

# Managerial Humor Practices: A Driving Force for Employees' Commitment

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper examined managerial humor practices as a driving force for employees' commitment. Humorous practices or styles such as, affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating humor employed by managers in their relationship with employees were discussed. The humor styles were further classified as positive and negative humor depending on the function it performs in the attainment of employees' organizational commitment. Affiliative and self-enhancing humors are classified as positive humors because they are positively related with the psychological well-being while aggressive and self-defeating humors are categorized as negative humor styles since they result in emotional reactions that are predominantly negative such as anger and aggression. Conclusion was drawn from scholarly research and articles, which postulated that managerial positive humor practices have a positive relationship with employees' commitment, hence a driving force for employees' organizational commitment while the negative humor is negatively correlated with employees' organizational commitment. It was recommended that positive humor should be encouraged in managerial relationship with subordinates to drive employees' commitment for the overall success of the organization.*

**Keywords:** Humor, Affiliative, Self-Enhancing, Aggressive, Self-Defeating and Employees' Commitment

## INTRODUCTION

Organizations are laden with stress, strains, tensions and paradoxes which are observable in the day to day activities and relationship between managers/leaders and employees. This relationship explains aspects of organizational effectiveness, efficiency and commitment. Managers engage in practices that are intended to influence their subordinates (Hiller, DeChurch, Murase & Doty, 2011) to cope with day to day interactions and feel a sense of belonging. Stress reduction is a crucial management issue since it could have adverse effects on the productivity of the organization and the ability to retain valuable employees (Miznikova and Schönfeldt, 2010). Geoswami and Nair (2018) posit that managerial humor can make employees experience positive emotions which reduce stress and result in engaged employees. Humor is considered a fundamental ingredient of good and healthy employment relationships, particularly regarding that of managers-employees relationship which has numerous organizational outcomes as proposed by researchers. Miznikova and Schönfeldt (2010) referred that humor is a tool that managers use in achieving benefits in the organization.

Humor has the potential to address both issues of employees' retention and viability by helping to create a fun filled environment that employees find attractive (Romero and Arendt, 2011). In the workplace, where differences in power and authority are an intrinsic part of interaction between managers and employees and colleagues, humor is an exceptionally useful strategy for putting across a negative or critical message or trying to undermine an opponent in an ostensibly acceptable manner (Cahill & Densham, 2014). Researchers have cautioned that humor can be both positive and negative and have proposed that work become meaningful when managers use positive humor to communicate with their employees because humorous expressions are an important aspect of interaction. In the same vein humorous work environment releases employees' creativity, reinforces their sense of freedom and commitment.

Commitment is the psychological state that binds the individual to the organization (John and Elyse, 2010). This binding force can be necessitated by certain factors and experienced in different ways that can be accompanied by different mindset, including affective attachment and involvement with target (affective commitment), a felt obligation to the target (normative humor) and awareness of the cost associated with discontinuing with the target that is, continuance commitment (Igella, 2014). With this in mind, managers adopt practices that can drive employees' commitment as humor encourages productivity, builds momentum and reinforces a sense of belonging to something worthwhile.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Foundation

There are three basic theories used in extant literature that explain humor; incongruity theory, relief theory and superiority theory. These three theories according to (Romero & Arendt, 2011) can be thought as contingency theories since they explain how humor works in different situations.

### Incongruity Theory

This theory of humor was first mentioned by a German Philosopher, Emmanuel Kant in 1790 and was further explained in "The World as Will and Idea", by Arthur Schopenhauer in 1819 who asserted that laughter is a means of acknowledging the humor that results when there is a disconnect between one idea and one's expectations. This theory attempts to explain what can be considered as humorous. It is built on the premise that surprises and uncommon circumstances engender humor (Meyer, 2000).

