

Chapter 4

Humor in Leadership: How to Lead People with Humor

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Abstract A leader may use humor for a variety of relational goals in a hierarchical relationship. Humor can be used to create cohesion and strengthen solidarity with subordinates, but also to create divisions between them and increase a leader's status. The duality of humor functions becomes especially apparent in the context of leader-subordinate relationships. In this chapter, we will describe how perceptions of leader humor and leader effectiveness go hand in hand, partly due to implicit personality theories. We will show that the effects of leader humor are stronger in some tasks and for some persons than others, and that the effects of general leader behaviors such as transactional and transformational leadership in part depend on leader humor use. We will explain various response strategies that enable listeners to acknowledge humor and power differences simultaneously. Finally, we will close by pointing out differences in humor use between female and male leaders.

Keywords Leadership · Leader humor · Transactional and transformational leadership · LMX · Leader perception · Leader effectiveness · Subordinate reactions · Gender

4.1 Introduction

Humor is often advertised for leaders—on the web, in books and in presentations. It is supposed to give leaders a competitive edge when motivating employees. Consultants purport to know exactly which type of humor brilliant leaders use. So they draw the conclusion that any leader can also become a brilliant leader by using certain kinds of humor. However, things are certainly not that simple. Leader humor does have effects on subordinates, yet they vary based on the task, the type of humor and the relationship between leader and subordinate among other factors. In

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this chapter, we attempt to shed some light on leader humor and to point out what we know and do not know in this area.

Leadership is generally considered to be an influence process. The goal is to make others “understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it” (Yukl, 2009, p. 8). Early research about leader humor accordingly described humor as a tool in order to get things done (Malone, 1980). Humor was also regarded as “a virtually undeveloped resource that can contribute to enhancing the satisfaction and productivity of human beings at work” (Malone, 1980, p. 360). Early articles about leader humor described its positive effects and provided suggestions for leaders. The underlying assumption seemed to be that the appropriate use of humor would help one to build a team of highly motivated and cohesive members and would eventually improve performance (Crawford, 1994; Duncan, 1982).

Below, we provide an overview of the functions of leader humor, describe how leader humor is related to a positive perception of leaders, point out how complex the effects of leader humor are, put a special focus on the relationship between leader and subordinate, explain how subordinates can respond to leader humor and, finally, describe how female and male leaders differ in their humor usage. We will close by pointing out avenues for future research and provide suggestions for leaders who wish to capitalize on the positive effects of humor.

4.2 Functions of Humor Use by Leaders

The often-cited notion of humor as a double-edged sword (e.g., Collinson, 2002; Malone, 1980; Meyer, 2000) may apply especially to its functions in relation to leadership. A leader’s use of positive humor has been associated with enhanced subordinate job performance, reductions in subordinate work withdrawal and improvements in workgroup cohesion (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012). Whereas a leader’s use of self-enhancing and affiliative humor styles is positively related to subordinates’ psychological well-being (Kim, Lee, & Wong, 2016), aggressive humor has been related to employees’ physical and psychological stress (Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2015; Huo, Lam, & Chen, 2012), and negatively related to their psychological well-being (Kim et al., 2016).

Creating cohesion, strengthening solidarity, and emphasizing collegiality are relational outcomes of humorous leadership behavior (Holmes & Marra, 2006). Employing ethnographic fieldwork in a mental healthcare setting, Griffiths (1998) found that psychiatrists engaged in humorous behavior to diminish authority and to emphasize a “common ground” with the team. One possibility to de-emphasize status distinctions within the leader–subordinate relationship was the use of self-deprecating humor by making oneself the target of the joke. A leader’s use of affiliative and moderate self-defeating humor may facilitate interpersonal interactions (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) and may minimize social distance by engaging in joking behavior (Duncan, 1984). Self-enhancing and affiliative humor styles have been negatively associated with social distance, and aggressive humor has been positively associated with social distance (Kim et al., 2016).

Humor may be used as a repressive discourse device, meaning as a disguise for a less acceptable message (Holmes, 2000). After being asked by his manager to speed up the team and increase pressure, the subordinate complains that “everyone has been running around like crazy men since our phone call this morning” (Holmes, 2000, p. 175). The manager laughingly remarks “not altogether a bad thing” (p. 175), thus allowing for humor to provide a cover for a remark that may otherwise be considered unreasonably oppressive (Holmes, 2000). Teasing or mocking lower status employees may assist in gaining behavioral compliance (Dwyer, 1991) and in controlling the behavior of subordinates (Holmes, 2007). Humor may be used in constructing a leadership identity with teasing being one way to portray oneself as an effective and competent leader (Schnurr, 2009).

