

Did You Hear the One About? A Look at Leadership Humor

By Chris Hamstra



Twenty pairs of eyes glared at me as we began the mandatory training. The expressions of the veteran employees told me exactly how they felt; some were angry, some were bored, a few were resigned, and a few even feigned interest in the material. Then there was Cindy. The laser beams shooting from her eyes were full of defiance and hostility and burned the back of my skull as we began the ice-breaker activity. Moving around the room she made her feelings well know by vocalizing an off color comment about the required training.....and my family. As the class sat in stunned silence, I looked her in the eyes, laughed and offered my own comment about the required training.....and my family. Immediately I heard a giggle from behind me. Then a chuckle was quickly stuffed by embarrassment. With my eyes still on Cindy, one person finally let out a full belly laugh and soon the whole class was roaring. Surprisingly the twenty pairs of eyes that pierced me with disdain were engaged and ready to learn. Twenty potential enemies turned a corner and became my friends. At that moment I also turned a corner in my understanding about the power of humor as a leader. Humor is an underdeveloped and underutilized tool in leadership and business. An appropriate and effective use of humor has the ability to positively influence individuals and groups.

Research on Humor

Winston Churchill once said that “A joke is a very serious thing.” Common sense says that humor and a full-fledged belly laugh is good for an individual’s body and soul. Past research about the physical and psychological benefits of humor are well researched and established in medical literature. The physical benefits of humor and laughter include: (1) exercising and relaxing muscles, (2) better respiration, (3) stimulating circulation, and even (4) an increased ability for our body to defend diseases. In addition there are several psychological benefits of humor. Berk (2002) points out eight benefits of humor including reducing the feelings of: (1) anxiety, (2) tension, (3) stress, (4) depression,

and (5) loneliness while (6) improving self-esteem, (7) restoring hope, and (8) energy. At a fundamental level a basic benefit of humor is that it allows individuals to detach and cope with a particular situation.

Along with the physical and psychological benefits, humor has also been found to be a powerful tool with individuals and groups. While the academic research continues, Avolio, Howell, and Sosik (1999) found that transformational leadership was improved through a positive and appropriate use of humor (p. 223). If a key component of effective leadership is “facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish a shared objective” (Yukl, 2006, p. 8), then humor is an important tool to have at our disposal. As engaged and transforming leaders, how many of us want to engage with those we work with to reduce anxiety, tension and stress while restoring hope and energy in the workplace?

How Humor Works

To understand the practical application of leadership humor it is important to define and understand the process of humor. I laugh... the academic elite needs to make the common sense point that laughter is a *human* phenomenon (Provine & Fischer, 1989). For some reason I can't see our Labrador retriever and the Pit Bull across the street making jokes about the squirrel that runs between our yards. Even with these common sense assumptions still another article suggests the field is a rich area for research because of humor's “pervasiveness in human interaction, and its complexity, which makes understanding it so challenging and worthy of exploration” (Robert & Yan, 2005, p. U1).

The three major theoretical foundations of humor and laughter include: tension-reducing, superiority, and incongruity (Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2009). The incongruity approach is the most popular and the most relevant to the field of leadership. Duncan and Feisal (1989) define humor as “any type of communication that intentionally creates incongruent meanings and thereby causes laughter” (p. 19). The incongruity perspective offers a model about understanding humor and leadership because the mental process and stimulation that occurs in our brains is the same. At a basic level incongruity is the juxtaposition of the *expected content* and the *unexpected twist*. For example the simple joke, 'Why does a golfer wear two pairs of pants? In case he gets a hole in one' highlights the two steps of incongruity and provides a bridge to understanding leadership. The expected content: a golfer scoring a hole in one; is contrasted with the absurd notion of wearing two pairs of pants. This mental process of working through the joke is similar to the mental process of effective leadership. We see or hear a challenge and creatively process how to 'solve' the problem. The humor and leadership processes are similar in the sense that understanding humor and understanding leadership require the ability to analyze a problem and manipulate the idea to come up with a creative solution. Berk (2002) links the two stages of humor and leadership by suggesting that the first step is recognition of the incongruity in

the humor, which resembles the identifying problem. The second step is resolving and understanding the punch line, which is similar to leadership problem solving.

Using Humor – Cautions but Try It!

Malone (1980) notes that humor is a double-edged tool in business today. There are still many in business and leadership that believe humor is not acceptable or an efficient use of time. It must also be noted that the use of humor is at its best unpredictable and may be dangerous. It is important to recognize that there is a difference between being a leader and being a comedian.

To decrease the odds that humor may get in the way offensive humor should never be used. Never put down an individual, a member of a different ethnic group (includes race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, religion, etc.), and under no situation should coarse language or swear words be used.

If you choose to use humor as a leader and increase your odds towards making a difference, there are a few things that you can do: 1) Get in touch with your inner funny bone by watching funny movies or comedians that you enjoy. 2) Take time to find the humor in your life and life around you. Look for wacky or misspelled signs as you drive to work or in your email box. With the recent snow storms across the United States I received an email that a local youth group was cancelling their once a year ski trip because of too much....snow. 3) Laugh at and be yourself. Think about what makes you laugh and use this material within your group of friends. A close colleague of mine at the University I work at teaches accounting. At one point in time he required all of his freshman students to find and include accounting jokes at the beginning of the week. I found through my colleague that any field has their fair share of jokes and humorous anecdotes...and that even accountants can laugh. 4) Finally a vital step in using humor and leadership is to practice, practice, practice. I try new material when I'm alone in the car, with the dog or sitting with my young children. An accurate measuring stick for me if my material is gold is when my eight year old daughter rolls her eyes and gives me the long drawn out "Daaadd, please stop embarrassing me!"

While these simple tips may not make you ready to headline at the *Improv* or the local comedy club these suggestions will help you as you seek to influence individuals and groups. American humorist Mark Twain once said that "Humor is mankind's greatest blessing" and I believe that humor can break down even the most prickly personality. Back in the training room during our morning break Cindy apologized for her opening remarks and admitted that she had learned something new in the required training. After the first joke of class she was open to processing new ideas and new perspectives about a job she had been completing for over ten years. While she didn't laugh for the rest of the training I did catch her smiling once or twice and I know that she learned something new. I learned

something new as well through this experience. I found that through an effective use of humor a potentially difficult situation was made better through humor. Not only was Cindy learning, but I was learning and growing as well.

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