According to this theory the things that people usually find funny and humorous are somewhat unexpected, surprising or inappropriate (Miznikova and Schönfeldt, 2010). This type of humor functions by establishing an incongruity between bodies of knowledge and the subsequent resolution of the incongruity by the recipient (Suls, 1972). Humor then can be seen as incongruity problem solving, which when moderately difficult, results in pleasure (e.g. laughter) when resolved (Romero & Arendt, 2011). This theory emphasizes the cognitive aspect of humor, where it is necessary for one to have the mental capacity to identify and understand incongruous changes. With the application of this theory, some forms of humor found within the work environment are illustrations of the incongruity theory. In the organization, the use of incongruity may assist in communicating unpleasant information or expression of feelings with minimal social risk (Graham, Papa & Brooks, 1992). It has been stated that humor eases tension and overcomes monotony in the workplace (Richardson, 2013). This leads to employees engaging with one another (Meyer 2000). According to the Incongruity Theory, humor interrupts the pattern of dreariness of the workplace with a pleasant incongruence (Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990).

#### **Relief Theory**

This theory of humor tries to explain humor from the perspective of its functions and values to us as individuals. According to this theory, humor is an antidote of tension, stress and paradoxes of everyday life. The major proponent of this theory is Sigmund Freud. Freud (1928) opined that humor releases repressed emotions that are associated with the humor theme. Also, this theory assumes that an individual will laugh or experience humor when he/she feels that stress or tension has been released (Martin, Rich and Gayle, 2004). The theory is expressed as the release of built-up tension either regarding a subject or a general sense of tension within the responder (Morreall 2009; Lyttle 2007). Thus, organizational members use jokes, stories, and anecdotes to build group cohesion and alleviate boredom (Block, Browning, & McGrath, 1983; Smeltzer and Leap, 1988; Ullian, 1976), develop inclusive relationships, increase a sense of belonging (Duncan et al., 1990), reduce tension (Martineau, 1972), and enhance group enjoyment (Wasserman and Klein, 1974). Additionally, self-disparaging humor, that is when jokes are directed at oneself, could be used as a tool by managers to achieve a release of stress and increased subordinate participation, thus being an effective tool in the hands of a skillful leader (Miznikova and Schönfeldt, 2010).

#### **Superiority Theory**

This theory is centered on the superiority of a person over others and can be traced as far back as Plato. Superiority theory postulates that humor is used to gain control (LaFave, & Mennell, 1976) and feel superior (Ziv, 1984) by laughing at people or things that one's feels better than. Hobbes is often seen as the originator of the superiority theory, stemming from his political philosophy (Miznikova and Schönfeldt, 2010). His philosophy maintains that people are not making the social contracts out of altruistic concerns but rather to protect themselves, thus a person would feel jubilant whenever others look bad in comparison (Duncan et al. 1990). This theory proposes that if humor provokes laughter, either inward or outward, it is because of a sense of triumph over the person or situation. Superiority humor is often used to gain control over subordinates, while not always being of an aggressive nature and directed at another party. Also, applying this type of humor allows to "maintaining boundaries without suffering negative effects that occur when using forceful or critical language" (Martin 2004 p.209). Consequently, superiority humor can reinforce group unity by laughing at somebody's faulty behavior together, while feeling triumphant over those being ridiculed (Meyer 2000). In the organizational setting, though, status has a great importance in deciding who can execute humor over whom (Duncan, 1985). First, high status subordinates of a group joke more than low-status subordinates. Second, high-status initiators most often direct jokes towards low status subordinates. Third, when other (high-status) subordinates are present, high-status subordinates refrain from self-disparaging humor (Miznikova and Schönfeldt, 2010).

#### **The Concept of managerial Humor Practice**

The concept of humor in the organization is currently receiving significant attention as against certain historical context where managers consciously suppress humor because it was seen as uncivilized and dangerous (Collinson, 2017). These have led to the different definitions of humor given by several scholars as humor does not lend itself to general definition even though it is all around us and is used constantly; it is not a concept that can be easily defined (Miznikova and Schönfeldt, 2010). This is why scholars in the study of humor do not have a universal definition but adopt different definitions depending on the aspect of humor being studied. Gkorezis, Hatzithomas and Petridou (2011) in their study of 'The Impact of Leader's Humor on Employees' Psychological Empowerment: the Moderating Role of Tenure' defined humor as a social expression with beneficial effects on physical and psychosocial health and well-being. Miznikora and Schonfeldt (2010) in defining organizational humor adopted Romero and Cruthirds (2006); definition of humor as amusing communication that produces positive emotions and cognitions in the individuals, groups or organization. The positive effect reflects the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, active, and alert, and is related to social activity and positive emotional reactivity (Hoendervoogt, 2015). Similarly, it has a certain effect on the workplace or an organization too. For individuals at workplace, humor concerns their working mood and is a means for them to interact with members of their team.

