

How to Keep the Office Laughing: A Scholarly Study on the Role of Humor in Workplace Dynamics

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Faculty Introduction

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Nick Pietramale's research explores the strategic use of humor by workplace leaders, an understudied aspect of organizational communication. While humor's role in work contexts has been previously examined, its application by supervisors in professional settings presents unique challenges. Nick's work contributes to organizational behavior and leadership studies by analyzing the balance between humor's benefits and drawbacks through established frameworks. This research attempts to continue and expand the current understanding around effective humor communication strategies in modern workplaces. The study's value lies in its focused examination of humor as a leadership tool, offering insights into improving workplace dynamics and efficiency.

Abstract

Organizational humor has been a heavily studied topic in the science of communication. This research project focused on perceptions and preferences of supervisor use of humor and how individuals went about determining humor appropriateness, as well as how the four functions of humor are connected to and used in the workplace. Data were collected through a survey method, and results found that participants preferred humorous supervisors in most situations, as long as that supervisor was able to use a serious tone in the right contexts. Results also showed that overall, participants believed that the ability to gauge a situation was key in deciding to use humor, but that there are also certain themes to avoid.

It is common to hear that employees might not like or get along with their supervisors. However, there are instances where employees get along very well with their supervisors through a shared sense of humor. This led to curiosity about how employees perceive supervisors based on their use of humor. Additionally, there was an interest in understanding what kind of workplaces employees favored the most. Does the nature of a task affect perceptions of supervisor humor? How do people determine what kind of humor is appropriate? Answering these questions is important, as understanding how and when to use humor in the workplace can lead to things such as an increase in productivity, employee satisfaction, and an overall improved work environment. A failure to understand how and when to use humor however may lead to an offensive, uncomfortable, and unserious work environment. The purpose of this paper was to explore how different situations affected perceptions of humor in the workplace, while also exploring how people gauge humor appropriateness.

Literature Review

We have all heard the word humor used in everyday conversation, but how is it academically defined? Meyer (2015) defines humor as “the capacity to perceive actions as funny, respond to an amusing stimulus, or create something that elicits amusement” (p.1). So how does this definition relate to this research? The question could be asked, is the workplace the right time to be using communication to elicit amusement? Does everyone in the workplace have the capacity to perceive the same topics as funny? Meyer (2015) introduces the idea of the Individual Model of Humor. This concept discusses how one can go through the tragic or comic path based on ego-involvement. The idea of ego-involvement can be traced back to Freud’s ego, id, and superego, and Burke’s expansion of ego itself.¹

Throughout life, we recognize the idea of contextual normal, also known as a pattern; however, what happens when that pattern is broken? When an individual perceives a pattern violation of an event that they understand the context for, they either choose to find humor in the interaction by going down the comic path of ego-involvement or choose to not find humor in the interaction by going down the tragic

¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 1945

path (Meyer, 2000). For example, you are in a movie theater and hear someone yell. The normal pattern is to be silent during the film. When someone is yelling while on their phone (e.g., ego-involvement would be negative source), you get mad (i.e., you take the tragic path). However, if it is during a scary moment in the movie and the person is yelling “Run away!” (e.g., ego-involvement would be positive mood) you may chuckle (i.e., taking the comic path).

Having the context of a situation is important to humor, as humor is found in a pattern violation, also known as bona-fide, and a pattern cannot be recognized as being violated if the pattern itself is not understood (Attardo & Raskin, 1993; Attardo, 2017). This is important to understanding organizational humor in the workplace since, if an individual chooses the tragic path when presented with a pattern violation, consequences may be found as a result of the individual violating the pattern (Grimes, 1955). If a supervisor uses humor, and a tragic path is taken, this can cause tensions in employee relations.

Humor can be a positive addition to the workplace (Lang & Lee, 2010). It can help foster new friendships and help serve as a sort of ice breaker for new employees (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2018). Humor can also influence the perceptions of those in supervisory positions. Affiliative humor, humor used to unify people (Meyer, 2015), was found to be positively related to perceptions of supervisor favorability, job satisfaction, commitment, and organizational pride (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2018). Self-enhancing humor, humor used to put oneself or a group above another person or group (Leist & Müller, 2012), did have a positive effect, but only in relation to supervisor favorability and job satisfaction. Self-enhancing humor was not effective at building feelings of organizational commitment or pride amongst employees. Mesmer-Magnus and colleagues’ (2018) study also found that aggressive humor, which is humor that can be used as a divisive tool (Meyer, 2015), promoted negative reactions, such as employee strain, while self-defeating humor, which is humor used to make fun of oneself (Leist & Müller, 2012), would sometimes make employees uncomfortable or feel awkward.

