

## **A Contextual Model on the Role of Management in Fostering Humor at Work**

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### **Abstract**

*This article discusses the exertion of humor at work from the managerial perspective where it was deem-accepted that humor was avoided in organizations because managers do not like it. Thus, reasons were outlaid from relevant literature and discussed for such hindrance. It was found that the real generators for humor at work are the management itself. It was also sensed that the functionality of humor at the workplace follows a pattern for which a contextual model was presented. These findings steer future research attempts on the usage of humor in the work environment given the usage purposes and styles.*

**Keywords:** Humor; humor at work; managerial humor; humor styles; humor intentions; contextual model; humor model

### ***1. Introduction***

There is often good news on many successful people in their businesses that claim enjoyment in their workplace, unlike many managers around the world who think that performing daily routine and making profit is their primary duty. In fact, the key duty is to create a workplace milieu that encourages the healthy growth of the human resources in the organizations as they are the vital resource. Hence, contemporary management shall encompass activities that espouse such healthy attempts and humor is often of a significant effect. This paper describes the phenomenon of humor at work, its exertion reasons, the usage styles, and the true generators of it. The pattern of humor usage in the work environment was prospected in a contextual model.

### ***2. Humor in Definition***

Humor is a complicated and a multifaceted phenomenon that it does not lend itself to a single generalized definition (Cooper, 2005; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). A general thematic definition was made by the biologists as they had illustrated humor in terms of a physiological attention towards a very sophisticated stimulus (Al Saeed, 1990). From another perspective, psychologists had defined humor as a normal verbal conduit of communication (Cooper, 2005) whereby there is a sender and a receiver with the underpinning technicalities of encoding, noise, and decoding (Avolio, Howell, and Sosik, 1999). Others had elaborated it further by referring to sets of emotions shared by an agent (person) with another individual (target) that is intended to be amusing to the target and that the target perceives it as an intentional act (Hornblow, 2003; Cooper, 2005).

On the other hand, writers had understood humor in other forms such as fun and jocularity where humor was viewed as a holistic picture of any funny activity (Davies, 2002) and the latter viewed humor as a tool for generating laughter (Linstead, 1985; Nevo, Nevo, and Yin, 2001).

From another perspective though, humor is said to deal with incongruity that is disorder and abnormality (Barsoux, 1993; Yarwood, 1995; Barsoux 1996; Watson, 2006). It is said when people often laugh about the things that worry them most (Barsoux 1996; Watson, 2006), which eventually retains their sanity and rational thinking into the proper order (Watson, 2006). Toney Watson (2006) illustrated that in the form of the glimpses of the tightrope walker over the abyss that encompasses different types of threats where the meaning of incongruity is understood in the unexpected circumstances that the tightrope walker might face along his/her walk towards the other end of the mountain and yet he/she glimpses (laugh's) downwards and remind him/herself of the possible intimidations that might be faced if he/she will fall down. This depicts the real life of human beings while they pass through their journey of life and how they address possible discrepancies. In spite of those views, the formal definition is to understand humor in terms of its actions as stated by Romero and Pearson (2004; p. 53): "We define humor as amusing communications that unite, direct, and energize people in ways that benefit the individual, group or organization."

### **1.1 Humor at Work**

Generally, any amusement or an activity of laughter or fun in the work environment is termed workplace humor (Duncan, Smeltzer, and Leap, 1990) but since humor is termed as a communicational medium between people (Avolio *et al.*, 1999; Hornblow, 2003; Cooper, 2005) then workplace humor should be explained in the context of the relationships among the organizational members. For the most part, these relationships can take any form such as weekend parties, birthday parties, sport days, camping and barbeque plans, and others (Dandridge, 1986). However, humor is much deeper than just refreshing activities where it is tied to the sensitive relationships between peers and their bosses (Malone, 1980). Romero and Cruthirds (2006, p. 59) put it in a very general form by stating: "We propose that organizational humor consists of amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization." As a trivial instance, an employee always praises his/her boss by telling silly jokes where the boss, in return, might make the employee his/her right hand and involve him/her in some of the decision making process (Duncan *et al.*, 1990) or might be lenient in giving away the employee few days off without reducing his/her leave account (Barsoux, 1993). Such examples are natural in any work setting that it was thought of humor and work as mutually exclusive activities. Hence, it is evident that workplace humor is associated with relationships among employees and their managers since it is controlled by specified determinants (Duncan and Feisal, 1989).

