

The Use of Humor in the Workplace

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Executive Overview

Humor is a common element of human interaction and therefore has an impact on work groups and organizations. Despite this observation, managers often fail to take humor seriously or realize its numerous benefits. Humor is more than just funny concepts; it represents a multifunctional management tool that can be used to achieve many objectives. This article describes how managers can use humor to reduce stress and enhance leadership, group cohesiveness, communication, creativity, and organizational culture. Specifically, we suggest humor styles that are best suited to realize these outcomes. Additionally, the effect of humor on organizational outcomes is moderated by individual differences such as ethnicity and gender. Much like selecting the proper tool from a toolkit, managers can select the appropriate humor style suitable for the desired organizational outcome, adjust for individual differences, and achieve positive organizational outcomes.

Introduction

Despite the belief that business is serious, humor can lighten the mood within organizational environments and make work life more enjoyable. Within work groups, which are fundamentally driven by the rules of human interaction, understanding the multifunctional role of humor in organizations can actually contribute to effective management of personnel. Indeed, the proper use of organizational humor can provide valuable benefits to organizations—and even more valuable tools to management for motivating staff, communicating effectively, and mitigating discord.

Humor itself is comprised of many facets and styles. Often considered only informally as an approach for communicating levity, there is actually a science to humor, one that can be effectively applied as a serious tool for managers and leaders within organizations. It can be used for more than simply joking and laughing or building camaraderie; it can serve as a toolkit, complete with a range of specific tools that can be selectively used and applied by management.

This article explores the ways in which managers can use humor to achieve a number of organizational outcomes, including reducing stress

and enhancing leadership, increasing group cohesiveness, improving communication, fostering creativity, and building organizational culture. We identify the various styles of humor as defined in research and indicate which styles are best suited to achieve specific outcomes for managers and leadership. Our analysis also considers the role of individual differences, on the basis of gender or race/ethnicity, for example, in selecting appropriate humor styles within professional settings.

Role of Humor

Humor is a basic element of human interaction, as evidenced by its role in numerous social entities as diverse as fraternities (Lyman 1987), Indian tribes, (Kennedy 1970) and police departments (Holdaway 1988). Humor is also an important part of the organizational culture of successful companies such as Ben & Jerry's (Castelli 1990), Southwest Airlines (Barbour 1998), Sun Microsystems, and Kodak (Caudron). Katherine Hudson, CEO of the Brady Corporation, suggests that humor can “foster *esprit de corps*. . .spark innovation. . .increase the likelihood that unpleasant tasks will be accomplished. . .[and] relieve stress” (Hudson 2001).

It seems reasonable to describe the current

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business environment as stressful. Increased competition, due in part to globalization, has led organizations to emphasize the need for innovation and creativity. Concurrently, organizational commitment is often low, and turnover is a significant problem that may contribute to teams with weak social bonds. Increasing diversity in the workplace can be not only a source of new ideas but also a source of conflict if not managed appropriately. Given these factors, and others, it is a challenge to create or maintain healthy social systems in organizations.

Humor has the potential to remedy some of these problems and promote healthy social relations in the workplace. Humor supports attempts to build group cohesion, enhance communication (Meyer 1997), boost subordinate satisfaction (Decker 1987), contribute to higher productivity (Avolio et al. 1999), and increase creativity (Brotherton 1996). Researchers have also discovered that humor is constructive in creating and maintaining organizational culture (Clouse & Spurgeon 1995), promoting leadership effectiveness (Decker & Rotondo 2001), and in generating camaraderie (Vaill 1989).

A Definition of Humor

Humor is “any communicative instance which is perceived as humorous” (Martineau 1972) and consists of nonverbal and verbal communications which produce a “positive cognitive or affective response from listeners” (Crawford 1994). Consistent with these definitions, we propose that organizational humor consists of *amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization*. This definition is general enough to allow for the possibility that one side of a humor exchange can find something funny while the other side does not. A discussion of this possibility is provided in a subsequent section. To illustrate how organizations can benefit from humor, we assume that humor is funny to all participants in the humor exchange.