Adequate exercise of humor can create a fun atmosphere and resolve embarrassment, dilemmas and even conflicts among people, establishing familiarity with others and contribute to the quality of interpersonal relationship (Ho, Wang, Huang & Chen, 2011). In contemporary management, managers are expected to create an environment/climate where employees can easily interact with management and fellow employees, which will promote employees' cooperation that is necessary for the achievement of organizational goals. Humor when used in the organization promotes healthy work life and harmony. Managerial humor practice involves managers communicating and interacting with subordinates using humorous materials. Managers can induce humor by presenting pleasant surprises, teasing, joking, laughing out loud, smiling, and raising a cynical eyebrow aimed at creating a fun filled atmosphere where employees can feel free to express themselves. Managers have a choice on how to introduce humor and

this choice is amongst the different humor styles. An important development in humor research is the conceptualization of four humor styles in extant literature by scholars that can be explored by managers in the workplace which include: affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor (Romero and Arendt, 2011).

### **Humorous Practices**

Humorous practices in the organization or styles reflect individual differences in the functions of humor. Approaches to humor are assumed from the initiator's perspective, thus suggest why a manager would choose one or the other style in various organizational situations (Miznikova & Schönfeldt, 2010). Though approaches to humor are independent, they can be combined due to the overlapping functions they perform. Below are the four humorous practices employed by managers:

#### **Affiliative humor**

Affiliative humor is used to ease tension in interpersonal communication. People who employ this kind of humor tell jokes and funny stories to attract others and improving social interaction. This position is supported by Ho, Wang, Huang and Chen (2011), they asserted that it is like a lubricant that can easily ease out interpersonal strangeness and nervousness and instill enthusiasm into social occasions. Similarly, this type of humor also has positive correlation with self-esteem, optimism, and a good mood; it is negatively correlated with nervousness and anxiety (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray & Weir, 2003). Managers who use this humor practice/style tell jokes or funny things to relief interpersonal tension and provide subordinates with the sense of comfort; these managers are usually liked by others and seen as non-threatening. Ho, Wang, Huang & Chen (2011) also opined that applying affiliative humor in an organization is often built on the hope to minimize the strange feelings with subordinates, shorten mutual distance, try to bring members together and create solidarity and a positive environment so that the individuals and team can work toward common goals.

#### **Self-Enhancing Humor**

Self-enhancing humor helps in developing a positive mindset in the face of distress, tension and tribulation. People who employ self-enhancing humor have a humorous view of life and are not easily overwhelmed in distress and by its inevitable tribulations (Romero & Arendt, 2011). These people have a humorous attitude towards their life. When they deal with stress or difficulty, they motivate themselves through humor and maintain their positive awareness. It is an emotion-regulating or responsive defense mechanism. Self-enhancing humor has been said to be negatively related to neuroticism and positively related to self-esteem and favorable emotions (Ho, Wang, Huang & Chen, 2011). Romero and Cruthirds (2006) posit that this type of humor is used to enhance the image of the initiator when used in the organization. This humor style is individual centered unlike affiliative humor (Martin *et al.*, 2003). Romero and Cruthirds (2006) also opined that this type of humor is use mainly to impress others. This is in consonance with Martin *et al.*, (2003) assertion that self-enhancing humor emphasizes the internal transformations of oneself and it is not easy for team members to be aware of the intensions of the initiations at the beginning. Managers who use this humor style enhance their self-image relative to others and demonstrate to others that the manager has a positive mindset towards stress and can effectively cope with organizational distress.

