

## You're Joking: Leadership and Humor

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### Abstract

This article was compiled from Dr. Heath's dissertation literature review on leadership and humor. Excerpts from the review are used to summarize the connection between leadership and humor.

The diverse nature of leadership makes it an easy target for humor. Although leadership affords a rich resource for humor, it has been historically viewed as a very serious enterprise that demands a sober demeanor. Additionally, when improperly applied, humor can have a very negative effect on a leader's image and credibility. Thus, the use of humor has been discouraged.

However, research has found humor to be more than just funny stories, puns, or physical pranks; it is a complex, multifunction leadership skill that can, if properly applied, reduce stress, improve leadership effectiveness, enhance team building, augment communication, spawn imagination, and advance organizational culture.

For the most part, leadership studies have consigned humor to the role of an unwanted trespasser, but those who practice effective leadership know better. Current research is revealing that humor should not be considered a threat to leadership but rather a valuable resource.

**Keywords:** Leadership, humor, stress, communications

### You're Joking: Leadership and Humor

Leadership has long been the object of supposition. For instance, in the Republic, Plato had a discourse on the training and education of leaders (Plato, trans. 1999). The nineteenth century saw the development of the Great Man Theory (Galton, 1870; Carlyle, 1841). However, the scientific study of leadership did not begin in earnest until the 20th century with the development of the Trait Theory. The study of leadership is difficult, because it is an ambiguous term that is confused with other terms such as management, authority, and control, which are used to describe the same overall concept (Yukl, 2002). Bennis (1959) stated it this way:

Always, it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it: leadership, power, status, authority, rank, prestige, influence, control, manipulation, domination, and so forth and still the concept is not sufficiently defined. (p. 260)

Stogdill (1974) commented that there may be as many definitions of leadership as there are individuals who have defined it. According to Yukl (2002), most definitions of leadership share little in common; however, the general assumption in most of the definitions is the intentional influence of one person over others to guide the activities and relationships of an organization. An example of this assumption is in Chemers' (2002) definition of leadership as the process by which an individual enrolls the help of other individuals to accomplish a common goal.

The concept for the English word humor evolved from the Latin word "umor", which means bodily fluid. Humor, in medieval times, represented the bodily fluids of blood, phlegm, choler, and black bile. These fluids were believed to control physical health and mental well-being. If all four of the fluid levels were balanced, then an individual's mental health was normal, and the individual was considered to be in good-humor. If the fluids were out of balance, an individual's mental health was not as it should be, and he/she was considered in ill-humor.

Subsequently, in the English language, the use of the word humor began to encapsulate the concept of an odd individual with an unbalanced temperament. Such individuals were subject to ridicule and laughter, and in time, humor began to be associated with things to be ridiculed and things that were funny (Martin, 2007). Eventually, the concept of humor evolved to represent a sense of amusement (Online Etymology Dictionary).

The modern definition of humor (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2001) includes the reference to both bodily fluids and a reference to something that is comical or amusing. According to Martin (2007), humor in its current context has become the all-inclusive term for all things funny.

Humor is "...a broad term that refers to anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it" (Martin, 2007, p. 5).

Leadership's divergent and contextual nature is fer-

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tile ground for the growth of humor. The disparities and discrepancies of leadership style and skill are an open invitation to incongruity, irony, satire, sarcasm, and jesting. Although leadership affords a rich resource for humor, it has been historically viewed as a very serious enterprise that demands a sober demeanor (Bakhtin, 1968; Bremmer, 1997; Collinson, 2004).

Plato (1999) was very critical of humor. In the *Republic*, Plato stated that young men should refrain from laughter. In his view, laughter, or humor uncontrolled, leads to the loss of focus, control of reason, and sets a bad example (Shelly, 2003). Moreover, Plato saw the dark side of humor and how it can be used against those in a leadership position. Aristophanes' comic portrayal of Plato's mentor, Socrates, in the play *The Clouds* was instrumental in the pronouncement of a death sentence on Socrates for corrupting the youth of Athens (Bremmer, 1997; Brickhouse & Smith, 2002; Shelly, 2003).

Aristotle's (1976) view of humor agreed with that of Plato. Furthermore, he viewed excessive humor as being associated with the lower classes. Aristotle posited that the upper class should show restraint with humor to demonstrate control (Bremmer, 1997).

