audience through a story (bit) and change the course of the expectations of the audience with the punch-line (Duncan et al. 1990).

The Incongruity Theory suggests that humor is found in things that do not go together or are placed together for the purpose of laughter, either intentionally or unintentionally (Lyttle 2007). With the application of this theory, some forms of humor found within the work environment are illustrations of the incongruity theory. It has been stated that humor eases tension and overcomes monotony in the workplace. This leads to employees engaging with one another (Meyer 2000). According to the Incongruity Theory, humor interrupts the pattern of dreariness of the workplace with a pleasant incongruence (Duncan et al. 1990).

RELIEF THEORY

Relief Theory dates as far back as the 18th century and was outlined in Lord Shaftesbury's 1709 essay "An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor". This was one of

the first essays that took a modern approach to humor (Morreall 2012). Shaftesbury expressed that laughter is the result of nerve impulses releasing built-up pressure from animal spirits (Morreall 2009). In the 18th Century, *this* was considered a scientific explanation of humor. Once better understanding of the nervous system became available, Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud revised this theory to be scientifically accurate (Morreall 2009; Morreall 2012).

Freud is well-known for his study of the Relief Theory of humor. He explores three situations of laughter: *der Witz* (meaning jokes or joking), “the comic”, and “humor”. He uses a narrower version of the term *humor*, but it is often expanded on for research purposes to represent an all-encompassing look at humor (Morreall 2012).

In the 20th Century, with the expansion of the Relief Theory, Superiority Theory was disparaged and not as highly regarded by scholars as it had been in the 18th Century (Morreall 2012). Eventually the Relief Theory was expressed as the release of built-up tension either regarding a subject or a general sense of tension within the responder (Morreall 2009; Lyttle 2007). Relief Theory suggests that people laugh at jokes that involve sex and anger because of built up tension that stems from repressed feelings towards these subjects. This can be beneficial if the withheld feelings are destructive (Lyttle 2007).

Relief, superiority, and incongruity theories have long been studied and provide insight into understanding humor and the motivation behind laughter (Morreall 2012). Each of these theories has the potential to discredit one of the others, but each one has its own merits (Lyttle 2007). Regardless, not one theory gives a complete understanding of

humor. They are believed to overlap with one another (as seen in the figure below) to give a more comprehensive explanation as to why people laugh and find things humorous (Lynch 2002). This figure illustrates that there might not always be only one motivation that compels one to find something humorous.

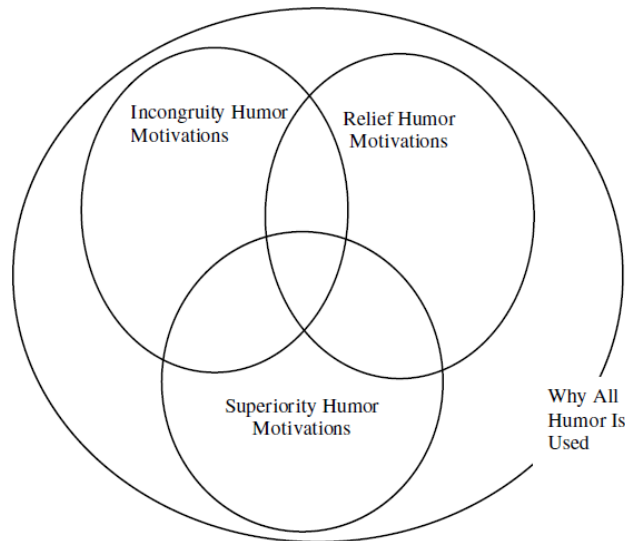


Figure 2 – Theories of Humor

With that in mind, communicators should be cognizant of their application of humor and understand the motivation behind its use in their interactions with others (Stauffer 1999).

HUMOR FUNCTION TYPES

In the professional environment, there is humor that is either positive or negative in that setting. When someone is considered to be humorous, they might be told that they have a good sense of humor. If someone is not found to be funny then they might have a *bad* sense of humor. But even more specific than *good* or *bad*, humor can be classified into several different types, including: ironic, blue, farcical, epigrammatic, cynical, anecdotal, dry, or screw-ball (Wanzer et al. 2006; Nichol 2011). Literature on the study

of humor in leadership communication generally does not focus on these types but rather, the functional purpose of humor.

The functional roles of humor in communication have been delineated into several types of roles. For the purpose of this paper, they will be summarized into these roles: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). In a leadership role, these functions generally serve the purpose of facilitating a specific relationship with the audience (Meyer 2000).