#### **Aggressive Humor**

Aggressive humor involves 'put down'. People who use this type of humor try to humiliate, belittle and victimize others. It is also aimed at manipulating others by means of implied threat or ridicule (Janes & Olsen, 2000). This humor style is based on the superiority theory, which postulates that the initiator of the humor is superior to others. People make themselves feel better at the expense of others by using aggressive humor in order to maintain a superior status. Aggressive humor is said to be negatively related to agreeableness and conscientiousness while positively related to hostility, aggression, and nervousness (Martin *et al.*, 2003). Naturally, aggression does not produce positive emotions and similarly it is not expected to establish positive relationships (Miznikova & Schönfeldt, 2010). In organizations, managers use this type of humor to humiliate employees increasing their anxiety and reducing their well-being (Gkerezis, Hatzithomas & Petridou, 2011). According to Miznikova and Schönfeldt (2010) the use of aggression by managers might equal exercise of power and insensitivity, thus is not advised to be practiced when trying to achieve organizational outcomes by friendly means.

#### **Self-Defeating Humor**

Individuals who use self-defeating humor employ self-disparaging jokes in an attempt to amuse others. Self-defeating humor is a negative humor style detrimental to oneself and a self-denying defense mechanism that tends to hide negative feelings away from problems through humor (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). By producing an excessive amount of self-disparaging and cynical humor, individuals attempt to ingratiate others at their own expense, by being the butt of the joke (Kuiper and McHale, 2009). This type of humor is said to be often positively related to depression, low self-esteem and anxiety, and negatively correlated with self-esteem, happiness and social support satisfaction (Martin *et al.*, 2003). Self-defeating humor when used in an organization is meant to go along with everyone and gain acceptance from others. Managers who use excessive self-defeating humor can result in subordinates perceiving him/her not seriously, thus endangering their power in the group or organization. Despite the negative impacts of this humor style resulting in perceived emotional neediness and low self-esteem, managers who use it moderately are capable of facilitating closer relationships with employees by reducing their status, will be considered more approachable (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

The aforementioned humor styles can be broadly categorized into two major groups; positive and negative humor styles; affiliative and self-enhancing humorous approaches can be considered as positive humor since they are positively related with the psychological well-being (Gkerezis, Hatzithomas & Petridou, 2011). On the other hand, aggressive and self-defeating humor styles result in predominantly negative emotional reactions such as anger and aggression hence can be categorized as negative

humor styles. Researchers have proposed that work become meaningful when managers use positive humor to communicate with their employees because humorous expressions are an important aspect of interaction which generates positive emotions. Roberts and Wilbanks (2012) posit that humor can perpetuate a positive emotions base on their wheel model of humor. In a study by Cheng and Wang (2014) it was found that persistent behavior can be influenced by humor through generating emotions. Managers' positive humor has been found to be positively associated with work attitudes such as subordinate job satisfaction and commitment (Geoswami and Nair, 2018)

### **Managerial Humor Practices and Employees' Organizational Commitment**

Commitment is defined as a psychological state that binds the individual to the organization (John & Elyse, 2010). Fu and Deshpande (2013) refer to employees' organizational commitment as a measure of employees' attachment to and identification with their job. This involves an active attitude to work by the employees; willingness to be devoted to the organization and to remain employed in the organization. Such employees would be willing to expend their efforts in; demonstrate loyalty to the organization (Lee & Cha 2015) and will develop a predisposition and emotional attachment that is psychologically aligned with the organization's strategic intent (Narteh, 2012). Employees' organizational commitment is simply employees' attitudes to organization (Zhenget, 2010) and is crucial to the success of the organization. So it can be said that someone who has high organizational commitment will tend to show it in the attitude of acceptance, confidence, strong and in support of the values and goals of the organization, as well as a strong impetus to maintain membership in the organization for the achievement of organizational goals (Djastuti, Irviana, Rahardjo & Udin, 2019). Employees who have a high commitment to the organization will work more optimally and show good performance (Lee, Tan & Javalgi).

