

A Realistic Look at Why Work is Not More Fun

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Abstract: This study investigated a reported lack of humor in today's workplaces. A survey of 809 employees at a corporate industrial park tested 12 theoretically-derived explanations. Worries about being distracted from quality and safety concerns turned out to be more important than the fear of offending people. The need to maintain an air of competence and authority varied across industries as an impediment. Surprisingly, the results suggest that taking a break for comic relief might be better than trying to integrate fun into the work itself.

Keywords: humor, workplace, distraction, offense, credibility

Introduction

Everyone likes humor and seems to want more of it in the workplace. The evidence for this is the appearance, month after month, of new articles in professional and trade publications calling for work to be more fun. These articles would not find an audience if there was already enough fun at work. The trouble is that these articles do not always define terms, check facts, or develop arguments well enough to allow testing. As a result, their efforts to lobby for more humor in the workplace fail and, more importantly, they remind readers that having fun can sometimes be an *alternative* to rigor and focus. It may be time to think more seriously about humor in the workplace.

In my model of humor, I am guided by our common understanding of the concept of *horror*. Those who make horror films carefully craft stimuli, hoping viewers will find them scary (i.e., experience fear). Producers are interested in screams as an indirect measure of success, but people do not always scream when frightened and they often scream for other reasons. So, producers are more interested in whether the emotional response of fear is being generated. Likewise, those who make humorous films carefully craft stimuli, hoping viewers will find them funny (i.e., experience mirth). Producers are interested in laughter as an indirect measure of success, but people do not always laugh when amused and they often laugh for other reasons.

As a humor researcher, I will not focus unduly on laughter and its effects. Those interested in achieving the benefits of laughter are advised to contact disciples of Dr. Madan Kataria and learn how to set up a Laughter Club at their workplace. That is the best approach to generating laughter, instead of using humor and hoping that laughter will occur without too many unintended side effects such as offense or distraction.

For the sake of this discussion, I will use the following definitions. By *humor*, I mean any

stimulus that is perceived as “appropriately” incongruous (unusual enough to be noticed, but not enough to be confusing or frightening) by an observer. By *mirth*, I mean an internal emotional reaction with psychological and physiological dimensions that may be aroused in an observer who perceives a non-threatening incongruity. By *laughter*, I mean the physical act of repeated staccato vocalizations, sometimes associated with expressing mirth but often performed for other reasons.

Literature Review

Great thinkers (and many others) have investigated humor and laughter since as far back as our written records go. Aristotle, Plato, Freud, and many others have weighed in on the topic. It was anthropologists like Alfred Radcliffe-Brown who first took an interest in humor as a component of getting things done (work).

The workplace is unlike other places in two ways. First, there is a specified task to be achieved and, second, there is a hierarchy of authority responsible for assigning and monitoring the achievement of that task. Thus there is an element of power in the workplace that is different from, for example, a comedy club. What has been done to look into this specialized context?

In 1980, Paul Malone III published “Humor: A double-edged tool for today’s manager” in a top management journal, the *Academy of Management Review* (Malone, 1980). That article was a challenge to management researchers to look into five questions about the use of humor in the workplace: (a) can humor serve as a tool to enhance the managerial process, (b) can it be used effectively by most managers, or only those who are naturally funny, (c) under what conditions is humor appropriate, (d) what types of people respond positively/negatively to humor, and (e) what types of humor are most effective?

W. Jack Duncan responded with guidelines for the appropriate use of humor in the workplace (Duncan, 1982) and, with Larry Smeltzer and Terry Leap, published a thorough review of humor theories, research to date, and the legal implications of negative humor in the workplace (Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990). Since then, mainstream research involving humor and work typically uses humor as an indicator of some other phenomenon, such as generating meaning (Grant & Berg, 2009), handling generational differences (Lamm & Meeks, 2009), enhancing team learning (Walter & Van Der Vegt, 2009), coping and self-worth (Smedema, Catalano, & Ebener, 2010), and a new investigation of the proverbial link with creativity (Lang & Lee, 2010). Little work focuses directly on what humor is and how to fit it in with our usual management research (for a great exception, see Cooper, 2008).