In a 2012 study, Mesmer-Magnus et al. found that employee humor did enhance day to day items (e.g. subordinate satisfaction with leader and coping effectiveness) such as work performance, satisfaction, and

workgroup cohesion, along with job satisfaction factors, such as coping effectiveness, decreased burnout, and stress. Overall, supervisor humor was correlated with positive perceptions of supervisor performance, satisfaction with supervisors, and enhanced subordinate work performance. Employees were found to perceive a humorous supervisor as warmer, and the perception of their competence had little effect. However, gender had an impact on the supervisor's use of humor. For example, if an employee was a woman, the perceived competence of a humorous supervisor was negative. Female employees also specifically perceived humorous male supervisors as less competent, while male employees perceived humorous female supervisors as more competent (Brender-Ilan, 2021).

A study that looked into employee-to-employee humor found that humor was an important factor when existing employees were deciding if they wanted to work with a new person or not (Taylor et al., 2022). This study also found that when a new employee was hired, existing employees would indirectly teach them what kind of humor was expected and accepted. This integrated teaching is important as there are social norms that are expected to be followed. Social norms are simply the expectations we have for people and situations. Humor was also used to address things that needed correction, which was beneficial as it addressed mistakes in a non-threatening way (Heiss & Carmack, 2012). Additionally, humor can also be used to put clear boundaries on different groups of people in the workplace such as men and women (Clason, 2019), and supervisors and employees (Lynch, 2009).

There are four functions of humor: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. The first two on that list are more unifying forms of humor, while the last two are more divisive (Graham et al., 1992). Identification relates to individuals having a shared script, or a shared sense of humor. Clarification can be used as a way of reinforcing the social norm, or playfully pointing out mistakes. Enforcement normally involves a social norm violation being addressed, or introducing a controversial topic that may be conflicting. Differentiation is used to create division, often by having someone's social group make fun of another social group that they may disagree with (Meyer, 2015). These functions were key when approaching this research, as the study was interested in how these four functions contributed and related to the use of humor in the workplace.

The two research questions are:

RQ1: Does the nature of a task affect perceptions of supervisor humor?

RQ2: In what ways do people determine what kind of humor is appropriate?

When exploring how humor is displayed within the workplace, I have outlined above how it has been explored in prior research. The goal of the current RQs is to explore the association between humor and leadership, as well as how humor would be deemed unimportant. The findings of these questions will answer how different tasks in the workplace influence the use and interpretation of humor, as well as how humor is chosen in the workplace when interacting with leadership. The purpose of this study is to explore the role of humor in interactions between leaders and subordinates in the workplace, which can be seen detailed throughout the data collection and participants involved.

Method

Data were collected using a survey. The population surveyed consisted of 41 participants (N=41) with the only requirement for participation being that they had been employed and were 18 years old or older. The population for this survey was a convenient snowball sample, as participants were asked to spread the survey to individuals within their proximity. After consenting to the study, participants were asked a series of 20 questions that consisted of a mix of close- and open-ended responses. An example of a close-ended question would be, “Do you think humor is an effective tool for providing constructive feedback or addressing mistakes?” and an example of an open-ended question would be, “In your opinion, what are the benefits of incorporating humor into the workplace?”

Results

The first research question asked if humor influenced the perception of a work task. Participants were asked to answer a question that gauged how they felt about receiving an unfavorable task from a supervisor. Table 1 displays these results. The minority (22%) of participants found it more frustrating being told to do an unfavorable task by a humorous supervisor, with one participant saying that if an unfavorable task was given by a non-humorous supervisor, it would feel like a chore, but if it

came from a humorous supervisor then it may feel more like performing a favor for a friend.