Restraint in the use of humor in England during the fifteenth through the seventeenth century was seen as the mark of a good effective leader. The suppression of humor showed a leader possessed dignity and set him/her apart from the lower classes. This view was supported by the religious leaders of the day, especially the Calvinist Protestant leadership and mirrored Plato's and Aristotle's thought on the subject. This view of the use of humor was incorporated into an overall set of standards that became known as the puritan work ethic (Collinson, 2004; Thomas, 1977).

Near the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twenty century, with the development of large corporations, management became more formalized and surfaced as a separate profession. In these large companies the overriding concern was with the bureaucracy, minimizing cost, and maximizing sales, and managers were expected to be very serious in accordance with the puritan work ethic. This expected somber demeanor not only permeated industrial leadership but most other leadership positions in society, especially political and religious leadership (Collinson, 2002).

The historical suppression of humor could lead to the conclusion that effective leadership shuns its use. However, several modern scholars have concluded the contrary, humor is a valuable skill used by effective leaders (Collinson, 2002; Gruner, 2007; Malone, 1980; Miller, 1996; Morreall, 1997; Priest & Swain, 2002; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

For the most part, leadership studies have consigned humor to the role of an unwanted trespasser, but those who practice effective leadership know better. Current research is revealing that humor should not be considered a threat

to leadership but rather a resource (Miller 1996). For instance, Barsoux (1996) asserted a leader's use of humor makes him/her seem more approachable and can be used as a subtle way of neutralizing detractors. Radcliffe-Brown (1965) found that even in primitive cultures humor allows leaders as well as followers to broach sensitive subjects in a non-threatening manner that otherwise would be interpreted as offensive or subversive. Humor allows small primitive cultures to express concerns while maintaining order and the cohesiveness essential to survival. Bradney (1957) studied a department store in London, England and concluded that organizational leaders used humor to reprimand without offending. This minimized animosity from subordinates, thus maintaining a good relationship.

Additionally, Priest & Swain (2002), in their study of the U.S. military, found that leaders who were considered effective by their followers had an overall higher humor rating than those considered to be ineffective. Even with the military's uncompromising demand for rigid order and structure, humor was still found to be a valued leadership trait.

Morreall (1997) asserted that the attributes of an effective leader include a high level of humor with the ability to laugh hardest when the joke is on him/her. Additionally, he posited that self-effacing humor is most effective for leaders in that it simultaneously communicates both humility and confidence. Morreall also stated humor can work to demonstrate a leader's knowledge about what is going on and is a way for the leader to gain knowledge by listening to the jesting of individuals in the organization. Subordinates, according to Coser (1959), use humor to reassure, entertain, communicate, and pull peers together to strengthen the social structure of the organization. Knowing the current subject of humor in an organization can be a good way for leaders to gauge follower's morale and concerns.

Leadership can be enhanced by humor in many ways (Crawford, 1994; Linstead, 1985; Meyer, 1990). For example, a leader's ability to communicate and to establish a position of leadership, power, and status within a group are just two important leadership attributes humor can enhance.

The ability to communicate effectively is an important part of leadership and can have a positive or negative effect on a leader's image and credibility (Crawford, 1994). Miller (1996) stated that humor closes the communication gap between leaders and followers. As a communicator, when leaders use appropriate and appealing humor, they will generally improve their image with the targeted audience (Gruner, 2007). Moreover, Meyer's (1990) research led him to posit that groups had a tendency to give a speaker more credibility when humor was utilized properly during a presentation. This being said, it must be noted that when improperly applied, humor can have a very negative effect on a leader's image and credibility (Crawford, 1994;

Gruner, 2007; Meyers, 1990).

Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan are two examples of leaders effectively using humor to communicate. Abraham Lincoln's use of humor was renowned throughout the United States and was a major tool used to persuade others and gain support (Phillips, 1994). Lincoln was such a noted humorist that the following story about two Quaker women discussing who would win the Civil War was very popular. "I think Jefferson will succeed," said the first. "Why does thee think so?" asked the second. "Because Jefferson is a praying man." "And so is Abraham a praying man." "Yes, but the Lord will think Abraham is joking" (Phillips, 1994, p xxiii).