Humor may serve a leader’s need to maintain face as well as to assist in saving a subordinate’s face. By analyzing recorded workplace interactions at business meetings, Holmes and Marra (2006) found indicators for both. When two advisors compared their written evaluations, the more senior and experienced advisor commented on the written evaluation of his junior colleague by saying “and apart from that, I’ve just got what you’ve got, but in a lot less words” (Holmes & Marra, 2006, p. 129). This comment was followed by laughter from both sides. Here, the senior colleague conveyed a clear message that the report by his junior colleague was too wordy, but attenuated its negative impact through the use of humor, which also serves the subordinate’s face needs. Humor also serves a leader’s need to a dignified profile when he or she makes an error. In another incident, a document, which was produced by a leader contained an error, which elicited a humorous comment by the leader—“I find it really hard being perfect at everything” (Holmes & Marra, 2006, p. 130).

Leaders’ use of humor has been found to inspire subordinates to find creative and innovative solutions to complex problems (Dixon, 1980). Humor can make it easier to introduce and to exchange new ideas in a low-risk manner, to experiment with potentially risky new behaviors and to engage in constructive conflicts (Barsoux, 1996; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008), with people enjoying higher status being able to use humor to end conflicts (Norricks & Spitz, 2008). Eliciting laughter during conflict assists in committing a group to one another and to challenge them to play, which can ultimately enhance problem-solving (Consalvo, 1989). Self-disparaging humor has been perceived as especially effective at relieving tension, summarizing group member opinions and encouraging participation (Smith & Powell, 1988). Although a leader’s humor can promote commitment and group cohesiveness (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999; Francis, 1994), it can also create divisions among subordinates (Dwyer, 1991).

The variety of humor functions seems to offer much potential for enhancing one’s leadership effectiveness, but also for diminishing it. Using positive humor appears more likely to lead to beneficial leadership outcomes than using negative humor. But all leaders should be aware that there is no “one size fits all” approach to integrate humor into their behavior, let alone a guarantee that humor will work in the way in which it is intended. Managers who try to manufacture humor might

actually suppress it, and managers who suppress humor might actually provoke it (Collinson, 2002).

4.3 Perception of Humorous Leaders

Leader humor can serve a variety of functions and can have several positive and some negative effects, as demonstrated above. When leadership scholars and humor researchers started to examine leader humor in empirical studies, they began to do so by focusing on the perception of leaders. Many early studies were based on the assumption that humorous leaders are regarded to be more effective and that their subordinates feel more satisfied. These studies are based on correlational survey data with participants indicating how they perceive their leader in terms of humor and other characteristics. Five specific results suggest the following relationships:

First, leaders who are ascribed a good sense of humor are also attributed many other positive attributes such as effectiveness, intelligence, friendliness, and positive task and relationship behavior (Decker, 1987; Decker & Rotondo, 2001). Second, leaders with a high humor orientation, which refers to a predisposition to use humorous communication during interactions, are more liked (Rizzo, Wanzer, & Booth-Butterfield, 1999). Third, these leaders are also perceived to be more responsive, which means that they listen, try to understand and are sensitive (Campbell, Martin, & Wanzer, 2001). Fourth, subordinates of these leaders experience higher job satisfaction (Hurren, 2006, who examined principals as leaders in schools). And finally, fifth, leaders who use negative humor are perceived to show fewer task and relationship behaviors (Decker & Rotondo, 2001).

One may also turn around this thinking and examine whether “good” and “bad” leaders are associated differently with humor. This is exactly what Priest and Swain (2002) did. They conducted two studies in the military and asked their participants to think of a “good” or a “bad” leader. Participants then rated the leader they had in their minds on several characteristics—among them was humorous behavior. Good leaders were described as having a warm, competent and benign humorous style when compared to bad leaders. For example, they were said to “use good-natured jest to put others at ease” whereas the “bad” leaders were said to “poke fun at the naïve or unsophisticated” or to be “unable to laugh at personal failings.” These effects were even found when controlling for differences in rated leader effectiveness.

