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Humor in Corporate Work Place Interactions:

It's Not What You Can Do for Humor, but What Humor Can Do for You

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This review examines the role of humor in work place interactions through the social constructionist perspective (Hatch 1997). That is, this review explores the ways in which people construct their interactions through humor, and the effects that has on their performance in the work place. However, according to Robinson, “any attempt to analyze humor risks taking all the fun out of the subject,” but this review is going to do just that (2001:123). Humor is often defined as being in the eye of the beholder. However, there are a few theories as to what constitutes humor. Humor is generally known as a verbal or written incongruity, or inconsistency with a societal norm, and communicated with the intention of being amusing (O’Quin 1981). This review focuses on that humor which is intended to be humorous, regardless of the outcome. Humor is a diverse and complex creature that has been scrutinized by some of the most learned scholars over the years, as shown in this review, which has sources dating back to 1951. The wealth of knowledge gathered on humor over the years shows that humor can be used in just about any way imaginable. Humor can be used to alienate people (Emerson 1969; Fine and De Soucey 2005; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001; Stephenson 1951), to create conflict (Hatch 1997; Stephenson 1951), to ease conflict (Rose 2007; Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Stephenson 1951), to broach taboo topics (Emerson 1969; Sanford and Elder 1984; Stephenson 1951), or even to explore one’s own identity (Rose 2007; Sanford and Elder 1984).

This review will briefly touch on all of these things, but the main focus of this review is the use of humor in the workplace, and how it is used to the benefit of the company and its employees. The review explores how and why humor builds group cohesion, facilitates communication, relieves stress, and (spark) sparks creativity (Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Romero and Pescosolido 2008). Managers and employees who use humor in a productive manner can create an atmosphere that stimulates many desirable aspects of the corporate workplace. However, humor is not entirely a bag full of chuckles, as there are some serious implications that are associated with humor (Emerson 1969). Humor can be used in a variety of unpleasant ways(;), both intentionally and unintentionally, such as to create boundaries between people, and can cause hurt feelings. This is important because it is entirely counterproductive to humor that enhances work place productivity. Productivity in the work place is essential, especially to managers, as this generation of employees increasingly expect work to be fun (Romero and Pescosolido 2008). This is highly relevant in this day and age, as employers must look for innovative ways to motivate their employees.

~Background~

As previously mentioned, humor has a plethora of uses and methods which have been around through the ages, probably since people were first able to communicate with one another. While that is entirely hypothetical, it is known that people have been using humor in many locations, situations and mediums for quite a while now. The profession of creating humor to amuse the masses has even arisen due to the popularity of humor. Comics and comedians have brought the use of humor into mainstream entertainment. However, humor is not purely for

entertainment purposes. Many studies have been done to determine the use humor on persuasion (Markiewicz 1974), on social influence (O'Quin and Aronoff 1981), and media advertising (Elpers, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004). More specifically, the research of humor in the context of being an influence in the workplace has become relevant within the last thirty years as our capitalist country becomes more incorporated by the day. Managers, and even employees for that matter, use humor on a day to day basis (Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Romero and Pescosolido 2008). Many might wonder why this is relevant or even useful, when in fact, humor is as useful a tool as a computer in many ways. This article will focus entirely on the corporate workplace, even though humor is prevalent in every aspect of any workplace. Specifically, this paper will focus on productive humor, which enhances multiple aspects previously mentioned, along with the negative aspects that are rife throughout the work place.

~Productive Functions of Humor~

Humor is an effective method of motivating or otherwise encouraging employees to be productive. Humor has unique ability to create group cohesiveness (Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Romero and Pescosolido 2008). Cohesion is the situation of many people working together as a whole. One of the many ways this can be accomplished is through humor that creates a feeling of togetherness, or reducing external threats, such as competition (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Romero and Pescosolido 2008). People who joke within a group about the faults and ineptitudes of another company increase their own self-perception and help to ease the tension of competition. Humor has a way of bringing people together under commonalities expressed through different mediums of humor.

Likewise, people who join an established group, such as department, or branch, are often subjected to humor that tends to inadvertently establish guidelines and rules set by the group. The newest member must endure the humor of their coworkers, until they recognize and maintain the same guidelines and rules (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Romero and Cruthirds 2006). For example, in a case used in the article by Romero and Cruthirds, senior college baseball players reported teasing the new players until the new players could perform on the same level as the seniors (2006). These two processes bring about a feeling of group cohesiveness, a feeling that they are a team, together against external and manageable threats. This specific article measures these variables through the results of various interviews done by one of the authors.