### **1.2 International Humor**

Humor is part of the daily life activities and yet it is normal to joke around and become humorous with whomever you know but the problem would arise when the receiver does not appreciate what the joke might be heading towards and this is simply because he/she is different in attitude due to his/her background (Davies, 2002; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). A research was held on joking patterns among the Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, and Denmark) where it was concluded that all citizens of one country tell jokes on the other two except for the case of the Swedes and Norwegians not telling any jokes about Danes because the values of the two differ from those of the Danes (Gundelach, 2000). Yet, it is irrelevant to claim that there is an international humor, but the arguments are fostering us to state that there are few jokes and types of humor that does gain international acceptance and it should be deemed comprehended that the acceptance gets more cumbersome when you are heading towards the east (Lewis, 1999). Therefore, managers should consider the cultural, historical, and demographic characteristics of their work groups before they exert humor (Duncan, 1982).

### **3. Humor Usage Intentions**

Humor at work was explained by many scholars in the form of the situations that it is exerted within (Al Obthani, Omar, and Bakri, 2011). However, such groupings were not standing to the real purposes of using humor at work until Jean Barsoux (1993) had provided an explanation of the true intentions for such. From his perspective, humor usage shall be evident when one of the following three purposes is present in the concurrent situation (Barsoux, 1993; Martin, 2001):

- **Sword:** Referring to the action aspect of humor where it is required to persuade individuals to accept some view points. The sword purpose shall allow the individuals to say the things which otherwise could not be said without causing offence and damage to the relationships within the organizational setting (Martin, 2001). For instance, by using humor with your employees, you shall urge them to unify with your opinion about the bad management of any department at your organization (Avolio *et al.*, 1999)
- **Shield:** Referring to the defensive aspect of humor where it is aimed at easing the acceptance of criticism and enabling individuals and groups to cope with the disrupted feelings and the moments of failure (Martin, 2001). For example, a chief engineer stating a severe damage in the factory machines by saying to the managers: 'I think we should pack up and start selling fish by Seattle' (Lundin, Paul, and Christensen, 2000)
- **Values:** Referring to the conditioning aspect of humor where it is aimed at influencing individuals to adapt to a particular role and reinforces organizational values (Martin, 2001). For instance, particular and private group jokes always raise group cohesiveness which accomplishes the broader values of the organization being a sign of unity at work (Duncan *et al.*, 1990; Ford, McLaughlin, and Newstrom, 2003)

#### **4. Humor Styles at Work**

Many attempts were sought in order to explain humor usage in terms of the characterizing styles; however, it is cumbersome since each explanation was not truly providing what it was expected. For example and as previously stated by Barsoux (1993) that humor at work was explained in terms of its purposes but those were not styles per se. Others as in the early words of Leap and Smeltzer (1984) had simply explained it by the topic but yet, it is not evident to be a style of such an attitude (Al Obthani *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, such attempts shall be tied to the attitude of humor not the reason or the effect and yet, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) had elaborated the state by the required attitudes as they proposed the following five styles of humor:

- **Affiliative Humor;** which is built on the objective of amusing others and building relationships in order to have a positive environment
- **Self-Enhancing Humor;** which is built on the notion of positive thinking in order to cope with stress and maintain a humorous sense during difficulties
- **Aggressive Humor;** which is built on the aim of manipulating others by implying threat or humor that entails using sarcastic and disparaging humor
- **Mild Aggressive Humor;** which is stated in the form of a playful description of disagreement or a notification towards an act or a work practice
- **Self-Defeating Humor;** which is aimed at making the person more approachable by others and that is by using self-disparagement and status tolerance