For one to understand humor’s dynamic nature, it is necessary to apply a multi-dimensional conceptualization of humor. Researchers have recently proposed four humor styles suitable for

this purpose (Martin et al. 2003). Although the proposed humor styles are dispositional characteristics, we propose using them in terms of the initiator’s intention and behavior. It is possible to employ any of these humor styles in combination and to varying degrees. Individuals can also use a particular humor style in one situation and another style in a different situation. While these styles are not exhaustive, they have been selected due to their comprehensive nature. Below is a brief description of each humor style. More information about the humor styles will be provided in the sections that follow.

Affiliative Humor

People who use affiliative humor joke around with others and attract them with forms of humor that focus on enhancing social interaction. Examples of affiliative humor include funny stories particular to a group, inside jokes, and good-natured practical jokes that are traditionally played on people during social events. Individuals who exhibit this behavior are liked by others and are usually perceived as non-threatening (Vaillant 1977). By utilizing this style of non-hostile and affirming humor, one can lessen interpersonal tensions and aid in relationship building (Martin et al. 2003). Affiliative humor is like a social lubricant that facilitates interpersonal interaction and creates a positive environment. We assume that when affiliative humor is employed in organizations, the initiator’s intention is usually to bring people together.

Self-Enhancing Humor

People who exhibit self-enhancing humor have a humorous view of life and are not overly distressed by its inevitable tribulations. This humor style is a coping mechanism for dealing with stress, which assists in maintaining a positive perspective. Self-enhancing humor is negatively related to neuroticism and positively related to self-esteem and favorable emotions. We posit that when this type of humor is used in organizations, the initiator’s intention is to enhance his/her image relative to others in the group or organization. Lastly, this humor style is centered more on the individual

when compared to affiliative humor (Martin et al. 2003).

Aggressive Humor

Individuals who employ aggressive humor often aim to manipulate others by means of an implied threat of ridicule (Janes & Olsen 2000). Aggressive humor can be used to victimize, belittle, and cause others some type of disparagement (Zillman 1983). This style of humor is consistent with superiority theory, which postulates that people make themselves feel better at another's expense in order to achieve, or perceive that they have achieved, higher rank or status (de Koning & Weiss). Aggressive humor is negatively related to agreeableness and conscientiousness while positively related to neuroticism (Martin et al. 2003).

Mild Aggressive Humor

We believe that mild aggressive humor can have positive functions. For example, researchers have discovered that observing other people being ridiculed is related to conforming behaviors, which is constructive in cohesive teams (Janes & Olsen 2000). When manifested as satire or teasing, mild aggressive humor can communicate a forceful reprimanding message but with a humorous and positive tone (Martineau 1972; Meyer 1997). It also allows one to express disagreement and conflict without negative affect since the message is delivered in a playful manner (Kahn 1989).

Self-Defeating Humor

People who utilize self-defeating humor ridicule themselves in an attempt to amuse and seek acceptance from others (Martin et al. 2003). Our position is that people who use a moderate amount of this humor style in organizations often desire to reduce their status level and make themselves more approachable. Specific information about how this is achieved will be provided in subsequent sections.

Organizational Outcomes

There are several areas in the humor literature that are relevant to the field of management: group cohesiveness, communication, stress, creativity, organizational culture, and leadership.

Although previous researchers have discussed how humor, in general, can be used in organizations, we describe how specific humor styles can be applied to pursue specific organizational outcomes. The following sections describe how humor can benefit managers and organizations in each of these areas.

Group Cohesiveness

Some factors that enhance group cohesiveness are perceptual in nature and can be broadly categorized as external (e.g., threats and competition from other groups) or internal (e.g., new member initiation) (Sherif 1977). Group cohesiveness can be enhanced through positive reinforcement within a group and the reduction of external threats. Humor creates positive feelings among group members by reducing external threats and thereby bonding group members (Francis 1994). For example, individuals who feel the threat of external competition could use aggressive humor by making jokes about their competitors. When group members deride an external threat (e.g., competition), they are placing themselves above the threat and, in doing so, perceive a feeling of triumph over it (Henman 2001).