All of the previously mentioned studies are based on correlational data and prohibit cause-and-effect conclusions. One lab experiment, however, tried to tease apart the relationship (Hoption, Barling, & Turner, 2013). In a vignette study, 155 participants were provided with a select situation in which a project manager at an inaugural project meeting introduced a new recruit named Pat. At the end of the vignette, participants read one out of four different statements: “I am so glad that Pat took this job...” (1) “despite knowing all about me!” (self-deprecating humor), (2) “despite knowing all about you!” (aggressive humor), (3) “despite knowing all

about us!” (ingroup deprecating humor) and (4) without any additional comments (no humor condition). After reading the vignette, participants rated the extent to which the project manager showed transformational leadership behaviors. Results indicate that leaders who used self-deprecating humor (as compared to those using aggressive humor) were rated higher on individualized consideration, which is one facet of transformational leadership. This means that a leader is attentive and sensitive to subordinates’ individual needs and skills. The finding suggests that individualized consideration could also be demonstrated by putting oneself last and by minimizing one’s superiority through the use of humor. Recognizing and laughing at one’s own shortcomings may be a way to enhance perceptions of transformational leadership by demonstrating egalitarianism at the workplace (Hopton et al., 2013).

All empirical results about the perception of leaders and the correspondent attribution of personality characteristics could be based on so-called implicit personality theories (e.g., Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996). Humans associate specific characteristics with other specific characteristics. For example, a mother might be ascribed a warm and caring nature and a person with glasses might be ascribed high intelligence. Likewise, a humorous leader might be ascribed sympathy and effectiveness and an effective leader might be ascribed a high sense of humor. Though these associations do not tell us anything about actual behaviors. It remains to be seen how strongly humorous leaders actually influence subordinate outcomes and whether effective leaders actually use more humor in their communications.

4.4 The Complexity of Effects

Many older studies focused on direct associations between leader humor and subordinate outcomes. More recent studies have acknowledged that the associations are not so simple and paint a more complex picture. They are based on the assumption that the relation between leader humor and subordinate outcomes is dependent on specific circumstances. In statistical terms, the relation between leader humor and subordinate outcomes is moderated by specific variables. Another assumption is that these moderating effects can be found more easily for socio-emotional subordinate outcomes than for performance because leader humor generally affects socio-emotional outcomes more strongly than performance (Hughes & Avey, 2009).

One of the first studies that examined moderating effects focused on subordinate tenure. The hypothesis was that the effects of leader humor would vary based on how long an employee had been in an organization (Gkorezis, Hatzithomas, & Petridou, 2011). This study examined empowerment as subordinate outcome. Empowerment refers to intrinsic task motivation and consists of four facets, namely meaning, competence, self-determination and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). Meaning refers to the value of a work goal in relation to one’s own ideals. Competence refers

to one's self-efficacy. Self-determination refers to the feeling of having a choice in starting actions. Impact refers to the degree to which an individual can influence important work outcomes. To test their hypothesis, the authors collected cross-sectional questionnaire data in four US dinner houses and measured leader's use of positive and negative humor, subordinate empowerment and tenure in months. First, Gkorezis et al. (2011) found two direct effects. The more positive humor a leader used, the more empowered the employee felt. And the more negative humor a leader used, the less empowered the employee felt. Second, they found the expected moderating effect. The relationship between positive humor and empowerment was especially strong for employees with short tenure. In other words, the newcomers benefitted more from positive humor than the old-timers. Additionally, the relationship between negative humor and empowerment was especially strong for employees with long tenure. In other words, the old-timers suffered more from negative humor than the newcomers. We believe that this effect may have occurred because the effects of negative humor are cumulative and build up over time. One might overhear a leader's negative humor comment, which is supposed to be funny, once or twice. But if one hears such comments every day, one may perceive some underlying problems and may eventually take the supposedly funny comments very seriously.

Another study that focused on boundary conditions of leader humor use is the one by Pundt (2015). One hundred and fifty employees participated in his survey study. Humorous leader behavior was only related to innovative behavior (as rated by the employee) if the task called for such behavior—that is, if creative requirements were high. Otherwise, humorous leader behavior was not related to innovative subordinate behavior. Interestingly, this effect occurred above and beyond the effects of transformational leadership and leader-member exchange, which refers to the quality of the relationship between leader and subordinate.

The previous studies examined the circumstances under which leader humor impacts subordinate outcomes and focused on tenure and task requirements. Other studies, however, focused on the effects of general leader behavior and took humor as one special circumstance into account. That means that these studies also acknowledge the complexity of the relationships, yet they have a slightly different take on them.