This is constructive because it creates an atmosphere that is relaxed, productive and confident; another factor is that of enhanced communication. Communication is the exchange of information from one party to another. Communication is one of the most important aspects of the workplace and without efficient communication, the group or team is much less likely to be productive (Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Romero and Pescosolido 2008). Humor that enhances communication can come in many forms. Self-depreciating humor brings a communicator down to the level of the people being communicated to, thus increasing the chance of reaching the desired audience (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Romero and Pescosolido 2008). This humor is very similar to what is known as affiliative humor, which connects the communicator with a specific group (Romero and Cruthirds 2006). For example, when jokes are made about times of miscommunication, it signals to the rest of the group that that miscommunication is expected to not occur from that point on. A group of people who can connect and communicate efficiently are better able to complete assigned tasks in an organized manner (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Romero and Pescosolido 2008).

Humor also has the unique ability to curb or dull criticism (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Rose 2007). This has its merits, but due to its unique nature, will be explored in greater depth later in this review. Overall, communication creates an atmosphere similar to that of cohesion created by humor. Enhanced communication creates a productive and more relaxed atmosphere than that of poor communication, and the troubles brought on by it. This, in turn, has the same effect as good communication.

As previously mentioned, these two results of humor, group cohesion and enhanced communication, have similar outcomes. They create atmospheres of relaxed, productive work. A relaxed atmosphere is also an atmosphere in which there is little to no stress. Humor, inasmuch as that it furthers cohesion and communication, relieves stress as well. Humor in and of itself also has the power to relieve stress. Jokes made about stressful situations or tasks often diminishes the perceived stress or anxiety concerning the issue (Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Romero and Pescosolido 2008). This state of lowered stress and anxiety allows for a sense of control or manageability over the tasks at hand (Romero and Cruthirds 2006).

The ability of humor to create an environment that is stress free, friendly, and communicative, also allows for an environment of trust. As a group within a workplace begins to work without stress, without poor communication and with a sense of trust, the individuals open up to make a more creative group. Humor serves to create open-mindedness within a group that allows for risks to be taken, under the trust that individuals will not be ridiculed (Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Romero and Pescosolido 2008). This is key in establishing an environment where creativity is essential. In a workplace with a trusting environment people open up to new ideas, find it easier to implement ideas and “are more likely to engage in creative problem solving” (Romero and Cruthirds 2006:62; Romero and Pescosolido 2008).

The final part to this environment of fun and productivity, should the necessity arise, to critique or dissuade certain individuals within the group. When the creative juices are flowing, perhaps someone gets a little off topic, or on a tangent, this is easily remedied with slight jolt back on topic. This may come as a criticism of one's idea, or even a reprimand. However, humor yet again can be used to help, as criticism is often veiled in humor (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Rose 2007). The point still gets across, but without the hurt feelings or loss of face within the group (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Rose 2007). Humorous criticism is usually not offending in nature, and this allows for "honest and freer communication" (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Rose 2007).

Overall, humor serves to create a productive climate within the workplace. By building cohesion, increasing constructive communication, relieving stress and allowing for more creativity, humor serves as a useful tool with which a group or team may become that much more productive. This is something that managers should take into account as they are both creating and managing a group of people within the corporate world. They should also encourage or facilitate the use of humor to set the tone. However, not all humor is conducive to workplace productivity.

~Negative Effects of Humor~

Not all humor is intended to be productive; in some cases, it is intended to be counterproductive and even hurtful (Emerson 1969; Fine and De Soucey 2005; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001; Stephenson 1951). Humor can also be used to, in a sense, undo or prevent everything in the previous section. Humor that creates boundaries, conflict and alienation is

counterproductive to the ideal work environment. This section explains how to recognize and avoid these problems.

Humor can be used to create boundaries within groups (Emerson 1969; Fine and De Soucey 2005; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001; Stephenson 1951). Humor used in a hurtful and derogatory manner, such as inappropriate ethnic or sexual jokes, can split up or segment groups, effectively preventing any cohesion. Humor of this sort would also create a stressful atmosphere, where communication was difficult and unwanted at times. Hurtful humor would also curb creativity, as people would be unlikely to take the risk of presenting an idea that would be ridiculed (Romero and Cruthirds 2006).

There is, on the other hand, humor that is not intended to be hurtful or counterproductive, but can be interpreted as such. Often, there is an attempt at humor, made by one party, which is not recognized, or is even ignored, by the other party, which can lead to awkward situations (Emerson 1969). Humor can also be misinterpreted or not fully understood, which when explained, similar to this review, tends to take away the intended humor anyway. There is of course, the chance that the humor is generally accepted, however, there are those who are sensitive to the humor, and take offense, even though none was intended (Emerson 1969).