Internal forces, such as new member initiation, can take the form of mild aggressive humor. Senior members who feel responsible to maintain group integrity can use mild aggressive humor (e.g., good-natured teasing, ridicule, mocking) with new members to shape their behavior so that they conform to group norms and prove themselves worthy of group membership (e.g., fraternity hazing) (Martineau 1972). When new members exhibit behavior that is congruent with the group's norms, the humor subsides. In fact, just seeing other people being ridiculed can influence individuals to behave in accordance with group norms (Janes & Olsen 2000). This relationship is common in university sports teams. During interviews conducted by one of the authors, college baseball players revealed a recurring humor pattern that emerged each season. New players were teased by senior team members until the new players demonstrated that they could perform comparably to veterans. When desired performance was achieved, the senior members discon-

tinued teasing. The following is an excerpt from one of the interviews:

When I showed up at my first training camp, the senior players met me and the other freshman at the dugout and told us that we couldn't go into the dugout until we walked like a duck and sang some ridiculous songs. When I finally got up to batting practice, all I could hear were taunts and jeers from these same players. It took me about two weeks of practice before I started competing against senior members in base running and hitting. When I held my own with them, I could feel the change in attitude toward me immediately. I felt like I had finally been accepted. The rest of the new players eventually achieved the same level of success and it happened for them [too]. At that point, we all felt like one big, happy family.

Humor also has a positive effect on the socialization process by making interactions less tense (Morreall 1991). This contributes to the development of strong group cohesion. According to McGhee, humor has the following effect on group cohesiveness:

Shared laughter and the spirit of fun generates a bonding process in which people feel closer together—especially when laughing in the midst of adversity. This emotional glue enables team members to stick together on the tough days, when members of the team need each other to complete a project and assure quality customer service (McGhee 1999).

Specifically, affiliative humor can increase group cohesiveness by associating positive emotions, generated by humor, with group membership. This may be due to the relationship between interpersonal attraction and humor appreciation (Murstein & Brust 1985). Successful shared humor is strongly associated with interpersonal attraction; in fact, its effect is stronger than attitude similarity (Cann et al. 1997). Shared humor can be functional in developing a cohesive group with diverse individuals. Affiliative humor highlights the group as an identifiable entity and conveys trust to other members due to its positive emotional effect (Terrion & Ashford 2002). In addition, self-enhancing humor at the group level can be employed to enhance the group members' perception of the group and create an emotional connection to it. Therefore, we propose that using

both affiliative and self-enhancing humor promotes group cohesion.

Communication

Humor is common in many forms of communication and relevant to the study of organizations. Humor in communication creates an open atmosphere by awakening positive emotions that enhance listening, understanding, and acceptance of messages (Greatbatch & Clark 2002). This observation is supported by evidence from the advertising literature, which suggests that humor has an "attention-getting" quality (Sternthal & Craig 1973) and leads to improved comprehension, persuasion and emotional connection (Weinberger & Gulas 1992). Actors in commercials often utilize self-enhancing humor to make a connection with the audience and to help the audience identify with them. In some situations, moderate self-defeating humor can facilitate the speaker identifying with the audience (Chang & Grunner 1981) by releasing tension and temporarily reducing the speaker's status. For example, politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton were known for their selective application of moderate self-defeating humor to make themselves seem like common citizens. Affiliative humor can accomplish the same goal as moderate self-defeating humor when used by group members to focus on similarities within the group and share humor. Therefore, the audience identifies with individuals who employ self-enhancing, moderate self-defeating and affiliative humor, which enhances communication.

One of humor's unique features is that, due to its ambiguous nature, it can allow one to critique without producing negative interpersonal effects (Grugulis 2002). Humor's inherent ambiguity aids in subverting the resistance that people usually feel when they are critiqued because the person being critiqued can laugh with the individual making a joke or funny comment. Additionally, sharing humor is inconsistent with being offended and, consequentially, it facilitates honest and freer communication. Humorous stories about miscommunications promote effective communication (Meyer 1997). When such stories are recounted, they make light of occasional miscommunications while at the same time conveying, through good-

natured teasing and mild ridicule, that clear communications are desirable in the future. Therefore, we propose that mild aggressive humor can be employed to communicate the need for behavioral changes without incurring negative affect.

Stress Reduction

There is strong evidence that humor reduces dysfunctional stress (Yovetich et al. 1990). When making a joke about a stressful situation, one develops a sense of dominance and control over it (Henman 2001), which is incompatible with stress and anxiety (Smith et al. 1971). In other words, joking about a stressful event (e.g., downsizing) makes it less threatening. For example, humor reduces stress in the military by mocking the risk of death in marching songs and jokes. Humor makes people feel that they are not afraid; without fear they feel a greater sense of control (Dixon 1980), which is incompatible with feeling stress. This situation has been illustrated many times in movies in which characters face a fatal outcome joke about their certain demise (e.g., James Bond). Affiliative humor may be applied within a group to ease tension resulting from stressful events because it creates a collective atmosphere so that stress-causing factors are shared and managed by all members. Therefore, affiliative humor creates a “we are in this together” mentality, which is constructive when responding to stress (Martineau 1972).

