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## **MANAGEMENT BY HUMOR: A PATH TO A PERFORMATIVE FIELD?**

### **Abstract:**

At the crossroads of cultures and languages, the meaningfulness of humor is often construed subjectively such as at workplace (Merritt, 2013). Because how humor is understood often varies across organizational cultures, so does its meaning as well as its intensity (Avolio et al., 1999; Davies, 2009). It gives rise to a question of whether it could be used as an effective management tool. Whether does this difference in understanding humor have any effect on employees' performance? And, how does leader-subordinate working relationship evolve under humor use? The proposed paper examines the connection between humor use and performative influence, drawing on the theoretical construct given in "Towards a progressive understanding of performativity in critical management studies" by Christopher Wickert and Stephan Schaefer (2014). They define Performative Effects as "the stimulants for language in order to induce incremental, rather than radical, changes in managerial behavior". Therefore, humor is not always so favorably viewed at workplace by all employees who could misunderstand a joke of their seniors without any fault of their own; who thus could start suspecting ulterior, sinister motives of their seniors; and who could then resultantly get oversensitive and cautious, especially when seeing how their colleagues are targeted and made a butt of joke by their seniors (see Shamir, 1995).

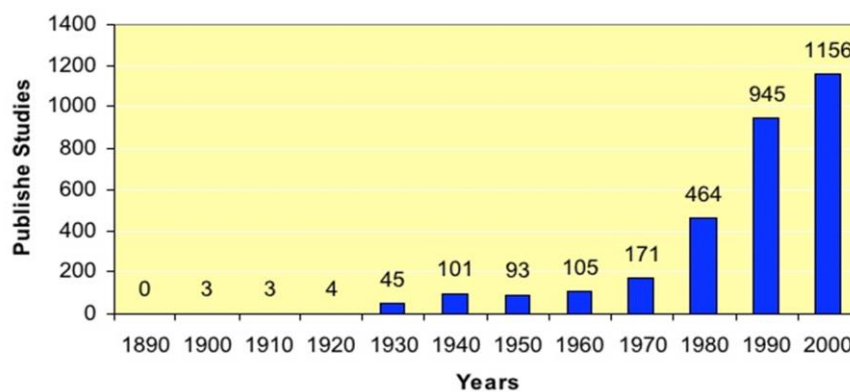
### **Keywords:**

Humor, Leadership, Performance, Management

**JEL Classification:** M12, L53, L19

## Introduction:

Humor and Management relationship is one of the evolving areas under study by researchers in management and sociology. The research context of humor in management is largely a developing one as it offers an exciting field of research for researchers to carry out exploratory studies, as shown in the graph below. Humor has often been a topic of interest for researchers interested in unraveling its power to affect behavior. However, there is a dearth of interdisciplinary work existing on humor as opposed to research contribution made to studying humor in those disciplines separately (Graham, 2010). The importance of humor research lies in its desirable physical outcomes such as pain relief (Cogan et al., 1987) and reduced blood pressure (Martin et al., 1993) whereas, on a social level humor helps in bolstering up individual bonding (Cooper, 2008) and creates credibility (Lynch, 2002) besides creating an easy familiarity with unexciting topics (Fine, 1984). Unraveling humor's power doesn't necessarily mean harnessing it because there are not many studies on understanding the role and impact of humor (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012).



The Growth of Humor Studies (Reference: PsycINFO)

## Construing Humor in the Workplace:

Some researchers have found that humor in the workplace could have consequences for the organization in terms of employees' stress and turnover (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999; Dikkers, Doosje, & de Lange, 2012). This, as Graham (2010) noted, is mainly due to the fact that there exists a difference between "maliciously making fun of someone and playfully poking fun at someone". Therefore, humor as a function could lead to certain negative outcomes such as manipulation (Holmes, 2000), disdain (Zillman & Stocking, 1976), and exclusion (Davies, 1982).

## Humor an Effective Management Tool?

According to Avolio et al., (1999), there is not much empirical evidence available corroborating the relationship between humor and management. However, there is a general perception among practitioners and researchers that witty humor fits well with effective leadership and successful management (Bass, 1990; Holmes & Marra, 2006).