It is significant to note that Romero and Cruthirds (2006) had built their arguments upon the work of Rod Martin and his colleagues (2003) as they had proposed only four of the previous styles where they had stated that there is only one aggressive style of humor (Martin, Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir, 2003; Veselka, Schermer, Martin, and Vernon, 2010). This justifies that there is no meaning in having a style named mild-aggressive humor since it is a degree of another original one that is named aggressive humor. Yet, it shall be concluded that the above humor styles are the ones well documented but it shall be evident to rely on the original four styles that were developed and researched by Martin and his colleagues (2003).

#### **5. Managing Humor at Work**

In order to manage humor at work, it is particularly important to note that the generators for such humor should be identified where literature had only focused on employee relations and neglected the role of management in supporting such activities in the work environment (Collinson, 2002). However, researchers had assumed that managers disembark humor at their work setting due to rational reasons that shall be argued upon further.

##### **5.1 What managers really do?**

Managers are organizational members who are responsible for achieving the organizational objectives through people and other resources (Boone and Kurtz, 1999). This supports the concept that human skills are important to adopt where much of the managers' time is devoted to responding to the pressures from their employees (Rees and Porter, 2003).

This had developed into structure of roles managers should play in such as, the traditional four functions of management: planning, organizing, influencing, and controlling (Boone and Kurtz, 1999; Mullins, 2002). Abraham Zaleznik (2004, p. 75) had conceptualized the roles in his article as he says: "Managers embrace process, seek stability and control, and instinctively try to resolve problems quickly – sometimes before they fully understand a problem's significance.". However, these roles are equal to every manager but what differentiates great managers from others is their tight focus on employee's capabilities (Barsoux, 1993). As a matter of fact, Marcus Buckingham (2005) conducted a thorough research on 80000 managers over two years and had concluded that great managers are the ones who discover what is unique about each employee and capitalizes upon it. He stated (2005, p. 79): "Always remember that great managing is about release, not transformation. It's about constantly tweaking your environment so that the unique contribution, the unique needs, and the unique style of each employee can be given free rein.". Despite this connotation, Buckingham's (2005) research did not change the functions and it is considered as another attitude lying between the organizing function and the influencing function of management. Above all, these attempts document the fact that managers are viewed as rigid controllers of the system, which proves a sign of rationality in the system being a structured one (Morgan, 1997).

## **5.2 Disliking Humor**

Management scholars had argued that there is no room for humor in management structures because it will disturb the rationality and the seriousness of the system (Duncan *et al.*, 1990; Barsoux 1993; Martin, 2001; Fatt, 2002). Humor and joking are viewed as expressions of the human spirit where it is associated with pleasure unlike the workplace which is meant to be a serious territory not a comedy club or a site for the pursuit of bodily pleasures (Watson, 2006); that it will be leaving employees and their managers with the prevailing view that work is a necessary evil (Bakke, 2005). However, this had been answered by knowing that the most frequently observed phenomenon in any work group is joking behavior and work group humor. Hence, even if management did not support such behavior, you cannot imagine employees working like machines where there should be a way for refreshing their thoughts and that is via humor (Starbuck and Webster, 1991; Barsoux, 1993). On the contrary, there were other serious issues hindered managers from adopting humor in their work settings and those are as under (Duncan *et al.*, 1990; Martin, 2001; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006):