An interesting example of unintentional humor is aptly portrayed in the Pilot Episode of the comedy series *The Office*, in the scene where the boss tries to impress the new intern with his humor, by pretending to fire the receptionist for stealing post-its. This backfires on the boss, however, as the receptionist takes it seriously and begins to cry. The boss did not intend to make the receptionist cry, but his humor was not understood and misinterpreted (Pilot, *The Office*). Here the boss tried to use humor to show how much fun they have at work there, but causes hurt feelings instead. This is a case of failed humor being counterproductive to the work place.

As humor can be unproductive and at times, hurtful, it would be beneficial to be careful when using humor, particularly in mixed groups. Humor is still a useful tool in the workplace, but discretion should be used when one is uncertain of the reaction, or be prepared to explain one's intent. There is also humor that is neither hurtful, nor useful for the workplace.

~Other Humor~

While much of the humor out there can be used productively, or unproductively, in the terms of the workplace, there is also humor that fits neither category, but is nonetheless prevalent in the workplace. This humor tends to take three major forms. The three forms are, exploring taboo topics, exploring identity, and pure entertainment.

Humor can, and often does take the form of exploring those topics which are not brought up in every day conversation (Emerson 1969; Sanford and Elder 1984; Stephenson 1951). These topics are considered taboo, and humor allows the introduction of topics in situations where the topic would not have been originally introduced in regular conversation (Emerson 1969; Sanford and Elder 1984; Stephenson 1951). Comedians are notorious for exploring taboo topics within society, a few great examples of which would be George Carlin, Dave Chappelle and Dane Cook. However, it is very relevant to everyday use. For example, Romero and Cruthirds say that people who have poor comedic skills can use materials from comedians and comic strips to help break the ice (2006). This kind of humor can also be used to feel out where people stand on certain issues.

Humor can be used as a means of identification. It helps "each party to better recognize the other as sharing in (or diverging from) some important sense of identity" (Rose 2007:4). This

is important in a workplace, because it allows co-workers to connect and relate to one another. One could even argue that this step is helpful in setting up humor to build group cohesiveness, as people use humor to determine others identities, they also determine what humor is usable to connect with those individuals (Emerson 1969; Sanford and Elder 1984).

Finally, humor can be used as just plain old entertainment. Some comedians and comic strip authors use humor purely for entertainment purposes (Romero and Cruthirds 2006). This is neither beneficial, nor productive, but it can be a stress reliever and time to relax. In the workplace, humor for the sake of humor can be nice; to joke around with the guy in the other cubicle is not a bad thing.

~Conclusion~

In conclusion, humor plays a major role in the workplace; it can be productive in increasing overall performance, it can be unproductive by creating a negative atmosphere, or it can just be a part of conversation. Productive humor is humor that builds cohesion, encourages good communication, relieves unnecessary stress, and sparks creativity. This humor is useful and should be used on a regular basis in the workplace. Unproductive humor is negative in nature, whether intentional or unintentional. This humor does not promote productivity and should not be encouraged. Humor that serves neither purpose still has a place in the workplace, and serves to be mentioned.

The implications of this work are already evident to many corporate companies. Hugely successful companies, such as Google and Microsoft, intentionally create atmospheres through humor and entertainment to increase productivity (Romero and Pescosolido 2008). Google has

what is known as the Googleplex, essentially a miniature city for its employees to work and play. They have assigned “play” time, in which they have to stop their work and go do something active for a time to relax. Though many companies will not go to the extremes that the aforementioned companies have, it still goes to say that humor is beneficial on any level. The office does not have to be full of comedians for work to get done, but properly used and facilitated humor can have great benefits. The benefits can include enhanced communication, less stress, greater cohesion and improved creativity (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Romero and Cruthirds 2006; Romero and Pescosolido 2008).

There are a few areas that, if researched in more depth, would result in a larger understanding of humor in the workplace. Future research in the explicit differences in humor between the sexes, and different age groups, would add another dynamic to the humor construction in the work place. Certain articles have alluded to the idea that there have been studies done that show that there are differences in humor between sexes, but not in relation to the workplace. Research done to tease out the differences in humor between sexes in the work place would probably add to research on harassment in the work place, among other things. The research of humor in relation to ethnic diversity within the workplace, along with the research of humor in different workplace types (blue collar compared to white collar) would both be valuable to furthering the study of humor in the workplace.

Overall, the research of humor has come a long way, much of it done recently, but it still has plenty of room to expand. Companies and managers would do well to learn from this and other reviews and from companies that have successfully shown that humor in the work place should not be discouraged, but encouraged. Working is, and always has been, a social norm in our society, and as corporate America is becoming a greater component of the work sector,

especially in urban and suburban areas, it will be interesting to see how humor changes corporate America in the future.

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