Participants were also asked if they felt more comfortable talking to a humorous or non-humorous supervisor about work-related grievances. The majority (68.3%) of participants said that they felt more comfortable with a humorous supervisor. One participant noted that the reason for this was because they felt more confident that they would not be yelled at by a humorous supervisor. There were also responses that indicated a more neutral response, such as one participant who stated that it could go either way, but if a supervisor only knew how to use humor and not when to be serious, then the participant would prefer a non-humorous supervisor. These responses helped to answer RQ1, as the nature of a task was influencing what type of supervisor a participant would prefer. It seems that a more lighthearted supervisor promotes calmness and decreases frustration, though there needs to be a balance between humor and seriousness.

Next, we discuss the results of RQ2, which explored how people deem what humor is appropriate. Table 2 displays results and quotes from participants. When participants were asked to explain how they decide what humor is and is not appropriate, there were many responses that suggested always avoiding things like sexual humor or degrading humor, and that determining what humor to use required knowledge of who would be receiving the humorous message, and from what sender. One participant noted that humor is subjective, and that it was important to understand what was okay with what person when deciding to use humor in the workplace. This helped answer RQ2, and showed that there are themes to be avoided, but mostly people decide how and when to use humor based on the situation and individual that they are communicating with.

Discussion

Table 1. Supervisor Humor in the Workplace

Question	Response Mean (1=yes, 0=no)	Participant Quotes
Do you consider a humorous trainer to be more helpful when starting a new job?	0.83	When they have a sense of humor they tend to make me feel more comfortable and relaxed. As long as they are still teaching me what I need to know, I'd rather have someone who I can laugh with. (response: yes) I'm trying to focus on learning the trade or craft. The person training has the luxury to be humorous because they already know what they are doing. (response: no)
Do you find it helpful being told to perform an unfavorable task by a humorous supervisor compared to a non-humorous supervisor?	0.88	I feel like in a situation like that, being told to do something unfavorable by a non-humorous trainer would make it feel more like a chore and more dreadful, while if it is asked by a humorous one it would possibly feel more like a favor instead of an order. (response: yes) At the end of the day I know it's part of my job description, so I personally wouldn't think of it as anything but my supervisor telling me what to do. (response: no)
Do you feel more comfortable approaching a humorous supervisor about work related grievances compared to a non-humorous supervisor?	0.68	The answer to this could actually go either way, it vastly depends on the supervisor's other qualities as well. Referring back to the last short answer, if all they have is humor then it's a problem. (response: no) If they're humorous, I'm going to be more relaxed knowing I'm not gonna get yelled at for a tiny mistake. (response: yes)
Do you think a work environment that encourages lighthearted and humorous conversations between staff and supervisors is more or productive?	0.58	People are more productive when they're happy or at ease. (response: yes) In my experience, a humorous supervisor can rally employees to accomplish a goal easier than a non-humorous one. (response: yes) They will not take him seriously or respect them. (response: no)

Table 2. Understanding Humor in the Workplace

Question	Participant Quotes
Please describe how you decide which humor is and is not appropriate in the workplace.	I think any humor that does not directly affect or degrade a person is appropriate anything outside of that boundary is inappropriate
	Humor is subjective and not everyone finds the same things humorous. So, building connections and understanding what is okay to say to each person in your workspace is important.
In your opinion, what are the benefits of incorporating humor into the workplace?	The benefits of incorporating humor into the workplace are that productivity is increased in addition to workplace culture improved because of better relationships within employees.
	It makes work go by faster and communication and relations easier among coworkers.
	Being comfortable enough to express humor allows there to be less tension in the workplace. Stress relief, team bonding, and hierarchy balance.
What kind of boundaries do you think a supervisor should adhere to when using humor in the workplace?	Emotional and social boundaries are important to avoid. A supervisor has to maintain a boss/employee relationship without getting emotionally connected or interacting outside of the workplace that may generate to company.
	Humor should not be used to do harm, criticize, put down, or make people feel uncomfortable. Treat others as you want to be treated.
In your opinion, what are the downsides of incorporating humor into the workplace?	Humor can be a distraction and cause issues, especially if the people making jokes are not fully aware of the boundaries.
	There is a possibility of making someone uncomfortable or someone getting too comfortable and not doing the work that's expected.
	Too much humor may distract people from the task at hand and poor use of humor can create unpleasant outcomes if communication is distasteful or negative.