Humor that is considered non-threatening and employs inside jokes or practical jokes shared with other colleagues is affiliative humor (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Southwest Airlines is a company that is known for its use of affiliative humor with its employees (Stauffer 1999). This function of humor is intended to engage others and create a sense of group cohesiveness (Romero & Cruthirds 2006; Lynch 2002). Leaders who exhibit this function tend to be accepted and liked by their employees (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Their actions might consist of a group luncheon or an all-expenses-paid trip to Walt Disney World for employees. Leaders who include affiliative humor in their communication toolbox can expect positive results in a group setting (Stauffer 1999).

Self-enhancing humor serves the purpose of shining a positive light on the communicator and enhancing his or her image (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Although this function of humor has a focus on the communicator (Romero & Cruthirds 2006), it is also expected to create a sense of relief (which would coincide with the Relief Theory) for the audience and the communicator (Meyer 2000). This might be because leaders who employ self-enhancing humor tend to have a positive view on life and are not easily

affected by stressful situations (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Self-enhancing humor has an element of control as well by releasing tension through laughter (but this is not an uncommon correlation of control and relief) (Lynch 2002). It should be noted that this humor function can serve a negative role when it is linked to neuroticism (Romero & Cruthirds 2006).

When communicators use humor with the intention of ostracizing and ridiculing another person, they are exhibiting aggressive humor (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). If humor is used as a tool to isolate an employee and made at a person's expense, the communicator might be using humor for the purpose of separating himself or herself from the audience. This is thought to portray a sense of authority or dominance over others (an example of the role of Superiority Theory) (Meyer 2000). This function is often represented through humor involving gender, race, sexuality or occupational position (Lynch 2002). Because of the negative attributes of this humor function, there have been few suggestions to support if there is an effective role for it in leadership communication. Lyttle (2007) posits that humor that offends or excludes people is hazardous and should be minimized.

Self-defeating humor is portrayed when leaders disparage or slight themselves with the intention of garnering respect or acceptance from others (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). This type of humor takes the direction of humor from the audience to the communicator and, as a result, could foster a welcoming environment (Truett 2011). Humor that is self-defeating is believed, in moderation, to make the communicator more approachable (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). This could have an effect of reducing feelings of punishment or blame from subordinates (Romero & Pescosolido 2008). But care

should be taken when accessing this humor function because self-deprecating humor can weaken leaders' credibility; this humor function is also especially common for female leaders (Lyttle 2007). Self-defeating humor could cause undesirable outcomes and should be utilized sparingly (Lyttle 2007).

HOW HUMOR IS MEASURED

Primary research (process of collecting original data) has been performed on this subject to answer varying hypotheses regarding the uses of humor in leadership-style communication and how it can be measured (Truett 2011; Avolio et al. 1999; Wanzer et al. 2006; Stirling 2004; Priest & Swain 2002; Kaplan & Pascoe 1977; Alden et al. 1993; Bryant et al. 1980; Lull 1940; Warnars-Kleverlaan et al. 1996; Madden & Weinberger 1982). To comprehend how researchers have made their observations and come to their conclusions, it is beneficial to understand what methods are used to reach them.

Two types of research were observed as the primary forms conducted: qualitative and quantitative. Researchers who perform qualitative research are seeking out information that is not randomly selected but is generally gathered from an interview or open-ended questions. The data collected could be words, symbols, or objects and are used to identify social norms and interpret social interactions (Xavier University Library). Quantitative research is usually conducted on a larger scale and is randomly selected. It is used to make predictions, understand cause-and-effect, and, most importantly, the data collected is numerical or statistical (Xavier University Library).

Examples of quantitative data from the selected papers consisted of:

- Statistical information on humor types from randomly selected students at a university (Truett 2011).
- Surveys conducted at a Canadian financial institution with statistical compilations of the results gathered from a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) (Avolio et al. 1999).
- Data compiled from anonymous students in graduate teachers' classes that are analyzed through a statistical analysis program (Stirling 2004).
- Randomly selected advertisements in four countries that were compared for similarities in content (Alden et al. 1993).

The qualitative data observed is exemplified in such studies as:

- Open-ended questions given to undergraduate students in entry level communication classes (Wanzer et al. 2006).
- A selection of sixty cadets in the United States Military Academy who answered open-ended questions in response to the leadership styles of their officers (Priest & Swain 2002).