A cross-sectional study that was conducted in a financial institution by Avolio et al. (1999) examined how the use of humor moderates the effects of transformational, contingent reward and laissez-faire leadership on performance. Data were collected from 115 leaders and their 322 respective subordinates, who were all asked to assess their manager's leadership behavior and their use of humor. Transformational leadership was more positively related to unit performance for leaders who used humor at a high rate (relative to low rate). Contingent reward leadership was more negatively associated with performance when leaders used humor more often. Because of the radical changes in the financial service industry back then, the use of humor by leaders in relation to setting goals and target objectives may have been perceived as insufficient to address the serious changes (Avolio et al., 1999).

A more recent study was conducted in schools (Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2009). Here, principals were examined as leaders and teachers as subordinates. In a questionnaire study, 179 principals rated a teacher's performance. The respective teacher rated the use of their principal's contingent personal reward (i.e., a set of behaviors focusing on clear exchanges between leader and subordinate; Bass, 1985) and their use of humor. In general, the more contingent personal reward the principal used, the better the teacher performed. This relation was stronger when the principal used less humor and weaker if the principal used more humor. We believe that this might be a fit issue. Humor and the use of contingent personal rewards may not go well together. A leader who uses humor, which is by nature ambiguous, and at the same time tries to motivate with contingent reward, which needs to be unambiguous by definition, may simply confuse subordinates and may therefore not be able to influence performance well.

The last study that examined the complexity of relationships focused on transformational leadership, which inspires subordinates to change based on a clear vision (Bass, 1985). The researchers (Hughes & Avey, 2009) collected data from 316 employees at two points in time one week apart. For their analyses, they split the sample into halves: the first half of the employees had reported to have leaders who used humor relatively often and the second half had reported to have leaders who used humor relatively seldom. When leaders often used humor, the following was found: The more transformational leadership behaviors leaders showed, the higher the employees rated their trust and affective commitment. In contrast, when leaders only seldomly used humor, transformational leadership was not associated with trust and affective commitment. The author's explanation is that if a leader is confident enough to joke about certain situations, subordinates feel reassured and transformational leadership behavior can play out to its full potential.

In summary, the effects of leader humor are stronger in some tasks and for some persons than others. The effects of general leader behaviors depend in part on leader humor use. Humor seems to fit transformational leadership because it enhances its positive effects. Yet it does not seem to fit transactional leadership because it diminishes its positive effects. The interplay between leader behavior, leader humor, task requirements, subordinate characteristics, and situational circumstances is very complex and thus provides a promising arena for future research.

4.5 The Relationship Between Leader and Subordinate

The variety of humor functions encompasses numerous socio-emotional processes. It is therefore plausible that leader humor should have a strong impact on the relationship between leaders and subordinates. Previous research has already shown that humor substantially influences the quality of leader-subordinate relationships (Cooper, 2008; Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014), which in turn is vital in shaping employee attitudes, such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and well-being (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). Thus, leader-member exchange

(LMX) theory, which focuses on the separate dyadic relationships between a leader and each subordinate, is of special importance in this context. By varying their interactions across subordinates, leaders determine the relationship quality (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012), which may range from one that is strictly based on employment contract (low LMX) to one that includes mutual trust, respect, liking and reciprocal influence (high LMX; Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). LMX is comprised of four dimensions: affect (liking one another), contribution (task-related behavior), loyalty (expression of public support for the goals and the personal character of the other member) and professional respect (perception of knowledge, competence, skills; Greguras & Ford, 2006; Liden & Maslyn, 1998).

Considering that different humor styles (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating) can either have a positive or negative effect on organizational outcomes, this may also apply to a leader's use of humor styles. For example, affiliative humor as a positive form of humor may be used to amuse other people in order to reduce interpersonal tension, whereas aggressive humor, as a rather negative form of humor, may be intended to mock other people in order to elevate one's self (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015; Romero & Arendt, 2011). A leader's positive humor has been found to be positively related to LMX (Gkorezis, Petridou, & Xanthiakos, 2014), with its dimensions "affect" and "professional respect" being significantly related to a leader's humor expression (Cooper, 2004).