Humor Theory

The word humor originally meant a fluid (as in humid) and is still used in that context when we speak of aqueous or vitreous humor. Following Hippocrates, medical theory in the middle ages assumed that humans were made up of four main humors; blood, phlegm, bile, and black bile. People who were manic were called sanguine, and thought to have too much blood. Those who

were lethargic were called phlegmatic, and thought to have an excess of phlegm. People who were cantankerous were called choleric and thought to have too much bile. Those who were depressed were called melancholic and thought to have an excess of black bile (a substance that doesn't exist). People with a balanced and healthy temperament were considered to be "in good humor" and, gradually, the word evolved to mean anything that puts people into a good humor.

It has become canonical to sort the many theories of humor into three categories. Incongruity theories (e.g., Kant, 1951) argue that humor results from the juxtaposition of the incongruous. These are stimulus theories, about what it is that makes things funny. Superiority theories (e.g., Hobbes, 1968) assert that we laugh at people and situations over which we feel a sense of superiority. These are response theories, about when it is that we will find things funny. Relief theories (e.g., Broer & Walther, 1990) argue that we laugh at "highly charged" topics like sex and aggression, because our feelings in these areas are usually repressed. I argue that all three perspectives are helpful. We do laugh at things that are incongruous or surprising, and ignore things that are routine. However, we laugh at incongruity only when it is not threatening to us (when we are not in a dark alley, for example). Furthermore, the inclusion of issues that are normally repressed such as sexual and aggressive themes will increase the intensity of humor (cleaned up versions of dirty jokes are still funny, but not quite as funny).

Benefits and Pitfalls

So, what are the benefits attributed to humor? There are psychological benefits such as venting anger and frustration that might otherwise have resulted in more destructive actions (Baron, 1978). Also, a sense of humor is an aid to gaining a healthy perspective on life problems (Ziv, 2010). The use of humor can "save face" while correcting a social *faux pas* (Bradney, 1957) or softening the blow of an unpleasant message (Ojha & Holmes, 2010). Furthermore, the shared use of humor builds a sense of intimacy and community (Meyer, 1997).

Another set of benefits is more intellectual. It has been argued that humor interrupts circular and other non-productive thinking patterns (Minsky, 1984). It is widely accepted that the use of humor relies on the ability to quickly shift perspectives. Since this is the same facility that leads to creative problem solving and innovation (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987), it is relevant to the world of business and management.

Given all of these benefits, we would expect to find humor in wide use within management. So, why do we need constant calls for more humor in the workplace? What impediments are being ignored or downplayed in this popular literature?

Humor, in its attempt to push the boundaries and surprise the observer, tends to risk creating *offense*. This is especially true in increasingly diverse workplaces with people who hold a wide variety of values (Schnurr, 2009). Which humor will work, and what effect it will have, varies widely across different industries and workplace cultures (Plester, 2009). Humor, because of its success in capturing our attention, tends to risk creating a *distraction* (Strick, Holland, van Baaren, & van Knippenberg, 2010). We may be distracted from focusing on quality or safety, or

even from doing any work at all, while we might be better off working to improve working conditions (Baptiste, 2009).

Because of humor's irreverence and light-heartedness, it tends to risk painting the joker as less than serious--lacking *gravitas*. It is hard to move successfully from the role of class clown to that of performance appraiser or conveyor of lay-off notices (Lyttle, 2007). The excessive use of self-effacing humor can erode credibility and, unfairly, this effect is more pronounced for female than male managers (Decker & Rotondo, 2001). Humor is often thought to be a valid form of subversion (Westwood & Rhodes, 2006), but authors are noting that it is a "decaf" version of rebellion (Contu, 2008). It may just tend to disarm the anger that should be used to motivate outrage and lead to real change in the workplace (Franklyn, 2008).

Question and Method

Why is there not more humor in the workplace? Is there one main reason? Have we been addressing that with humor consultants? Does the explanation vary with the size of the firm, or the industry it is in?

The above discussion has suggested some reasons that humor might not always be advisable. Humor that goes awry can offend people and lead to hurt feelings or lawsuits. It can seem to trivialize important issues that should be taken seriously. It can detract from the sense of authority and credibility that is required of a leader. The effects of humor are unpredictable and vary widely depending on the culture of the company and other factors. Even when humor does work, it can distract people from a careful focus on quality or safety, or from doing any work at all. My own speculation is that the founders of organizations tend to be very intense people and may imprint that driven personality on the whole organization. Which of these reasons are causing the apparent reticence of today's bosses and Human Resource department to encourage humor in the workplace?

I wanted to find out what employees thought about this issue, so I prepared a survey with four sections. Each section had several statements with typical five-point Likert scales, anchored with the titles Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree. The first section sought information about the respondent's view of humor, and included statements such as "Joking is a safe way to vent bad feelings." The second section sought information about the situation at the respondent's place of work, and included statements such as "We fool around behind our bosses' backs."