DEFINITION OF LEADER

For the purpose of this paper, the term *leader* is broadly used to mean anyone in a role of authority or in a role that is attempting to persuade an audience. Leaders are represented in this analysis as teachers (Wanzer et al. 2006; Stirling 2004; Truett 2011; Kaplan & Pascoe 1977; Aylor & Oppliger 2003; Kher et al. 1999), managers (Avolio et al. 1999; Duncan et al. 1990; Duncan 1982; Martin 2004; Stauffer 1999; Ling 2007; Lyttle 2007; Romero & Cruthirds 2006), advertisements (Eisend 2007; Eisend 2009; Alden et al. 1993; Madden & Weingberger 1982), doctors (Berk 2009), military officers (Priest & Swain 2002), politicians (Dmitriev 2008), and persuasive speakers (Lull 1940; Markiewicz 1974).

Within this wide range of professions there are consistencies in the application of humor from those leadership roles.

APPLICATION OF HUMOR

The tool of humor in leadership communication can be quite useful, but one must know how, when, and where to apply it (Lyttle 2007). Communicators should be aware of the positive and negative effects of humor usage, he or she should analyze the situation or group, and be aware of any cultural communication barriers. Just like any tool, it has a specific application and leaders are responsible for understanding the appropriate implementation of humor (Dmitriev 2008).

Humor has many benefits in communication, such as: promoting a friendly atmosphere, reducing social distances (Warnars-Kleverlaan et al. 1996), relieving frustration, or enhancing productivity (Lyttle 2007). Humor can stimulate audiences' interest in messaging in an informative environment. It can also establish a more efficient climate in the classroom setting (Bryant et al. 1980). In the appropriate setting, humor can be quite effective. For instance, if a leader is in a situation that calls for open discussion, then humor can facilitate the fluidity of conversation between group members (Romero & Pescosolido 2008).

Alternatively, if ineffectively applied, humor can create a hostile environment and lower the self-esteem of subordinates (Kirsch & Kuiper 2003). Even if the intentions of the communicator are positive, the responses from the audience might be adverse (Stauffer 1999). In other words, "humor does not have to be intentionally negative or aggressive in order to offend" (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Stauffer (1999) suggested that

aggressive humor should not have a place in any environment that fosters positivity. Humor that exhibits negative traits can be considered verbal abuse and, in roles that benefit from or require a positive attitude, (e.g., doctors and therapists) it is adamantly warned against (Berk 2009).

Negative humor that is directed at the speaker (i.e., self-defeating humor) can also have a negative effect on their integrity (Lyttle 2007). For example, leaders who are speaking to groups where there is a high-power distance, should avoid the use of self-defeating or affiliative humor (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Leaders with hierarchical roles are expected to uphold a sense of superiority and if their credibility is jeopardized they might not be as effective in their role (Romero & Cruthirds 2006).

Leaders should use caution when exercising humor that has the potential to promote negativity or bad behavior (Lyttle 2007; Stauffer 1999). Humor is intended to have positive functions. When aggressive humor is applied, it might not be considered humorous because the negative intentions do not coincide with the positive role of humor (Lockyer & Pickering 2005).

Humor can facilitate a productive work environment, but one should remain steadfast to ensure that humor does not impede on goals or objectives (Stauffer 1999). Joking banter may seem harmless, but in the workplace it can distract employees or others from following basic protocol, such as safety procedures. If it is not controlled, humor might impede on deadlines (Lyttle 2007). Humor can supplement productivity but it should not supersede it (Bryant et al. 1980). The key is moderation. Humor can be an ingredient to a successful work environment; it just has to be blended in appropriately. As

a leader it is essential to monitor the application of humor and effectively handle it (Lyttle 2007).

It is essential to analyze a group or audience that is to be communicated with to understand its dynamics (Romero & Pescosolido 2008; Romero & Cruthirds 2006). The leader is responsible for considering the interpersonal relationships they share with their audience or employees, or the associations that exist among others (Romero & Pescosolido 2008). There is the chance that the audience may only laugh at the leader-initiated humor because they are subordinates or spectators to the leader – not because they found the humorous content funny. Because of this idea, leaders cannot only rely on the laughter as feedback. They must use caution and consider the audience beforehand (Lyttle 2007). Lyttle (2007) even suggests planning the humor in advance.

Boundaries should be in place when interacting with diverse groups (Ling 2007; Alden et al. 1993). The literature review suggests that in nearly all situations the use of humor involving race, religion, sexuality, or gender should be avoided. As a communicator, this type of humor can isolate the audience, or members of the audience, and negatively impact messaging (Wanzer et al. 2006). From a global perspective, communicators should understand that every nationality or group has a different set of values, beliefs, taboos, and even corporate culture (Ling 2007). Studies have concluded that incongruent humor tends to be effective across diverse nationalities (Alden et al. 1993). Although, the actual content of humor and its function do not translate across varying cultures (Ling 2007).