Owoyemi, Oyelere, Elegbede and Gbajumo-Sheriff (2011) have conceptualized three dimensions of employees' organizational commitment which include affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment. Affective commitment refers to the employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Igella, 2014). Affective commitment is said to have a positive relationship with low employee turnover, low absenteeism and improved job performance (Wang, 2010). On the other hand, Continuance commitment is concerned with the employees desire remain with the organization which could be as a result of the cost associated with leaving the organization such as tenure, pay, benefits, vesting of pensions and family (Igella, 2014). Normative commitment is the moral obligation employees feel to remain in the organization. Coyle-Shapiro, 2008) proposed that normative commitment has been found to be correlated with affective commitment.

Scholars suggest that employees may express each of these three forms of commitment to varying degrees depending on the force that binds the employees to the organization and the factors that necessitated it. This binding force reflects the extent to which an individual identifies with an organization. Organizational commitment is often interpreted by employees' feelings toward the organization, how employees are willing to contribute and stay with the organization (Djastuti, Irviana, Rahardjo & Udin, 2019). They further opined that this feeling is often called affection, where one dimension of organizational commitment is affective commitment. An employee who feels fun at work or humor will be pleased with the work environment; it will spur them to exhibit positive behavior and attitude, one of which is how it is committed to the organization. The fun at work reflects and enhances an employee's commitment to the organization.

Djastuti *et al.* (2019) in their study found that humor or fun at work has a positive effect on organizational commitment. Fun moods and 'humor' in the workplace can be transmitted to other employees. Managerial positive humor practices such as affiliative and self-enhancing humor act as a bond to bring people together (Cahill & Densham, 2014). Individuals who use affiliative humor would be expected to be more cooperative with their team members and more committed to the organization, since the positive and other-focused nature of affiliative humor makes it a natural fit with cooperative and committed behaviors. Likewise, individuals who use self-enhancing humor would be expected to be more cooperative with their teams and more committed to their organizations because they are more satisfied. (Romero & Arendt, 2011) further purported that the positive relationship between self-enhancing humor and both extraversion and agreeableness suggests a positive relationship with team cooperation and organizational commitment. According to Geoswami and Nair (2018) leaders' positive humor has been found to be positively associated with work attitudes such as subordinate job satisfaction and commitment (Burford, 1987; Decker, 1987).

Similarly, Romero and Arendt (2011) in their research found that there is a positive relationship between team cooperation and affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor. In addition, there is a positive relationship between organizational commitment and affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor. There is a negative relationship between self-defeating humor and agreeableness, social intimacy, and conscientiousness. This is consonance with Martin, *et al.*, (2003) who asserted that a negative relationship exists between self-defeating humor and team cooperation or organizational commitment. People who use self-defeating humor would likely have a negative outlook on their team and their organization. Individuals who use aggressive humor are likely to perceive their team and their organization as inadequate and unworthy of their continued participation. The negative relationship between aggressive humor, agreeableness and conscientiousness and the positive relationship between aggressive humor and hostility (Martin, *et al.*, 2003) suggest a negative relationship with team cooperation or organizational commitment.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Managerial humor practice is a crucial factor in the organization which entails the relationship that exists between the managers and subordinates. This relationship is necessary for the effective operation of the organization. This is way humor practice in the organization creates positive feelings that enable employees have a sense of belonging. The three widely used theories of humor, which include: incongruity theory, relief theory and superiority earlier discussed laid the foundation on how humor is used and the functions it performs in the organization. These functions of humor are expressed in the humor styles employed by managers, which could be in form affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor.

Scholars in this field have proposed that the use of positive humor (affiliative and self-enhancing) can stimulate positive emotions which in turn have the potential to trigger organizational outcomes such as employees' organizational commitment necessary for the attainment of the goals and objectives of the organization. On the contrary, negative humor (aggressive and self-defeating) has also been found to be negatively related to employees' organizational commitment because managers who employee negative humor are likely to perceive their team and their organization as inadequate and unworthy of their continued participation. Hence, managers are encouraged to employ positive humor, that is, affiliative and self-enhancing humor to drive employees' organizational commitment as it is pertinent for the overall success of the organization.

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