

HUMOUR STYLES IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract: *Humour is known to help relational outcomes: specifically, humour styles (constructive / positive versus negative) and management may play an important role. This study aims at identifying the effects of humour styles on manager – employee relationships. This study relies on previous studies on humour effects in fields such as psychology and management. While constructive / positive humour is shown to have positive effects on manager – employee relationship, a different pattern is found for negative / offensive humour. This study shows that managers should attend training courses about the use of humour in the workplace. This study brings about an insight into how to use humour in a manager – employee relationship by activating humour in an affiliative or self-enhancing manner, instead of self-defeating or aggressive ways. No previous study has examined this topic in a Romanian context so far, to the author's knowledge.*

Key words: *humour style, workplace, manager, employee*

INTRODUCTION

Organizational communication designates any form of communication – verbal (conversations, documents, messages, presentations, etc.) or non-verbal (drawings) [2] relevant to conducting and controlling an organization [7,13,31,32].

There are two types of organizational communication – inside and outside:

- Inside organizational communication:
 - Vertical:
 - Top → down (managers → employees), in the form of instructions, manuals, policies, presentations, written messages, etc. and whose advantages are:
 - Improving individual performance by developing intelligent participation;
 - Improving consumption relations;
 - Improving industrial relations [17];
 - Better coordination;
 - Improved moral;
 - Down → top (employees → managers), in the form of calls, complaints, estimates, judgments, proposals, reports, responses, etc. and whose advantages are:
 - Providing employee support;
 - Encouraging vertical and horizontal cooperation;
 - Reducing frustration among employees;
 - Horizontal (managers → managers, employees → employees):
 - Formal, in the form of electronic communications, presentations, sessions, etc.);
 - Informal, in the form of anniversaries, coffee breaks, lunch, traditional celebrations, etc.;
- Outside organizational communication.

The issue of humour in the workplace has been tackled for only two decades. The main aspects of humour in the workplace have been:

 - Humour outcomes [29];
 - Humour styles [29];
 - Humour types [5];

- Humour use [1,3,4,20,21,25,26,29,30,33];
 - Humour's downsides [18,19,20,];
 - Moderation of humour's effect [29];
 - Ways to create humour [33,34].
- This study focuses on managers' humour styles.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material on which relies this study consists of the literature on humour styles published in the last two decades. The four basic humour styles are described and analysed in detail and, based on the findings, recommendations for managers are made.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The study of humour styles is almost one century old. It started with Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) who wrote, in 1928, an article titled Humour, in which he called joking and wittiness some of the highest defence mechanisms. Almost two decades ago, Martin et al. [23] posited the existence of four humour types – affiliative, aggressive, self-defeating, and self-enhancing.

1. Affiliative Humour

Affiliative humour [8,23,27,29] is a healthy and tolerant use of humor which has the potential to enhance our relationships and which is correlated with a high degree of well-being [23]. Among the main characteristics it displays are the following:

- It characterises individuals who:
 - Tend to express funny things about their own person or not take themselves too seriously, with an intention to make others feel more comfortable [23];
 - Prefer to amuse others, by uttering witty jokes or funny stories in a spontaneous manner so as to minimize tensions [17,23];
- It contains some mildly aggressive elements;
- It conveys company's culture;
- It correlate with:
 - positively with personal accomplishment dimension of burnout;
 - negatively with depression, negative affect;
- It increases group cohesiveness;
- It involves gentle teasing, playfully poking fun;
- It is non-hostile, with respect to others, so that it maximizes interpersonal connectedness [22];
- It relates to extraversion and mainly positive emotions which are conducive to a high degree of self-esteem and generally to relationship satisfaction [27];
- It may include self-deprecation;
- It may include some element of aggressiveness (friendly teasing, making fun of members of an "out-group", etc.);
- It reinforces company's culture.

2. Self-enhancing Humour

Self-enhancing humour [6,16,22,23,27,29] is a non-detrimental use of humor which has a tendency to promote one's self [22] It:

- Conveys a company's culture;
- Has an intrapsychic focus, as compared to affiliative humour, which is more interpersonal in scope;
- Displays a rather humorous outlook on life, in general, as well as the inclination:

- To be rather amused by various situations of life;
- To promote a humorous perspective over life in general instead of caving in to stressful situations [22];
- Is hypothesized to highlight perspective-taking in order to better regulate negative emotions in a humorous manner [23]:
 - It is not correlated with negative emotions (such as high degrees of anxiety or neuroticism);
 - It is highly correlated with psychological openness, self-esteem, and a general a mood of well-being [23];
- According to the Freudian definition of humour, it may be perceived as a healthy defence mechanism used against negative emotions which helps one preserve a realistic perspective on any kind of situations of life [23];
- Is:
 - Positively related to cheerfulness and social support;
 - Not correlated with displaying an unsupported bad mood [23];
- Reinforces a company's culture;
- Relates to:
 - Humorous attitude shifts through perspective-taking [23];
 - Humour may be used as a coping mechanism in order to regulate emotions [8, 23].

3. Aggressive Humour

Aggressive humour [8,10,23,29] is a display of humor which is employed in order to enhance one's own self at the cost of other people (Martin et al., 2003). It:

- May be correlated with a compulsive use of humour, which is an impulse to say funny things even though they may hurt others [10];
- May be used in order to manipulate others, as it may also involve an underwritten implied threat of being ridiculed [23];
- May be used in order to belittle others, even if it is pretended to be merely playful amusement [23];
- Is:
 - Positively related to aggression, anger, anxiety, burnout dimensions, depression, hostility, negative affect, and neuroticism;
 - Negatively related to agreeableness, conflict management, conscientiousness, emotional perception, emotional support, relationship satisfaction, and well-being;
- Is potentially detrimental to psychosocial well-being;
- Is sometimes carried out at the expense of one's relationships with peers [9];
- Relates:
 - To expressing humor while completely disregarding its impact on others (e.g., racist or sexist types of humor)" [23];
 - To the use of derision, disparagement, ridicule, sarcasm, teasing humour [23].