Self-enhancing humor can be particularly beneficial in reducing stress. In one study, individuals who scored high in humor experienced less stress, responded with optimistic emotions, and had a more positive self-concept (Martin et al. 1993). In a related study, people with a high sense of humor were likely to reframe stressful situations so that they were perceived as manageable (Abel 2002). Utilizing humor in both studies is congruent with self-enhancing humor’s coping function. Based on the findings in this section, we propose that affiliative and self-enhancing humor can reduce stress in organizations.

Creativity

The literature provides evidence that humor is linked to creative thinking (O’Quin & Derks

2002; Humke & Schafer 1996; Murdock & Ganim 2003). Humor promotes openness to new ideas by relaxing people and making them less likely to criticize mistakes or new ideas. This leads to risk taking, which is the basis of creative thinking (Morreall 1991). The lack of sharp criticism leads to a safe environment allowing people to act on creative thinking and implement new ideas more freely. An additional explanation for humor’s positive effect on creativity is that a humorous environment leads to increased creativity by instilling a contagious “fun mood” in which original ideas are likely to emerge (Ziv 1983). Individuals in a humorous environment are more likely to engage in creative problem solving. In fact, research indicates that exposure to humor has a positive effect on creative problem solving (Isen et al. 1987). This finding is supported by anecdotal evidence from organizations (Newstrom 2002), some of which spend significant time and effort to create a playful and creative work environment (e.g., Google, Pixar Animation Studios, and Yahoo).

Of the four humor styles, we propose that self-enhancing and affiliative humor are the best choices to increase creativity. Both humor styles prime one to think in an incongruous manner, which is conducive to creative thinking. Affiliative humor can be used to develop an open work environment in which ideas can be freely expressed and to communicate norms that support creativity. Self-enhancing humor can accomplish this same goal by making light of failures related to new ideas.

Organizational Culture

Humor has been described as an important component of organizational culture (Clouse & Spurgeon 1995; Ott 1989; Linstead 1985, & Fine 1977) by creating a positive environment in which knowledge and ideas are shared freely and interpersonal relationships can flourish. Both empirical (Avolio et al. 1999) and anecdotal evidence (Caudron 1992) suggests that humor is associated with superior performance. For example, Southwest Airlines is well known for its fun culture and witty employees as well as its consistent profitability and growth (Quick 1992). It seems

reasonable to conclude that humor is an element that managers should try to integrate into their organizational culture (Newstrom 2002).

Humor is a valuable tool to communicate organizational values and behavioral norms. Humorous stories delineate desirable and undesirable behavior by highlighting key actions that are reflective of desired values and norms (Meyer 1997). Stories in which the subject is laughed at or ridiculed for engaging in improper behavior indicates that such conduct is not to be repeated. The key factor in humorous stories and comments is that values and norms are molded but without negative affect for the audience. Similarly, humorous comments (e.g., good-natured teasing, ridicule, etc.) are also very effective at molding behavior of new personnel and strengthening norms by drawing attention to improper conduct (Holdaway 1988).

Recent research indicates that supportive and collaborative humor (analogous to self-enhancing and affiliative humor) were used by factory workers to make routine tasks interesting and to solidify close relationships (Holmes & Marra 2002a). Additionally, this research revealed that different types of organizations employ different types and amounts of humor. This suggests that humor is not only part of an organization's culture, but also a distinctive feature that makes each organization's culture unique. Affiliative and self-enhancing humors promote relationships and the ability to cope with problems. It is logical to conclude that these two humor styles would be the preferred styles chosen by organizational founders. We propose that by utilizing these humor styles, individuals will be positively influenced to engage in team-oriented behavior and behavior that enhances the organization.

Leadership

Humor can be used to enhance leadership by securing a person's power in hierarchical relationships and reducing social distance between leaders and followers.