The third section sought reactions to 12 possible impediments to humor in the workplace, which were derived from the above literature review and included statements such as "Sooner or later, clowning will hurt someone." This section, and the last one, were framed in a general way and did not specifically refer to the respondent's workplace. The last section sought information about what the respondent thought should be done to improve the situation, and included statements such as "We should leave humor to the comedians."

I prepared a detailed Informed Consent form and secured approval (#29084) from the

Institutional Review Board at Pennsylvania State University. Then I administered the survey with students who were employed full-time at a nearby corporate campus and studying for an MBA at night. I also asked each of them to distribute the surveys among peers and co-workers at their places of employment, and to return those that had signed an informed consent form.

A total of 907 surveys were returned, 809 of which were considered usable. The other 98 suffered from long chains of the same answer or other indicators of having been filled out perfunctorily. In a few rare cases, students submitted several surveys that seemed to have been completed by the same person. To be safe, these were rejected but, for good form, they were analyzed first. Compared to the surveys as a whole, the ones that were rejected were less likely to agree that laughter makes people feel good, or that a sense of humor helps people to cope, and were more likely to favor bringing in a clown to encourage fun. Table 1 breaks down those differences.

Table 1: ANOVA between retained and rejected surveys.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Laughter Feels Good	Between Groups	9.865	1	9.865	24.519	.000
	Within Groups	363.737	904	.402		
	Total	373.603	905			
SenseHumorHelpsCope	Between Groups	10.909	1	10.909	22.990	.000
	Within Groups	428.488	903	.475		
	Total	439.397	904			
Builds Intimacy	Between Groups	6.788	1	6.788	9.387	.002
	Within Groups	653.725	904	.723		
	Total	660.513	905			
FoolingAroundForLosers	Between Groups	3.869	1	3.869	3.876	.049
	Within Groups	898.357	900	.998		
	Total	902.226	901			
Bring In A Clown	Between Groups	11.185	1	11.185	10.566	.001
	Within Groups	955.968	903	1.059		
	Total	967.154	904			

Results

The main reason given for not having more humor in the workplace was a desire to stay focused on quality, and then on safety. The next reason to avoid humor in the workplace was a need for clients to see the company as serious. Avoiding offense, and specifically fearing lawsuits, seemed much less important than expected. Table 2 shows the average Likert scores.

Table 2: Main Impediments to More Humor in the Workplace

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
My bosses just don't have a sense of humor.	808	2.17	1.024
Management wants to deny us any fun.	808	2.03	.966
The nature of our business is somber.	806	2.71	1.155
Our clients must see us as serious.	808	3.65	1.117
Our founder was a very intense person.	782	3.03	.980
Sooner or later, clowning will hurt someone.	808	2.92	1.060
We have had, or fear, harassment lawsuits.	799	2.93	1.249
We are careful not to offend anyone, ever.	808	3.62	1.159
It is urgent for us to focus carefully on quality.	807	4.39	.779
It is urgent for us to focus carefully on safety.	809	4.04	1.026
Kidding is inappropriate on company time.	809	2.15	.971
Fooling around is for losers; we work hard.	805	1.93	.970

Several people did not respond to the statement about the founder's personality. It may have been phrased poorly, people may not have known much about the founder, or it may just have been a misguided idea. Several people also avoided the statement about harassment suits, which was compound in nature and may have been asking for too much sensitive information. The other statements, though, were rated by a sizable percentage of the respondents.

The first two statements, which were meant to assess workplace cynicism, produced two of the lowest scores. This suggests that there may not be much cynicism to worry about when establishing a humor program at work. It also may suggest that workers would be willing to engage in a humor program that was administered by their own managers, since they seem to like and trust them well enough (expensive consultants may not be needed at all levels). The last two statements were meant to identify any resistance to humor, or attitude that humor does not belong in a workplace. Again, the scores for these statements were very low, perhaps suggesting that there is little resistance to bring humor into the workplace and, thus, little need for more articles advocating it or singing its praises.

Surprisingly, those who worked at large firms were significantly *less* likely to agree that their workplace had a policy of humor in the workplace. The priority of impediments also varied across firms of different size, as shown in Table 3. Using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test, the fear of harassment, the need to be seen as serious, and the somber nature of the business were found to be higher in large firms as compared with smaller and medium sized firms. The desire to avoid offense and the need to focus on safety, however, varied directly with the size of firm in a more-or-less linear fashion.