Pundt and Herrmann (2015) provide a closer look at the association between leader humor and LMX. In a 2-wave study, they investigated the relation of a leader's affiliative and aggressive humor to LMX as perceived by subordinates. Results indicated that affiliative and aggressive humor are related to LMX. Subordinates whose leaders frequently used affiliative humor rated their relationship with their leaders as better than subordinates whose leaders used affiliative humor less frequently. In contrast, subordinates whose leaders used aggressive humor frequently rated their relationships with their leaders worse than subordinates whose leaders used aggressive humor less frequently. Identification with the leaders mediated the relationships between affiliative leader humor and LMX. In this context, humor is seen as an offer for relational identification, which is viewed as a precondition for the development of a positive relationship in terms of trust (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

In contrast to previous research, Wisse and Rietzschel (2014) found no evidence for the impact of leaders' humor style on subordinates' perceived relationship quality. They assessed leaders' and subordinates' self-reported humor styles and the extent to which subordinates perceived a high LMX relationship with their leader. The authors assumed that the perceptions of a leader's humor styles may actually be more important than the leader's actual humor styles in the prediction of relationship quality. With regard to the role of similarities in humor styles and their association with relationship quality, it was found that leaders' self-defeating humor was linked to higher LMX when subordinates' self-defeating humor was also high (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). The effects of similarity in self-defeating humor style were especially pronounced for the LMX sub-dimensions of affect, professional

respect and loyalty, but not significant for contribution. This indicates that similarity effects draw rather on affective aspects than exchange-related aspects of the leader–subordinate relationship (Cooper, 2008; Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014).

Humor styles per se, unlike other aspects of humor such as frequency, may not be as important for the relationship between leaders and subordinates (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). A study by Robert, Dunne and Iun (2016) found that subordinates' job satisfaction was impacted by the perceived quality of the leader–subordinate relationship, and not by leaders' use of affiliative or aggressive humor. The authors argued that, when subordinates evaluate their relationships with their supervisors as positive, they are more likely to interpret the leaders' humor as positive—regardless of the leaders' self-reported use of aggressive or affiliative humor. On the other hand, a negative relationship can lead employees to perceive a leader's humor as rather negative, even when its use is intended to be positive (Robert et al., 2016). Employees may feel that the use of humor is inappropriate or that it only serves as a distraction (Avolio et al., 1999), or even as a leadership tactic of ingratiation (Cooper, 2005). Thus, leader humor seems to be in the ears of the listener, and not so much in the mouth of the speaker.

4.6 Subordinate Reactions to Leader Humor

Humor is ambiguous by nature. Its effects seem to be based more on the kind of relationship between leader and subordinate and not so much on the actual type of humor used (Robert et al., 2016). In order to fully understand the effects of leader humor on subordinates, one needs to examine how subordinates react to humorous comments in situ. Linguistic research that examines humor effects on a micro-level gives some hints about how subordinates deal with ambiguous humor.

The most interesting humorous instances are those that are maximally ambiguous, when listeners do not know to what extent the message is meant seriously and when it contains a potential face threat. Two types of humor that are particularly ambiguous are teasing and self-denigrating humor. Teasing refers to comments about the listener that are potentially aggressive and simultaneously contain cues signaling that the comment is not meant seriously. For example, when a leader says to a team member “Wow! Now that you have finally found the document, you should treat the team to dinner.” Self-denigrating humor refers to comments about the speaker him- or herself. They are also potentially aggressive and contain cues that signal that the comment is not meant seriously, for example, when a leader says the following about herself: “I've got this terrible reputation for being a technical klutz.” In both instances, it seems important for listeners in a relationship with power differences to acknowledge the humor, to remain polite and not question the power differences, and to maintain face (Schnurr & Chan, 2011).

A linguistic study examined how subordinates react to leaders' teasing and self-denigrating humor (Schnurr & Chan, 2011). The researchers analyzed data from workplace interactions in New Zealand and Hong Kong and used both

one-on-one interactions and large formal meetings. Their results of specific examples indicate that listeners used a variety of response strategies. Most listeners laughed, which indicates that they understood the comment as humorously. Specifically, after teasing, listeners either played along with the humor, blamed someone else, teased back or responded to the criticism. After self-denigrating humor, listeners played along, teased back, offered alternative explanations, expressed agreement or did not respond. Overall, there are a variety of response strategies that enable listeners to acknowledge the humor and the power differences simultaneously. The choice of response seemed to depend on several factors on different levels such as norms in the workplace and the larger sociocultural context (Schnurr & Chan, 2011).