Securing Power. Humor is a tool to aid in establishing and maintaining hierarchical relations, which can be valuable for leaders in numerous situations (e.g., military officers). In particu-

lar, humor is constructive for individuals to secure power. People who occupy high-status roles joke at a higher rate than those of lesser status and tend to be more successful at eliciting laughter from others (Robinson & Smith-Lovin 2001). Additionally, when a high-status individual jokes, he or she is likely to choose someone of lower status as the focus of the joke (Cosser 1959). Using humor is a unique privilege in power relationships, and it is applied to demonstrate the initiator's power over others (Holmes & Marra 2002b). For example, teasing or mocking lower status employees is an effective method to gain behavioral compliance (Dwyer 1991). This is common in the military where drill sergeants, the ultimate power figures in a new recruit's life, use teasing, mocking and ridicule to reinforce their power position over recruits and to make them behave like soldiers. In essence, humor is the privilege of individuals with authority (Goffman 1961), and people in authority can utilize humor to define their status and elucidate power relations (Smeltzer & Leap 1988). Aggressive humor best fits this organizational outcome because it can assist leaders to solidify their position in the hierarchy by demonstrating power over subordinates.

In contrast, leaders are often granted power from people above them in their hierarchy. Securing power from influential groups or individuals can be facilitated by establishing positive relations with them. Self-enhancing humor is beneficial when addressing higher status people by assisting the initiator to ingratiate a superior or group (e.g., upper management). Specifically, self-enhancing humor facilitates the leader's acquisition of power from superiors by increasing the leader's appeal.

Earlier, it was suggested that self-defeating humor is functional in lowering the speaker's status and causing the speaker to appear more approachable. However, in some situations in which credibility is crucial, using self-defeating humor is counterproductive. If a member of the same status group or higher is present, the initiator of the joke will likely refrain from self-defeating humor because doing so would reflect adversely on the initiator's credibility (Cosser 1959). In such a situation, if an individual employs self-defeating humor to put others at ease, it can prevent others from taking the

individual seriously. The leader may be perceived as too playful and not serious, which is inconsistent with leadership status or a person in a power position. Research indicates that self-defeating humor is negatively related to power (Goodchilds 1959). Therefore, self-defeating humor inhibits securing power from superiors when maintaining credibility is important.

Reducing Social Distance. While higher status is important for many leadership roles, it can create social distance between leaders and followers. In some leadership situations (e.g., participative leadership), this may be undesirable. Humor reduces social distance by identifying similarities between people (Graham 1995) such as intelligence, needs, values, etc. (Murstein & Brust 1985). The application of humor by leaders is one method to reduce social distance and promote identification with employees (Smith & Powell 1988). Humor reduces the importance of status by equalizing the supervisor and subordinate's status (Vinton 1989). The choice of affiliative humor is quite appropriate in reducing social distance because it causes followers to perceive the leader as being part of the group by focusing on shared humor. Self-defeating humor also reduces social distance between leaders and followers. Research indicates that followers rated their leaders as less stressful, more supportive of participation, and more open to communication when they utilized slight self-defeating humor (Smith & Powell 1988). This type of humor is used by political leaders to make themselves appealing and temporarily reduce status differences (Meyer 1990). Humor promotes leader effectiveness, relationship-building behaviors with subordinates (Decker & Rotundo 2001), and contributes to higher satisfaction ratings by subordinates (Decker 1987). Therefore, we propose that when combined, affiliative and moderate self-defeating humor reduce social distance between leaders and subordinates.

Individual Differences

Humor is a universal phenomenon that is practiced across different countries, religions, ethnic groups, nationalities, and tribes across the world (Apte 1985). Despite this fact, there are

differences in how humor is enacted and understood due to ethnic and gender differences (Duncan et al. 1990). Thus, the humor initiator must be aware of the audience's composition, because humor that is expressed at the expense of another person or group will tend to alienate that person or group. Additionally, the initiator is also affected by individual differences. While there are many moderators, ethnicity and gender were chosen because they are the most significant demographic characteristics in organizations. Understanding these moderators will provide value to practitioners and researchers alike.

Ethnicity

In today's increasingly diverse business environment, managers must understand how ethnic groups react to various forms of communication, including humorous exchanges. Humor styles vary according to ethnicity, and the differences can be significant (Alden & Hoyer 1993). Ethnic humor, especially in the organizational setting, has the potential to create negative affect and conflict (Clouse & Spurgeon 1995). Humor does not have to be intentionally negative or aggressive in order to offend. The initiator must first consider the audience's ethnic composition prior to selecting humor content and style. For example, interpersonal conflict would likely result if a specific ethnic group is the subject of a joke and a member of that group is present. An exception to this example may be when the initiator is of the same ethnic background as the subject of the joke (Decker 1987). Therefore, ethnic humor in a mixed ethnicity group will likely alienate the audience, cause interpersonal conflict and inhibit organizational outcomes. This being the case, ethnic humor should be avoided in the workplace.