Table 3: ANOVA among firms of different size.

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Nature of Biz Somber	Between Groups	11.204	2	5.602	4.283	.014
	Within Groups	857.968	656	1.308		
	Total	869.171	658			
ClientsMustSeeSerious	Between Groups	17.467	2	8.733	7.273	.001
	Within Groups	787.762	656	1.201		
	Total	805.229	658			
HadFearHarassment	Between Groups	36.981	2	18.491	12.176	.000
	Within Groups	985.575	649	1.519		
	Total	1022.557	651			
CarefulNotToOffend	Between Groups	30.083	2	15.041	12.021	.000
	Within Groups	822.093	657	1.251		
	Total	852.176	659			
UrgentFocusOnSafety	Between Groups	9.271	2	4.636	4.611	.010
	Within Groups	660.541	657	1.005		
	Total	669.812	659			

Results also varied across industries, as shown in Table 4. Those who worked in financial or retail firms were more likely to report that they had a policy of fun at work, while those in government and education were least likely. The government and education group was less likely to be concerned about attention to details of quality and significantly *more* likely to report that the boss had no sense of humor. This may reflect the sensitivity to personal issues in those regulated environments. As expected, the need to focus on safety was less important to those in business services and much more important to those in health care and pharmaceuticals.

The financial industry had much more agreement with the statements that the nature of their business was somber and that clients needed to see them as serious. This was expected, since people are not likely to entrust their life savings to a firm with Ronald McDonald as a mascot. However, those were firms were also much more likely to report attempts to avoid offense at all times. This focus on avoiding offense (presumably internally, among peers) was not expected.

Discussion

It seems that most people want to have more humor at work, so there is little need for articles month after month advocating it. People know about the benefits of humor. They seem to be less aware of the dangers of humor, so it may be time to stop dismissing those with facile advice such as making fun of yourself or avoiding sensitive topics. There does not seem to be much cynical distrust of bosses in the workplace, so it is probably safe to bring humor programs into the office and leave them in the care of local managers.

Table 4: ANOVA among different industries.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
BossNoSenseOfHumor	Between Groups	15.857	5	3.171	3.062	.010
	Within Groups	830.574	802	1.036		
	Total	846.431	807			
Nature of Biz Somber	Between Groups	31.660	5	6.332	4.858	.000
	Within Groups	1042.822	800	1.304		
	Total	1074.483	805			
ClientsMustSeeSerious	Between Groups	39.967	5	7.993	6.631	.000
	Within Groups	966.800	802	1.205		
	Total	1006.767	807			
HadFearHarassment	Between Groups	34.420	5	6.884	4.512	.000
	Within Groups	1209.931	793	1.526		
	Total	1244.350	798			
CarefulNotToOffend	Between Groups	61.173	5	12.235	9.597	.000
	Within Groups	1022.451	802	1.275		
	Total	1083.624	807			
UrgentFocusQuality	Between Groups	15.962	5	3.192	5.404	.000
	Within Groups	473.186	801	.591		
	Total	489.147	806			
UrgentFocusSafety	Between Groups	64.313	5	12.863	13.147	.000
	Within Groups	785.648	803	.978		
	Total	849.960	808			

Surprisingly, the main objection to more humor in the workplace seems to be that it might distract workers from their focus on quality and/or safety. It is not that they will be distracted from doing any work, but that they may not give it their full attention and may miss an important detail. This leads to the surprising conclusion that it might be better to stop working and take a break for comic relief, instead of working to integrate fun activities into the workday. This goes against everything we usually say in humor consulting.

Again surprisingly, the fear of offending others seems to be less of an issue than we realized. Whether workers feel that they can handle this, or whether they are deluded about how big a problem it can be, the humor consultant who spends half the time on avoiding offense may be just alienating the audience.

In some industries, such as financial services, trust in the competence of the provider is a large component of the product. In those cases, it is important to keep any clowning internal and not let clients see the firm as a place where workers go to play.

My idea of the founders being intense and imposing their driven personalities on the organization

seems to have little merit. If this is a factor at all, it seems to have escaped the notice of the respondents in this study.

Overall, people do want more humor in the workplace and are willing to share it with their bosses as official policy. They are less concerned about offense than we thought and more concerned about being left alone to focus on quality and safety. Humor programs should be used as a break from work rather than as a component of it, and it should be kept out of sight in financial and other trust-based industries.

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