A core part of this research was to inquire about how the four functions of humor are involved in organizations. This study wanted to see how each function benefited and improved the workplace, while also looking at how those functions might inhibit the workplace. In the following paragraphs, a discussion of these functions shows that without humor, tasks and actions in the workplace become more strenuous and conflicting.

The first is identification; this involves bonding over a shared sense of humor. This is important in the workplace, since a comfortable work environment helps promote productivity. When participants were asked about what they thought the benefits of humor in the workplace were, many stated that productivity and workplace culture were improved through the use of humor. Many also stated that it made relationship building amongst coworkers easier, as well as overall workplace communication.

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In regard to clarification, which can be used to point out errors, this research discussed how certain topics or conversations can be eased through the use of humor. One of the survey questions asked if participants preferred approaching a humorous or non-humorous supervisor about work-related grievances. Overall, participants preferred a humorous supervisor, as they felt they were less likely to get yelled at. One participant noted that if the supervisor was unable to communicate in a serious tone as well as a humorous tone, then they would prefer a non-humorous supervisor, as they would be worried that their grievances would not be taken seriously. This was important as it showed that humor was helpful in easing tensions in tough conversations, but also that if humor was the only communication tool used during those tough conversations, it may cause the employee to feel as though they were not being taken seriously.

Next is enforcement. This relates to correcting a mistake or norm that has been violated. This research looked at how humor can improve the correction of mistakes and address wrongdoings. Participants indicated that they would prefer to receive a task from a humorous supervisor, as they felt that the task would be viewed more as a favor; however, from a non-humorous supervisor, the task may feel like performing a chore. This showed the benefit of using humor in organizations, as it can be used as a gateway for presenting tasks that may cause conflict.

Lastly is differentiation, which involves bonding over division or alienation of an outside group. When it comes to this function, there can be both positive and negative uses of humor in the workplace. A positive form of differentiation could be found in coworkers joking about another department, and bonding over that shared humor. This study produced results that helped demonstrate an instance where a negative form of differentiation could be present. When asked about what kind of boundaries a supervisor should adhere to when using humor in the workplace, participants noted things such as avoiding making fun of an employee or making fun of someone's personal life. This supported the importance of differentiation in the workplace, while also showing the consequences of a poor use of humor in organizations.

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One interesting finding from this study was participants' opinions of receiving an unfavorable task from a supervisor. As displayed in the results, some participants said that the use of humor positively influenced the perception of the task, while others said it did not make

a difference. When thinking of the individual model of humor (Meyer, 2015), individuals choose to go down the comic path or to go down the tragic path. The first of which involves finding humor positive in a situation, while the other does not. The responses to the question about unfavorable tasks show the different perspectives that people can have in interactions with workplace leadership.

This research also shows the relevance of ego-involvement in the workplace. The three components of ego-involvement—source, mood, and confidence—were discussed in almost every response to the open-ended questions. For most participants, the source of the humor (e.g., supervisor or coworker) was important in its interpretation. The mood of both the sender and the receiver in a humorous interaction was also important, as many participants talked about how it was important to read the room or understand the person you are talking to. It was also important to participants that they were confident the conversation they were having was of a humorous nature, as was their confidence in understanding the context.

Limitations and Future Directions

Overall, the results of this study echoed the findings of previous research, such as that Lang and Lee (2010). This study showed similar results and revealed a new layer of how functions of humor are used within the workplace. It was interesting to see how certain questions produced results that were split more evenly, such as the question asking if participants thought a humorous work environment was more or less productive. The limitations of this study were a small population size, as well as the lack of incentive for participants to consistently respond with thoughtful, open-ended responses. If this topic were to be researched again, surveying varying age demographics and separating results by age could possibly show the effects of a changing generation in the workplace. Future research should also look into how results would vary depending on the type of workplace (e.g., food service or office work).



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Student Biography

Nick Pietramale graduated in May of 2024, having majored in Criminal Justice with a minor in Psychology at Sam Houston State University. When Nick took a Humor in Communication course, he was inspired to begin his own research on organizational humor for a course assignment. Nick began researching organizational humor under the advisement of Dr. Hubbard, who helped guide him through the research process to produce his paper. Nick plans to pursue graduate school for Clinical Psychology, with the goal of researching topics such as sexual assault, childhood trauma, and memory. He intends for his career to focus on helping youth that have experienced childhood trauma.