Crawford (1994) stated that humor is the most promising communicative strategy which is least understood. Therefore, there is a need for more research on the two topics to establish a more meaningful connection. Some research relevant to leadership has hypothetically suggested that the use of humor can improve leadership by affecting the motivational and affective states of a leader and a follower (Avolio et al., 1999). Certain studies have been conducted to this end. Two significant ones include studies each done by Philbrick (1989) and Sala (2000). Philbrick's study was based on elementary school principals to investigate how humor, leadership and leader effectiveness are related to each other. She found that the respondents who have task-oriented leadership style are the ones having inclination for crafting humor. Whereas, other respondents that showed relationship-oriented leadership style are those who have inclination toward appreciating humor. She suggested that this is because task-oriented leadership demands conformity with objectives; therefore, humor is used to boost up morale. While relationship-oriented leadership seeks to create and maintain self-respect through affinity with followers by using humor. This study is limited to just providing insights into humor-reinforced leadership styles.

Fabio Sala (2000) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between executives' use of unprompted humor and leadership. He found that those executives who were outstanding in their performance used humor thrice as often as their colleagues rated as average. And during the interview for leadership position, they made their interviewers laugh two times more than the executives rated as average. This study goes to show that thriving executives are more apt at using humor successfully.

Other studies have suggested that humor is likely to be advantageous to some leaders and their organizations but not beneficial to others. As Lyttle (2007) pointed out, "one danger of using humor is the possibility of causing offense". In a diverse work environment it is more likely to inadvertently offend someone (Quinn, 2000). Therefore, it becomes a natural consequence of including or excluding people to minimize the risk of humor-offence when shared in a group. Too much use of humor can lead to triviality, losing its effect desired to affect people's behavior. This may also wear down the aura of authority which is also not something desirable. Humor may also cause distraction from work and compromise on performance standards on a larger scale.

## Humor versus employees' performance:

There are many studies, including some of the doctoral dissertations which include Loretta Rahmani's (1994), Linda Hefferin's (1996) and Constance Reece (1988), to examine the effect of humor on employees' performance. However, there has not been any concrete empirical evidence that would lead to conclude in affirmation as Rahmani found no convincing connection between humor and management. So did Hefferin and Reece as they both found no considerable relationship between sense or style of humor and behavior, but that women, in an interesting observation, were found to like better situational humor than canned humor (Reece, 1998). Humor is unavoidable in the workplace and in order to curtail its chagrin effect Duncan (1982) has given a guideline involving key points: 1. Humor should be used only after creating an environment of trust; 2. Avoid humor belittling others; 3. Allow others to react to humor; 4. Safeguard dignity of others. Humor has a strong dependence on time and place which affect its interpretation and the message to be conveyed. Therefore, it saves an extra hassle and spares controversy by keeping in mind these four points above, when taking a shot at humor.

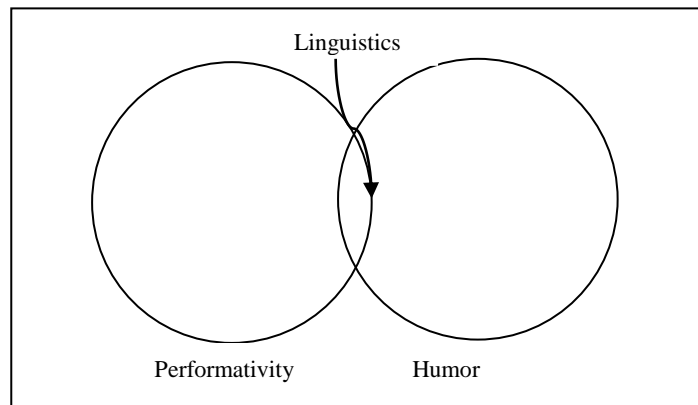
Some other studies by practitioners and humor consultants have found numerous benefits of a humor-driven or humor-open work culture's impact on employees and organization's overall performance. Andrew Travin has listed down thirty benefits of humor in "30 Benefits of Humor at Work", supported by research and case studies. According to him, humor is effective with dealing with humans and may result in improving some of the important characteristics of any organization. These include communication, relationship, problem-solving, productivity, health, and leadership. According to one study (Shaul, 2001), "Humor can help to reduce the social distance between managers and employees", as "[it] facilitate[s] conversation and bridge[s] differences...[it] has been identified as a key factor in peace-building and international mediation" (Knox, 2013).

