

# Review and Prospect of the Research on the Ambidexterity of Leadership Humor

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## Abstract

Leadership humor is a new type of leadership that integrates humorous behavior into leadership. It is characterized by breaking the traditional dogmatic management and aims to adopt humorous and interesting interactive ways to manage and stimulate the benign behaviors of subordinates. Although the research on leadership humor has made some progress in both theoretical and empirical aspects, the research on the duality of leadership humor is still in its infancy. Through literature review, this paper analyzes the connotation of the duality measure of leader humor and the effect of different types of leader humor, and makes an in-depth review on the duality path and boundary conditions of leader humor influencing subordinates' behavior. Finally, in view of the difficulties and shortcomings of the research on leadership humor duality, four feasible research directions are proposed in the future.

**Keywords:** leadership humor, ambidexterity, action path, boundary conditions

## 1. Introduction

People have a long history of using humor. For example, Chinese crosstalk, sketch, novel and Opera have always depicted the plots with humorous elements to attract audiences. It was not until the 1980s that humor gradually gained prominence as a "useful" management tool (Malone, 1980). Humor, as a kind of unconventional leadership behavior, emphasizes on stimulating the initiative and enthusiasm of subordinates in their work through interesting and humorous interaction. Therefore, scholars usually regard humor of leaders as positive leadership. In order to identify the difference of leadership humor in the workplace, scholars have been trying to put forward different types of leadership humor. For example, Martin (2003) suggests that positive leadership humor includes self-enhancing, affiliative, and self-deprecating (Hopton et al., 2013); Negative leadership humor includes aggressive and self-defeating.

Positive leadership humor aims to exert a positive influence on subordinates by stimulating their positive emotions, emotions and attitudes. For example, Cooper (2018) confirmed that leadership humor can stimulate subordinates' positive emotions, relieve subordinates' pressure and change the quality of LMX to promote subordinates' extra-organizational behavior. While positive leadership humor plays a positive role, its "joke" and "unconventional" nature will bring certain side effects to subordinates. For example, Yam (2018) believe that positive leadership humor will make subordinates have the perception that norms can be violated, leading to subordinates' deviant behavior.

Negative leadership humor aims to achieve personal goals by satirizing or belittling subordinates, which will bring the pressure of position difference and negative emotions to subordinates. However, while these negative effects on subordinates, they may also bring positive effects to subordinates. For example, leaders use sarcastic humor to convey "reprimand message", which helps subordinates not to make mistakes and "remember" matters needing attention. It can even make subordinates feel that the leader is "giving face", which in turn generates a positive response in return for the leader.

It can be seen that as a special way of leadership in the workplace, the positive and negative effects of leadership humor are often symbiotic and coexisting no matter what the leader "intends to do" (Cooper, 2008). Scholars refer to this good and bad effect of leadership humor as "duality" effect (Malone, 1980). Although the role of leadership humor has been concerned by scholars at the beginning of the study, it has not attracted enough attention. Therefore, this article intends to lead from humor to their subordinates "dual" role, first of all different types of humor of the dual role of leadership, the second for different types of leadership humor "dual nature" of the subordinate behavior affect paths and boundary conditions to carry on the review, the last effect on leadership "dual" humor research discussed possible future directions.

## **2. The Duality Effect of Different Types of Leader Humor**

### *2.1 The Dual Role of Positive Leadership Humor*

For subordinates' work attitude, positive leadership humor will have a positive impact on subordinates' job satisfaction, job engagement and emotional commitment (Kim et al., 2016; Goswami et al., 2016; Pundt et al., 2017), while negatively affecting emotional exhaustion (Pundt and Venz, 2017) and cynicism (Gkorezis et al., 2014). For subordinates' work behaviors, positive leadership humor not only has a positive driving effect on subordinates' in-role behaviors, such as innovative behaviors (Tang, 2008), but also can stimulate subordinates' out-of-role behaviors, such as OCB (Organizational Citizenship Behavior).