- It reduces respect from the subordinates to their managers which may result in a chaotic environment and abolished rules of conduct. For example, some employees make their managers as the butt of their silly jokes (Duncan and Feisal, 1989; Barsoux, 1993; Barsoux, 1996). The case of disrespect is also clear when humor is affected by the hierarchical structure of management as higher status managers joke about lower level ones which creates a sense of paradox (Duncan, 1982; Barsoux, 1996)
- It promotes sexual harassment as it is the most common topic a daily organizational humor would have (Leap and Smeltzer, 1984); especially if the jokes were directly about females and femininity, which results in disturbed relationships between the two genders (McGee and Shevlin, 2009) and eventually among the employees in the work setting
- It develops ethnicity and racism among employees where it is known that it make up most of the topics of humor in our lives (Leap and Smeltzer, 1984), particularly significant if the jokes were blackish such as black Americans (Foxworth, 2008) or on minority groups such as Italians or generally Hispanic Americans or dumb blondes and so on (Davies, 2002)

Despite the rationality the previous issues might embed, there were few attempts as short answers for the above matters as the first discrepancy was not researched and proved yet though it is claimed by many researchers (Duncan *et al.*, 1990). The second is framed in the cultural custom where a sexual-type humor would not be accepted in the west but could be accepted in the east (Macks, 2003) even though with the presence of diverse religions and national customs that prohibits such a thing which every country or nation is known for it (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006); and if it was mentioned that it has been proved in few research attempts such as in the work of Elizabeth McGee and Mark Shevlin (2009) where they stated that there is no direct relationship between gender and the use of humor because females as males do use sexual humor but the only concern is using sexual humor between the two genders, which sometimes is accepted, especially if they were mates. Above all, sexuality in the workplace might be dimly expressed but it could not be neglected where it would be apparent in other forms that are inevitable, which in fact is a true aspect of human spirit that will always be a challenge for managers to control (Watson, 2006).

The third issue was replied in the same way as the second discrepancy provided the international rules that demeans it (Foxworth, 2008); except for adding that many religions regulate such jokes on minorities and promotes equality among all mankind (Ali, 1995; Al Ismaili, 2004).

### 5.3 Humor Generators

Despite the arguments in the previous subsection, the majority of researches had turned to studying humor usage among subordinates which led to a deemed understanding that the source of organizational humor is the employee (Collinson, 2002; Cooper, 2005) where they exert humor among themselves due to many reasons (Barsoux, 1996; Watson, 2006). Many organizations had adopted this thought as an evidence of humor usage such as Kodak's "Employee Humor Room" and Ben and Jerry's "Joy Gang" (Luthans, 2002; Breeze, Dawson, Khazhinsky, 2004). These organizations felt the difference in performance by observing the joking behavior among employee groups where it was hypothesized that it improves group cohesiveness (Duncan *et al.*, 1990; Ford *et al.*, 2003). Thus, it was evident that the literature is focusing on humor among employees as depicted in Figure 1 where less attention has been paid to management and their role in fostering humor at work (Collinson, 2002). Managers are required to accept humor as a significant form of communication in order to understand why both they and employees engage in humor, and strive to understand also its contributions and dysfunctions relative to the organizational purpose and the general societal standards of work (Yarwood, 1995). Researchers yet had emphasized on studying management and leadership styles as the sources for organizational humor since they are the key players in reducing the signs of the workplace humor pitfalls (Malone, 1980; Linstead, 1985; Duncan *et al.*, 1990; Glasser, 1994; Collinson, 2002; Holmes and Marra, 2002; Newstrom, 2002; Ford *et al.*, 2003; Hornblow, 2003). Therefore, it was admitted that it was a mistake focusing on subordinates rather than managers as humor generators (Miller, 1996; Collinson, 2002; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006).

### 6. Modeling Humor at Work

After taking the above matters into consideration, the researchers had sensed the functionality of humor at the workplace where a model shall represent it in a cyclical form. Figure 2 depicts the outlay of the prospected model where the intention for using humor is explained in the three purposes of humor that are sword, shield, and values (Barsoux, 1993; Martin, 2001). The humor styles in turn, are the ones proposed by the original opinions of Martin and his colleagues (2003) where they had only proposed four styles of humor in their newly developed Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) (Martin *et al.*, 2003). The proposed process starts with an intention as one of the humor purposes which drives the initiator, that is the manager, to use one of the humor styles that should be appreciated and accepted by the audience, that are the subordinates, in the form of an exposure of the commenced intention.