## Humor Use and Performative Influence:

"Laughter and good humour are the canaries in the mine of commerce – when the laughter dies, it's an early warning that life is ebbing from the enterprise." *Paul Hawkin*

Performativity has been defined as words spoken to act or lead to consummation of action (Dino, n.d.). Performativity is an art of words to perform certain actions by achieving certain identity or state. Humor, on the other hand, has been defined in so many different ways because it greatly varies across cultures and social situations. In simple words, humor is an act, spoken or unspoken that is perceived by others quite funny or laughter-creating. There are five interdisciplinary areas (Norrick, 1993) of humor research, which include apart from linguistic, philosophical, psychological,

anthropological, and sociological. Humor and Performativity are linked together through linguistics (see the figure below):



Performativity and Humor: Linguistic plays an important role both in performativity and humor effectiveness

In the above figure, humor and performativity are connected by linguistics which is a corner pillar in affecting behavior. At Zappos, the unique culture has an immensely positive effect on employees. The company's culture is defined by its strong sense of well-being for customer and all stakeholders. These guiding principles to affect behavior are as follows:

1. Deliver wow through service.
2. Embrace and drive change.
3. Create fun and a little weirdness.
4. Be adventurous, creative, and open-minded.
5. Pursue growth and learning.
6. Build open and honest relationships with communication.
7. Build a positive team and family spirit.
8. Do more with less.
9. Be passionate and determined.
10. Be humble. (Frei & Morris, 2010)

Each above point is loaded with a certain action and the work environment at Zappos has been specifically designed to motivate employees to act on their own, without any compulsion, but with their heart, mind and soul to contribute to achieving organizational excellence!

In order to understand how performativity influences humor, it is important to know the concept from linguistic perspective known to Critical Management Studies (CMS). Performativity discourse within CMS has been introduced with the notion of proposing small, incremental rather than radical changes (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014). This change has been given a new name of Progressive Performativity that leads to influence managers' behavior in incremental steps. The framework of this new conceptual dimension demonstrates two interrelated process. According to Wickert and Shaefer (2014), the first process consists of critical researchers reaching out and collaborating

internal change agents among managers. The second one called “reflexive conscientization” is a process to slowly but surely to increase critical consciousness of employees so that they can realize, adopt and implement newer practices under the effects of performativity—that is, effects of language. Reflexive Conscientization is sort of a personal link where managers interact with researchers and discuss ways to improve their actions and better serve their organizations. In this regard, progressive performativity affects how managers continuously look for ways to improve their contribution to their organization by being open to new ideas which further leads to new rethinking of doing tasks. This is all because language serves as a medium for realization, assessment and improvement, just as for behavior and motivation (Ferraro et al., 2005). Wicker and Schaefer (2014) named this tendency of finding newer meanings for existing things resignification, implying that there is a possibility of reinterpretation to guide managerial behavior in different directions.

Humor on the other hand, is a fluid of energy that engages and livens up managers to come out of the boredom of daily routine. Humor and performativity can be related even more closely by examining various humor styles and seeing how each humor style relates to performativity:

1. **Affiliative Humor:** This style of humor refers to individuals who focus on improving social interaction. This kind of humor involves good natured jokes, funny stories, and inside jokes. This humor style is considered non-threatening (Vaillant 1977) and it helps in reducing interpersonal tension and strengthening relationships (Martin et al. 2003).
2. **Self-Enhancing Humor:** This style of humor refers to those people who have a humorous view of life and they don't let the troubles in life overcome them too much emotionally. Self-enhancing humor helps with stress dealing and in keeping a positive attitude. **Aggressive Humor:** Those who resort to implied ridiculing or making puns exhibit this type of humor. This humor style gives a sense of superiority over others and leads to manipulation and control.
3. **Mild Aggressive Humor:** This humor typically consists of satire or teasing. Through this humor style managers can convey a strong message but with a positive tone.
4. **Self-defeating Humor:** Through this humor people ridicule or make fun of themselves or gain acceptance from others. It is effective when addressing a controversial issue or talking on a sensitive topic before an audience.