For instance, puns and irony generally receive positive responses in British culture but they are not as effective to Germans and Swedes (Ling 2007). (Note: Alden's (1993) findings somewhat disagree with Ling's (2007) statement.) Another important idea to consider is that Americans tend to be more litigious than other countries (Ling 2007). So, with the multitude of laws prohibiting discrimination, the leader should evaluate the audience's ethnic and cultural composition before applying any type of humor (Romero & Cruthirds 2006; Wanzer et al. 2006).

In any situation, humor should be used accordingly. Humor functions can be effective in different situations and the communicator should understand the appropriateness of humor functions in their context (Romero & Cruthirds 2006).

COGNITIVE RESPONSES TO HUMOR

Just as it is important to understand the application of humor, the perspective of the audience is equally significant. The audience's cognitive responses give valuable insight to their viewpoint. A considerable numbers of scholars have shared these conclusions regarding the cognitive responses to humor: humor reduces stress and relieves tension (Romero & Cruthirds 2006; Priest & Swain 2002; Ling 2007; Romero & Pescosolido 2008; Avolio et al. 1999; Lyttle 2007; Bryant et al. 1980; Kirsch & Kuiper 2003; Holmes & Marra 2002; Cooper 2005; Lynch 2002; Martin 2004; Duncan 1982; Meyer 2000; Truett 2011; Stirling 2004), the audience's response can enhance group cohesiveness (Romero & Cruthirds 2006; Stirling 2004; Meyer 2000; Duncan 1982; Lynch 2002; Avolio et al. 1999; Romero & Pescosolido 2008; Stauffer 1999; Ling 2007), and humor can positively affect the listeners' retention and perception of information

(Lynch 2002; Wanzer et al. 2006; Romero & Cruthirds 2006; Ling 2007; Romero & Pescosolido 2008; Markiewicz 1974; Bryant et al. 1980; Kaplan & Pascoe 1977; Stirling 2004).

According to the Relief Theory, people laugh in order to relieve nervous tension caused by, or in response to the current situation or tension that is engendered in the individual (Lyttle 2007; Meyer 2000). With the addition of humor to a message, the listener might respond with feelings of relief that lead to physiological and psychological safety. As a result, the environment seems less threatening and the individual or group might cope more effectively to stress (Romero & Pescosolido 2008; Meyer 2000; Romero & Cruthirds 2006). This could perhaps be why humor is often a tool for disclosing difficult information (Lynch 2002; Avolio et al. 1999).

Debates and conflicts can be attenuated if humor has provided relief to those involved. This could foster an environment that is less dysfunctional or negative. In fact, studies have shown that humor is an important aspect of conflict management (Romero & Pescosolido 2008). Perhaps, this breakdown of barriers encourages the audience to become more engaged and facilitate better teamwork within a group (Stauffer 1999).

The benefits of humor-induced relief are plentiful. Researchers postulate that one of these benefits is the enhancement of creativity (Romero & Cruthirds 2006; Stauffer 1999). Companies known for their creative products or services, such as Pixar Animation Studios, Google, and Yahoo, exemplify this very notion. Clinical psychologist Joseph R. Dunn, editor of *Humor and Health* newsletter in Jackson, Mississippi states that, “humor and creativity go together” (Stauffer 1999).

Southwest Airlines has been mentioned repeatedly throughout the literature for its successful implementation of humor into daily work activities (Avolio et al. 1999; Romero & Pescosolido 2008; Cooper 2005; Stauffer 1999; Ling 2007; Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Practical jokes and humorous newsletters are just a couple of examples of Southwest's practice of humor at work. The leadership at Southwest Airlines places a high value on humor as a tool (Avolio et al. 1999; Romero & Pescosolido 2008). Southwest believes that its workplace has a high level of group cohesiveness that is directly related to its use of humor (Meyer 2000). It is clear that humor is beneficial for this company by researchers' interest in its practices.

Humor in communication is said to decrease the social distances between individuals (Warnars-Kleverlaan et al. 1996) which can have a positive impact on group atmosphere. Romero & Pescosolido (2008) summarized this concept by postulating:

“When humor is used in groups, people experience positive affect which facilitates more efficient and effective social processes. Efficient social processes require less energy and effort to establish a social bond and effective social processes are more likely to achieve a social bond.”