### 7. Conclusion

The paper provides evidence on a research gap for the significant contribution of the management of the organization in fostering humor at their work environments. The intentions of such usage were described with the possible humor styles that shall be used at the work environment. The exertion of humor at the work environment was structured in the form of a model that combines the intentions and the styles into a rational cycle where it will open the door for further research on the applications of humor in the workplace given the model components.

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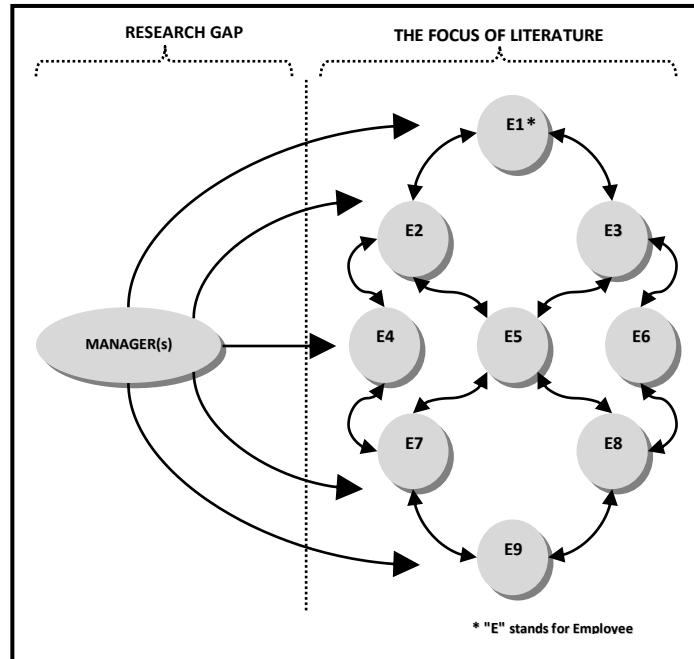


Figure 1. Managers are the Generators of Workplace Humor

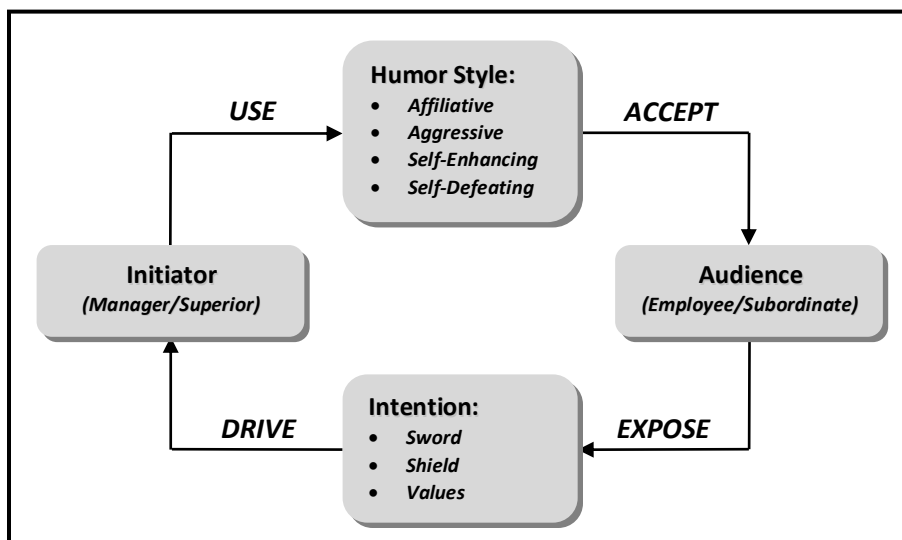


Figure 2. The Humor at Work Model