## Achieving Organizational Outcomes with (which?) Humor Style/s:

Literature on humor is relevant to different areas of management such as leadership, stress, creativity, communication, cohesiveness, and organizational culture. Different styles of humor can be used to achieve specific organizational outcome. For example, self-enhancing humor can be utilized to create emotional connection to the group. Normally, actors in commercials use this humor style to make connection with the audience. Self-enhancing humor reduces stress. As Martin et al. (1993) noted that individuals who scored high in humor experienced less stress and has more positive self-outlook. Both affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles are effective in dealing with problems and enhancing organizational cohesiveness. Organizations may prefer these humor styles to promote team-building and organizational commitment.

Self-enhancing humor facilitates interactions with high-ups in the management by way of ingratiation. It is also effective for working in power-distance cultures because of its alignment with high status. Positive organizational outcomes are dependent on managers' awareness of preferred humor style of their reports or to whom they report. In one study, it was found that gender difference also influences style of humor (Hay, 2000). Women tend to share humor for building team spirit and harmony, whereas men use humor to impress and highlight likeness. In order to realize desired organizational outcomes, men and women should employ affiliative and self-enhancing humor respectively.

## How does leader-subordinate working relationship evolve under humor use?

Several organizations have practiced workplace humor to tap into "the humor advantage" but some of the notable ones that have used humor and positive fun culture include Zappos and Southwest Airlines. Zappo an online retail company has been known for its creative workplace and humor-friendly work environment. Southwest Airlines besides transporting their passengers also make sure that they have a pleasant and memorable flying experience by making their passengers happy and comfortable on the flight. Zappos core value is "Pursue Growth and Learning", and Southwest Airlines lives by the simple rule "happy employees equals happy customers". While both organizations have an upbeat culture yet they abide by ethics and stick to hiring standards to ensure they get the right fit for their organizations. Zappos believes that way it doesn't have to train their employees to smile because they are already a natural fit for their organizational culture. The sensitivity threshold has also gone up due to right selection of their new-hires having similar personality types to work with. Both organizations have manifested the right mix of elements needed to brand their business, attract and retain right employees and to

attract customers in novel ways. Zappos offers its trainees \$4,000 if they think at any point in time that the company is not a right fit for them, to leave the organization with that sum of money. At Zappos and Southwest Airlines, leader-subordinate relationship has been nurtured on mutual respect and trust basis. There are no performance reviews at Zappos, but rather cultural reviews based on the company's ten core values. And these reviews are not given annually but almost daily to guide employees by giving them confidence and trust. Every quarter, there is a company meeting of all employees and top management where alongside company updates presentations there is talent show, idea sharing, singing, dancing or any novel thing anyone wants to share is encouraged to perform or present. This not only helps with team bonding, strengthening organizational culture but also promotes interaction and collaboration among employees from different departments. A note of caution as Avolio et al., (1999) explained, "managers with active leadership styles were more likely to use humor than those that were more removed from their subordinates", meaning humor effectiveness depends on the current state of existing relationship between managers and their subordinates. Those managers who go by clearly defined expectations and rewards may be less successful using humor (Safferstone et al., 1999).

## Conclusion:

In this paper, the role of humor in management has been discussed. Since it's a new area of research and many researchers are interested in knowing more about humor and management relationship, but still there is a lot of room that is yet to be researched, therefore, there aren't many studies yet to shed any conclusive evidence regarding this phenomenon. Some researchers are very excited proponents of humor and management relationship, while others are naysayers or Doubting Thomases. Humor has largely both positive and negative consequences, depending on time and space, which calls for ethical consideration in the use of humor. Organizations that have created a culture of understanding and mutual respect, without compromising on the performance standards to remain as much competitive as their competition demands, have gone an extra mile to find ways to keep their employees satisfied, happy and committed. These organizations have now realized how an employee could make the customer happy when they themselves are not in a happy frame of mind. The framework of progressive performativity offers the same objectives to managers who by employing humor in their organizations aim to achieve them. These objectives include improving the manager-employee relationship, doing work in a better way, continuous learning, going over and above to better serve the customers, accommodating colleagues and building mutual trust and respect within an organization. Therefore, humor has a strong role to play that can help achieve the objectives of performativity. This is an interesting area for researchers in humor studies to investigate the extent humor could facilitate the outcomes of progressive performativity.



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