4. Self-defeating Humour

Self-defeating humour [23, 29] implies making use of humor at one's own expense as long as relationships may be enhanced [23]. It:

- Involves a constant effort to amuse others in order to gain approval by ingratiating oneself or by allowing oneself to be ridiculed [23];
- Characterises individuals:

- Who are generally perceived as witty or amusing (e.g. <the class clown>), while displaying emotional neediness and a generally hidden low self-esteem [11,23];
- Who tend to highlight their occurrences of poor performance and to minimize their instances of good performance [23];
- Involves excessively self-disparaging humour;
- Tends to be:
 - Correlated to a high degree of neuroticism and a range of negative emotions
 - Not correlated to well-being and self-esteem [23];
- Is hypothesized to include:
 - Using humor as defensive self-denial;
 - Displaying humorous behaviour in order to hide one’s negative feelings, or not addressing problems in a healthy positive manner [23].

Romero & Cruthirds [29] introduced a fifth style of humour – mild aggressive humour – which:

- Delivering clear messages to express disagreement without any negative underlying ambivalence [29];
- Could:
 - Send a reprimanding message in a positive tone, without being aggressive [22,29];
 - Have positive functions because it may be constructive in teams [15,29].

Gkorezis, Hatzithomas & Petridou [12], Romero & Arendt [28], and Frey [11] categorised humour styles as:

- Positive types of humour: affiliative, self-enhancing, and moderately self-defeating humour styles – which are correlated with general well-being, self-esteem, and promoting relationship satisfaction;
- Negative types of humour: aggressive and self-disparaging humour styles – which exhibit mainly negative emotional effect or output, such as a tendency to aggression or high degrees of neuroticism [28].

Martin et al. [23] found the following correlations between humour styles and the “Big Five” psychological typology (according to the model of personality types ranging across the domains – “Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability / Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Intellect / Openness to Experience” – [24]) (as shown below in Table 1).

From a managerial perspective:

Table 1.
Correlations between humour styles and the “Big Five” (after Martin et al., 2003)

The “Big Five”	Humour styles			
	Affiliative	Aggressive	Self-defeating	Self-enhancing
Agreeableness	-	-	-	+
Conscientiousness	-	-	-	+
Emotional Stability / Neuroticism	-	+	+	-
Extraversion	+	+	+	+
Intellect / Openness to Experience	+	-	+	+

Source: 2003 [23]

- Affiliative and self-enhancing humour types:
 - Enhance / increase employees' psychological empowerment depending on employees' tenure [12,14];
 - Increase creativity[29];
 - Influence individuals to engage in behaviour that enhances the organization and in team-oriented behaviour;
 - Promote the ability to cope with problems and relationships;
- May be useful to reduce interpersonal barriers between the manager and other employees" [8];
- Humour tempers any contradictions that may occur in organizations despite constructive efforts of the management [14].

From a cross-cultural perspective, literature shows that Americans tend to be culturally higher in self-enhancing and self-defeating humour styles than Arabs, for instance Egyptians or Lebanese, while displaying similar degrees of affiliative and aggressive types of humour [15];

In our opinion, the implications for international management are considerable.

Thus:

- American managers:
 - Do not have a tendency to use aggressive humor towards people in subordinate positions;
 - It is less risky for American or Arab personnel to use affiliative and aggressive humour;
 - May be seen as lacking managerial capacity when making use of self-defeating humour, with detrimental consequences upon the general productivity of the company's employees;
- Should not use self-enhancing and self-defeating humour in intercultural encounters such as interactions with Arabs, as the latter might misinterpret these styles in a negative manner, which could lead to communication issues due to cultural code differences [15];

CONCLUSIONS

The study of the four humour styles shows that managers should use affiliative humour because it:

- Conveys / reinforces company's culture,
- Correlates positively with personal accomplishment dimension of burnout,
- Facilitates relationships,
- Increases group cohesiveness;
- Reduces interpersonal tensions,
- Managers should use self-enhancing humour because it:
 - Conveys / reinforces company's culture;
 - Is not correlated with negative reactions or such emotions as anxiety or neuroticism [24];
 - Is positively related to joy, openness to experience, satisfaction with social support, self-esteem, and well-being;
 - Is related to humour use as emotional regulation or coping strategy;
- Managers should not use aggressive humour because it:
 - Is intended to offend others, though often in a playful manner;

- Is negatively related to agreeableness, conflict management, conscientiousness, emotional perception, emotional support, relationship satisfaction, and well-being;
- Is positively related to aggression, anger, anxiety, burnout dimensions, depression, hostility, negative affect, and neuroticism;
- Does not promote psycho-social well-being;
- May be detrimental to one's relationships with others;
- Is correlated with disregarding others when expressing humor which might impact them (e.g. racist or sexist types of humor) [23];
- Is correlated with derision, disparagement, ridicule, sarcasm, teasing types of humour [23].

Managers should not use self-defeating humour because: it is hypothesised to be a method of problem-solving avoidance by employing or relying on humorous behaviour; it is negatively correlated with psychological well-being, relationship satisfaction, and high degree of self-esteem [23]; it is positively correlated with neuroticism and negative emotions.

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