It is believed that humor might reduce outside threats, thus creating positive feelings that bond people together in a group (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). This social bridge between peers creates a sense of intimacy and group camaraderie in the workplace (Lyttle 2007).

There are still some uncertainties as to why humor is used as a tool to create social-cohesiveness; but, regardless this effect is undeniable and notably pervasive in the workplace (Romero & Pescosolido 2008).

Teachers often use humor as a tool to engage students and reinforce messaging (Kher et al 1999). This utility of humor is useful for any leader hoping for the audience to retain information. Some researchers suggest that humor does not have any effect on the intake and recall of information (Markiewicz 1974) but scholars who have performed primary research in recent years have concluded to the contrary (Kaplan & Pascoe 1977).

One study suggested that communicators who do not gesticulate and also have monotone speech will negatively effect the audience's perception of the material. The audience will then be unlikely to retention the information. Alternatively, if a speaker appears excited and incorporates humor then recipients were more receptive to their message. As a result, the audience retained the information and had greater understanding of the content (Truett 2011). In fact, with follow-up retesting to measure information retention, subjects that were provided information with humorous examples scored significantly higher than those who were not sampled with humor (Kaplan & Pascoe 1977).

Topics that are generally avoided are best supplemented with humor. Students who were enrolled in "dreaded courses" responded and performed better with humor added to the lectures. Studies suggested that it was the openness and sense of respect, that humor fostered, that facilitated the students' increased performances (Kher et al. 1999). This characteristic seems especially useful across a variety of professions that entail training videos, conferences, or other informative mediums that usually elicit boredom from the audience.

To summarize, the benefits of humor are manifold for both the communicator and the audience. Humor is a multifaceted tool (Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Of its many uses, humor helps create a comfortable atmosphere and, as a result, listeners are more likely to feel relaxed and receptive to information. This reception improves the learning responses from students (Truett 2011) and employees will feel more engaged and invested in their work (Duncan 1990). With appropriate application, the cognitive responses can create positive, lasting effects.

DISCUSSION

Dating as far back as Plato's studies, the inexplicable nature of humor in communication has lead scholars to seek understanding of its use for centuries (Morreall 2012). Many theories of humor have been formed; three in particular are often referenced: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, and the Relief Theory (Duncan et al. 1990; Veatch 1998; Meyer 2000; Lynch 2002; Stirling 2004; Lyttle 2007; Romero & Pescosolido 2008). The three theories offer explanations as to why people find things, people, or situations humorous, but no single theory offers a definitive, conclusive understanding of humor (Lynch 2002).

Humor also serves four functions: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating – and it is valuable to know when to apply these humor types (Romero & Cruthirds 2006).

Using humor in communication can facilitate positive interactions with the communicator and his or her audience. To ensure the positive intentions are reciprocated, the communicator should be aware of the appropriate applications of humor that are

specific to their environment (Lyttle 2007). A situational analysis of the situation or group is crucial (Romero & Pescosolido 2008; Romero & Cruthirds 2006). Communicators should also avoid the use of humor involving gender, race, religion, or nationality (Wanzer et al. 2006).

The recipient's cognitive responses have great value for the communicator. The presence of humor can break down audience barriers and result in the relief of stress (Meyer 2000). In addition, and possibly as a result of tension release, humor can promote group-cohesion (Meyer 2000). In situations where information retention is sought, the use of humor can facilitate the capture and recall of information from message points (Kaplan & Pascoe 1977).

Future studies of this topic will benefit from past decades of valuable insight and research performed previously by scholars. The available information is abundant. Researchers interested in the topic should seek articles that perform primary research that is followed up with post-testing of subjects. Studies with these criteria give thoughtful and extensive findings on this complex subject.

To ensure professional success, it is vital for communicators to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their communication toolbox and be aware of how well-equipped it is. Among honesty, research skills, written and oral skills, posture, and many other available traits in this toolbox, communicators should possess humor. But, perhaps, humor isn't merely *just* a tool in a toolbox. The application of humor is an *art*. A sarcastic remark in front of the wrong audience could be easily misconstrued but an appropriately placed anecdote could bridge gaps with an audience.

Using humor requires a combination of instinct, common sense, situational analysis, and good judgment -all of which can be learned (Vorhaus 1994). It is as if the communicator is choreographing a dance and they must carefully place each movement to ensure fluidity of movement and ease of transitions. The application of humor can either be a graceful pirouette or a clumsy leap – ultimately, the communicator is responsible for the precise execution of humor.

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