Lincoln's wit and humorous stories made him popular in the same vein as Mark Twain and Will Rogers. Lincoln also had the ability to laugh at himself, conveying the idea that he did not regard himself above others, further endearing him to the populace. He used this popularity to gain political advantage over his opponents (Phillips, 1994).

An illustration of Lincoln's use of self-deprecating humor can be found in a story he told at a convention in Bloomburg, Indiana. He began his speech with a story about a time when he was walking down a road and a lady passed him and said, "You are the ugliest man I ever saw." To which Lincoln replied, "I know, but I cannot help it." The lady countered, "No, I don't suspect you can, but you could stay at home." Lincoln knew the effect humor had on people and he used it effectively (Phillips, 1994).

During his public speaking, Ronald Reagan used humor to make a point more convincing. Not only did he use humor to make his points more persuasive, he also used it to entertain and draw in his audience. According to Meyer (1990), Reagan's effective use of humor played an important role in his being labeled the "Great Communicator."

Additionally, Reagan was noted for using humor to ease his audience's tension and increase their confidence in him. For example, when speaking on the intensely argued touchy issue of high government spending, Reagan stated: "It's easy to lose touch of reality," ... "when it's other people's money we're spending and there are so many things you want to do" (Meyer, 1990, p. 82). With this humorous statement, Reagan eased the audience's tension and went on to explain how government spending could be reduced.

Meyer (1990) labeled Reagan's humor a "Velvet Weapon." During the 1976 presidential campaign, Reagan used humor to admonish government bureaucracy:

There are 8000 separate federal record-keeping systems currently keeping tabs on us. Yet, despite all of this, Social Security could still send a letter to a fellow in New Jersey, telling him he was dead, and thus terminating his payments. When he showed up very much alive, they still couldn't figure out a way to reinstate his payments. But they did tide him over for awhile: they gave him \$700 for his funeral! (p. 83)

took a very negative view of government mismanagement, but did so in a humorous nonthreatening way. Thus, he got his rebuke in and still engaged the audience.

Linstead (1985) stated that the power of humor to effect change cannot be underestimated. Lincoln and Reagan understood the power of humor and used it to their full advantage.

Humor delivers messages in ways that other forms of communication cannot. It enables messages to be sent and received in a way that otherwise would be hurtful or resented (Kahn, 1989). For leaders, receiving messages is as important as sending them. In this case humor can be particularly useful when communicating with leaders in certain situations. Kets de Vries (1990) suggested that every leader needs a jester. This is a subordinate that takes on the role of the "organizational fool", one who can speak out on sensitive issues in a humorous way that reduces hostility and tension. The "organizational fool" is a counter to the propensity of a leader to become self-absorbent and arrogant.

Humor does not just augment a leader's communication skills; it can help establish leadership, power, and status in groups. Lundburg (1969) and Traylor (1973) found that humor is both friendly and antagonistic. This view reinforces that humor is an important aspect when defining and enforcing leadership, power, and status in groups.

Lundburg (1969) posited that peers joke more than their leaders. Furthermore, if an individual of lower status was the focus of a leader's joke, the lower status individual did not joke back, and if his/her peers were present, the joke was not considered funny. Additionally, if an individual of lower status initiated a joke on an individual of higher status, the joke was not considered funny.

Traylor (1973) came to similar conclusions after his study of a group from an oil exploration company in Alaska. He found that an individual's status in a group and his/her joking behavior are inversely related. Lundburg (1969) and Traylor's (1973) work serves to highlight the complicated relationship between leadership and humor.

Currently, humor has come to be seen as an important leadership skill and organizational attribute (Collinson, 2002; Miller, 1996; Morreall, 1997). However, there is evidence that improperly employed leadership humor can be destabilizing. Humor can be especially harmful when it is used by a leader to express prejudices, or as a form of harassment (Bakhtin, 1968; Filby, 1992). Collinson (2004) warned that even though humor can have a stabilizing effect and give followers a sense of belonging, it can backfire on a leader. This potential dark side of humor further highlights the complicated relationship between leadership and humor.

Humor, properly utilized, is an important learnable skill that can link the leader to the followers, and it can be used by a leader to create a positive work environment

(Crawford, 1994). It is evident that the relationship between leadership and humor is complicated, but the right combination of the two has great potential. Thus, leaders should take humor seriously and develop ways to use it effectively (Crawford, 1994; Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990; Linstead, 1985; Meyer, 1990; Phillips, 1994).

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