4.7 Leader Humor and Gender

Leadership and humor still seem to have one widespread perception in common—they are often associated with masculinity (Crawford, 1995; Hearn & Parkin, 1986). Thus, the notion of a humorous female leader may sound like a bad joke to some people. Empirical research has found substantiated evidence for gender differences in the use of humor (see also Chap. 8 in this book). Whereas women are much more likely to use humor for the specific function of forming or maintaining solidarity, men are more likely to use humor for the general function of increasing solidarity and status and performing positive work on their personal identity (Hay, 2000).

With regard to humor styles (affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing and self-defeating), males score significantly higher than females in all styles and they report a much greater tendency to engage in aggressive forms of humor (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Gender differences in humor use have also been found within a workplace setting, with contesting and challenging humor being generally perceived to be more masculine whereas collaborative and supportive humor is considered to be more feminine (Holmes, 2006a, b).

It has been suggested that women have a lower propensity to use humor in professional situations (Cox, Read, & Van Auken, 1990) and that they are encouraged to respond to humor rather than creating it (Crain, 1981). These suggestions are contradicted by analyses based on the amount of initiated humor in business meetings that were either chaired by women or men and that included up to 17 participants (Holmes, Burns, Marra, Stubbe, & Vine, 2003). In both mixed-gender and single-gender meetings, the overall amount of humor initiated by female chairs was greater than the amount initiated by their male counterparts. Compared to individual participants, the women who were in leadership positions in these meetings, the chairs and managers, contributed more to the overall amount of humor (Holmes et al., 2003). Female and male chairs' use of humor in business meetings was also investigated by Mullany (2004) who focused on the role of humor as a linguistic politeness device in order to gain compliance from subordinates. Although only female leaders were found to use repressive humor as a

mitigation tactic, both female and male chairs most commonly used mitigation tactics other than humor. Nonetheless these findings suggest that the use of repressive humor as a strategy is favored by female chairs and may be part of a wider gender patterning (Mullany, 2004).

A more detailed look at women's uses of humor in order to portray themselves as effective leaders was undertaken by Schnurr (2008). She analyzed conversational data of female leaders in a predominantly masculine environment (IT) with a multi-method approach and included interviews and participant observation. Findings indicate that women use humor to display masculine and feminine leadership behaviors as well as to exhibit gender stereotypes. A female leader who laughingly tells her subordinates that she has to send a particular email off, because "if we don't we're in the poo" releases stress and tension in a rather masculine manner while maintaining a feminine style by using the inclusive pronoun "we" as well as using the rather weak expletive "poo" (Schnurr, 2008, p. 305). Thus, humor enables the leader to display leadership behavior associated with masculinity while preventing her from being judged negatively as "unfeminine." A female leader who teasingly remarks in a slightly challenging tone that "you'd better do a quick programming course, Errol" (p. 308) expresses criticism to her colleague for not being able to help with a project that involves much programming, while simultaneously maintaining a good relationship by minimizing the potential negative impact of this remark. The transactional and relational functions of humor assist in displaying authority and power—stereotypically masculine behaviors—while simultaneously maintaining a leader's femininity. A leader may use self-denigrating humor to construct a stereotypical feminine identity and challenge the masculine norms (Schnurr, 2008). For example, a leader who states that she has a reputation for being a "technical klutz" (p. 310) is playing down her status and authority and makes use of the stereotype of a technophobic woman. The examples cited here demonstrate how using humor as a female leader in a male dominated profession can become part of an effective leadership style (Schnurr, 2008).

Female and male leaders not only use humor differently; their humor also has different effects. Decker and Rotondo (2001) investigated how gender moderates the relationship between humor and leader behavior and effectiveness. Although female managers were reported to use less positive humor than their male counterparts, they were rated higher on relationship behavior and effectiveness. Although male managers were reported to use more negative humor than their female counterparts, they were rated higher on relationship behavior and effectiveness. It appears that in comparison to men, women are more severely "penalized" when using negative humor and more "rewarded" when using positive humor (Decker & Rotondo, 2001, p. 460). The authors speculated that women who use humor are rather surprising and not perceived as the norm. Whereas the use of positive humor enhances a female leader's ability to communicate effectively and to create a better working environment, her use of negative humor may be perceived as a more serious offense than that of male leaders.