Contingent on the ethnic background of audience members, certain humor styles can be detrimental to interpersonal relations (Maples et al. 2001). For example, a manager who is addressing a group of workers from a high power distance society should avoid self-defeating humor or affiliative humor. In societies that score high in power distance, individuals with power tend to have feelings of high self-worth and strive to maintain, or even increase, power distance (Hofstede 1984)

by elevating themselves above others to gain a feeling of superiority (Nevo 1985). As a result of using self-defeating and affiliative humor, the humor initiator could be perceived as weak. Conversely, self-enhancing humor is constructive in high power distance cultures because such humor is supportive of, and congruent with, high status. Managers who match the audience's ethnicity-based humor style preferences will realize positive organizational outcomes. A prerequisite is the manager's understanding of key cultural characteristics of his/her workers. However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper (House et al. 2004).

Gender

Managers wishing to improve the interpersonal quality of their workplace environment should consider differences in how gender influences humor (Robinson & Smith-Lovin 2001). Research indicates that women share humor to build solidarity while men employ humor to impress and emphasize similarities (Hay 2000). These humor tendencies are consistent with affiliative and self-enhancing styles respectively. Therefore, we suggest that when addressing women, men should utilize affiliative humor while women should use self-enhancing humor when addressing men. Failure to do so will make realizing organizational outcomes less likely.

Gender-based humor is usually aggressive in the form of degrading comments to make the initiator feel superior (Lyman 1987). It is reasonable to assume that recipients of such humor would not enjoy it and experience negative affect (Hemmasi et al. 1994). Humor with strong sexual content can also be offensive. Researchers have discovered that women find sexist jokes more offensive than men (Smelze & Leap 1988) and that men prefer sexual humor more than women (Brodzinsky et al. 1981). Gender-based humor and sexual humor, when unwanted, can cause conflict and division within groups. Consequently, when such humor is employed in mixed-gender work environments, positive organizational outcomes are less likely to be realized. Given the high probability of conflict and inter-

personal problems, we recommend against the use of such humor in the workplace.

Possible Negative Effects of Humor

Humor is a "double-edged sword" (Malone 1980), because it can be perceived as humorous by one person yet quite offensive to another person. Consequently, humor can result in a negative and/or positive effect for the individuals involved in a humorous exchange. Additionally, unwanted humor can cause problems in organizations. Aggressive humor, manifested as derision, plays a key role in alienating people in organizations (Hemmasi et al. 1994). A recent article reports that aggressive humor can be used in a dysfunctional competitive manner (Holmes & Marra 200b). When aggressive humor is utilized to ridicule and manipulate in a malicious manner, it will likely undermine relationships. We conclude that aggressive humor of this sort would likely contribute to dysfunctional competition within groups and organizations.

Due to differences in sense of humor, what is funny to one person can spark negative feelings in others (Maples et al. 2001). Negative humor includes humor-based activities that result in repression, humiliation, degradation and intentional or unintentional distress in organizations. For example, unwelcome ethnic and sexist jokes, insults, humiliation, and malicious ridicule are all examples of negative humor (Clouse & Spurgeon 1995). In fact, lawsuits can result from sexist, racist, and ethnic humor, which highlights the cost of negative humor. Additionally, individuals who use too much humor can lose credibility, which is also problematic.

Integrating Humor in Organizations

Our purpose is not to turn managers into stand-up comedians; rather, we intend to help them understand how to use humor in organizations. The paper provides new insights into the extant research by suggesting humor styles which will maximize the likelihood that the organizational outcomes discussed previously will be realized. Affiliative and self-enhancing humor are the most commonly recommended styles. Aggressive humor is discouraged because it has the po-

tential to prevent positive outcomes and likely lead to negative ones. The approach presented in this paper also considers the effect of individual differences such as gender and ethnicity.