4.8 Future Research

A leader may use humor for a variety of relational goals that can become of special importance in a hierarchical relationship. Humor can be used to create cohesion and strengthen solidarity with subordinates, but can also create divisions between them. Its use can emphasize but also diminish a leader's status and authority. Humor can be employed to reduce face threat and soften critical comments, but also to control subordinates' behavior. A leader's humor may contribute to the well-being of employees and increase job satisfaction, but may also lead to increased strain. Thus, the duality of humor functions becomes especially apparent in the context of leader-subordinate relationships. With regard to task-related outcomes, a leader's humor can inspire creative and innovative behavior in subordinates and can have an impact on their intrinsic task motivation.

Leaders who are ascribed a good sense of humor may be perceived as more likeable and responsive and be attributed a positive task and relationship behavior. A leader's humor may enhance perceptions of transformational leadership behavior. Subordinates' perception may also play an important role with regard to the leader's gender, considering that female managers, who have been reported to use less positive humor than their male counterparts, were rated higher on relationship effectiveness and behavior. A leader's choice of humor style may also affect subordinates' perceived relationship quality. Subordinates whose leaders frequently use affiliative humor rate their relationship as better, whereas subordinates whose leaders use aggressive humor frequently rate their relationships with their leaders as worse. On the other hand, the leader-subordinate relationship may determine how subordinates interpret leader humor.

There are a variety of response strategies to humor that enable listeners to acknowledge the humor as well as the power differences. Reactions may range from laughing, playing along with the humor, blaming others, teasing back and expressing agreement, to not responding at all.

Although empirical research about leader humor has greatly increased our understanding about this phenomenon, several avenues for future research are very promising. We see four different ways of thinking and doing research that should increase our understanding even more.

First, it is important to develop an overarching model regarding the effects of leader humor. It should attempt to explain which kinds of humor affect which subordinate socio-emotional and performance outcomes. Such a model should also include moderators regarding leader characteristics, subordinate characteristics, task and situational demands, and the wider organizational context. An overarching model would systematically summarize previous research, guide future research and help to integrate new research findings.

Second, research needs to move from correlational survey methods which assess associations at one point in time to different methods. Experiments in laboratories and the field would clearly tell us about causes and effects. Longitudinal research methods (e.g., based on diary methods) would help us to understand how leader

humor and its effects develop over time and to what extent the effects are cumulative.

Third, research must take into account the more negative kinds of humor (such as aggressive humor). Most previous research is based on the assumption that positive humor has positive effects and does not contrast positive with negative humor. Taking into account the dark side of humor would more adequately reflect the double-edged sword of leader humor and point out potentially ironic effects of humor, such as positive outcomes after aggressive humor.

Further research that employs cluster analysis can provide more insights into the ratio of positive and negative humor and its outcomes. Results of a recent study that employed this method suggest that using aggressive humor may only be of negative consequence if it is not accompanied by affiliative humor (Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2015).

Fourth, research should focus more strongly on the dyad between leader and subordinate. Humor always needs a speaker and a listener, and the effects of humor can only play out within a dyad (or within a larger team). Previous research has mostly examined the subordinate perspective and has neglected the leader perspective. A closer look at the dyadic relationship helps us grasp how leader humor is understood and misunderstood and how a fit in humor styles and other characteristics impact humor effects.

4.9 Recommendations for Practice

Even though we already know a lot about leader humor, there is still no simple recipe for leaders on how to use humor. And there never will be. Before providing specific suggestions, we would like to point out that effective leadership can never be substituted with humor. Humor is one out of many communicative tools that leaders can use to motivate subordinates. That being said, it should also be clear that leaders do not have to use humor in order to be effective. There are numerous other ways of motivating employees.

Leaders can use humor in order to create a humor-supportive climate in which humor is not only accepted, but encouraged and enhances positive affect (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). Positive affect may in turn increase creative performance, which is particularly relevant for creative and innovative tasks. Possible ways of creating such a climate are actively using humor and encouraging other team members to use humor as well; making fun of oneself to show that one does not take oneself too seriously; using humor to communicate one's imperfections in order to motivate others in practicing self-criticism; and finally encouraging open feedback when people feel that they were made fun of inappropriately or feel hurt by humor.

Before creating such a humor-encouraging climate, leaders need to consider their relationships with their subordinates. A negative relationship can lead employees to perceive a leader's humor as rather negative, even when its use is intended to be positive. Thus, leaders who want to engage in humorous behavior with their

employees should assess first whether the relationship quality will support their use of humor. An already poor leader–subordinate relationship may not be a good foundation for humorous overtures, whereas a high trust relationship seems to increase the effectiveness of a leader’s humor (Kim et al., 2016).

Recommendations for further reading

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