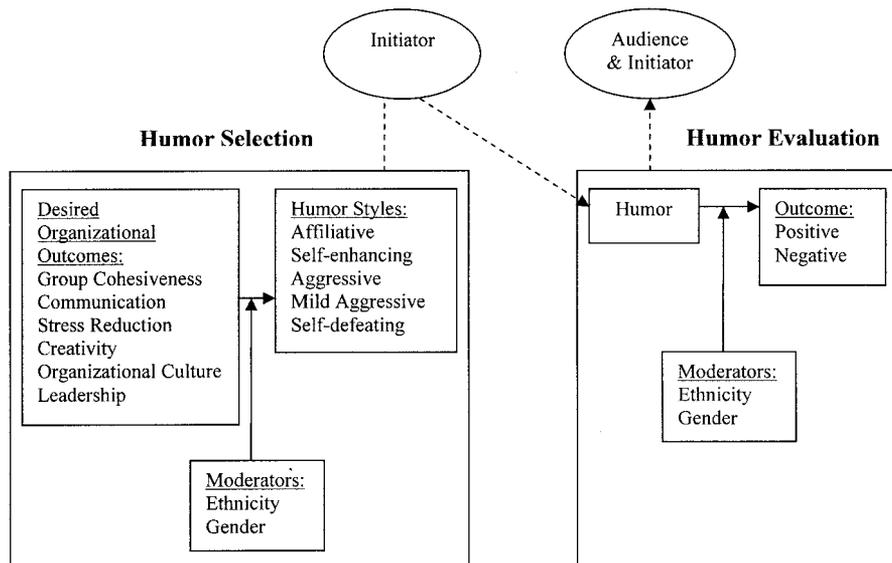
By understanding the relationship between humor styles and organizational outcomes, managers can tailor humorous messages so that they are likely to produce positive results. The Organizational Humor Model (OHM) summarizes the relationships discussed earlier (see Figure 1).

The first step in the model is the selection of an organizational outcome to enhance. Next, the initiator selects a humor style, either consciously or unconsciously, that will convey the intended message. The initiator's gender and/or ethnicity will moderate the type of humor selected. Once the humor style is chosen, the initiator delivers the humorous message. The last step in the model aids in understanding whether the intended outcome was realized based on the initiator and audience's evaluation. For example, if a leader utilizes affiliative humor to become closer to the team and is successful, humor has facilitated achieving this organizational goal. This example is reflective of a match between humor style of the initiator and audience, which is positive humor. However, if the leader alienates the group, one would assume that there was a mismatch and the humor was characterized as negative. It is also possible for

misinterpretation by someone in the humor exchange, leading to inaccurate outcome evaluation. Furthermore, one person can perceive humor as positive (e.g., a leader successfully using humor to gain power) while other people perceive the same humor as negative (e.g., followers perceive the leader as arrogant). As discussed earlier, gender and ethnicity will affect the audience and initiator's evaluation. Finally, feedback from the outcome may be incorporated in future humor attempts and evaluations. An implicit assumption in the model is that an optimal level of humor is being used so that not too much time is spent joking and productivity is not reduced.

To realize the benefits of humor, organizations can apply the OHM to develop humor-training seminars for managers and team members. For example, modules can be designed to teach participants how to select appropriate humor styles, how to recognize gender and ethnic differences in humor, and how to match humor styles to particular organizational outcomes. The ideas from this paper can be utilized for organizational change interventions in which a creative and open culture is needed. Consultants or managers leading such a change could employ the OHM to select humor styles that are congruent with particular change interventions and the composition of the firm. To create or maintain a fun culture, humor

Figure 1
Organizational Humor Model



measures can be administered during the selection process to identify people who match the humor style preference of a team or the organization. This would likely result in consistent humor within the organization and lay the foundation for a unique culture similar to that of Southwest Airlines.

Jokes and funny stories can be employed most successfully by personnel who have humor delivery skills, but humor is not restricted to such people. Organizational humor can take many forms, some of which require little comedic talent. Comic strips like Dilbert or video segments from funny movies can be utilized by people with poor humor delivery skills. Such forms of humor could be used by personnel to "break the ice" at meetings and daily activities. If the goal is to reduce power distance between hierarchical levels, managers and supervisors could participate in pre-planned practical jokes. For example, one of the authors posed as a water balloon target to raise money for The March of Dimes. Lastly, humor is valuable in its own right. It provides pleasure in what can sometimes be a rather boring situation. With some careful thought and preparation, anyone can be successful at using humor appropriately in organizational settings.

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