Positive leadership humor has a positive impact on subordinates, but also has certain side effects. When the leader implements the agreeableness or self-strengthening humor behavior, the subordinates perceive that it is acceptable to violate the norms, and then follow the leader to conduct behaviors contrary to the organizational norms, such as deviance and sabotage (Yam et al., 2018). When leaders engage in self-deprecating humor, it weakens the rank distance, position disparity, and interpersonal tension between subordinates (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006), and creates an impression of inferiority among subordinates (Martin et al., 2003), which greatly endangers the leader's image in the organization.

### *2.2 The Duality of Negative Leader Humor*

For subordinates, mocking leader humor, as a negative social emotional resource, on the one hand will make subordinates perceive the leader's intention to offend and harm their relationship, and then reduce voice behavior to avoid the risk of being attacked (Liu et al., 2019). On the other hand, it will increase subordinates' pressure in the workplace, resulting in psychological problems such as depression, tension and insecurity (Richman et al., 1996). At the same time, sarcastic humor can also lead to deviant behaviors of subordinates (Yam et al., 2018). For leaders, improper use of negative leadership humor will reduce subordinates' subjective evaluation of leadership effectiveness. For example, Ho confirmed that mocking humor negatively predicted leadership effectiveness (Ho et al., 2011).

Although the implementation of negative leadership humor mainly negatively affects the subordinates, it also has a positive effect on them. Firstly, as an individual privilege with authority (Goffman, 1961), ironic humor can help leaders clarify power relations (Smeltzer and Leap, 1988) and consolidate the position of leaders in the hierarchy (Romero, 2006). Secondly, mild sarcastic humor can help leaders shape subordinates' behavior norms to conform to group norms (Martineau, 1972). In addition, in the context of Eastern culture, individuals value interpersonal relationship and face, and mild ironic humor communicates with subordinates in a humorous tone (Martineau, 1972), which not only makes subordinates "willing" to accept mistakes, but also saves their face.

To sum up, as a new type of leadership, leadership humor is a double-edged sword (Malone, 1980), which can be used as a tool for effective management or subversive management (Westwood and Johnston, 2007). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the "dual nature" of leadership humor, in order to make use of the positive role of leadership humor, while reducing its negative impact to the minimum, is an important subject that the current academic circle and leaders need to face and pay attention to.

## **3. The Path of Leadership Humor**

There are three main pathways of leadership humor influencing subordinates' behavior: positive pathway; Negative action path; A dual action path with both positive and negative effects. This section takes Cooper (2018), Huo et al., (2012) and Yam et al., (2018) as examples to review and reveal how leadership humor affects subordinates' behavior through positive, negative and ambivalent paths.

### *3.1 The Path of Positive Leadership Humor*

Cooper (2018) believe that leadership humor, as a social emotional resource, can promote subordinates' extra-organizational behaviors by changing the quality of LMX, relieving subordinates' pressure and stimulating

their positive emotions. Therefore, Cooper (2018) constructed a positive leadership humor interpersonal enhancement path model (as shown in Figure 1).

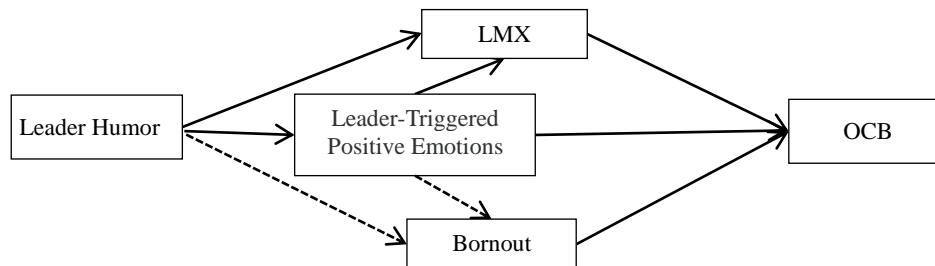


Figure 1. The positive role pathway model of leadership humor

Note: From Cooper (2018).

### 3.1.1 “Leadership Humor→LMX→OCB” Path

In the workplace, after a series of exploratory and interactive activities between the leader and the subordinate, if the subordinate agrees with the leader's humor and forms a psychological contract of mutual trust and loyalty with the leader, the two will form high-quality LMX; otherwise, they will form low-quality LMX (Blau, 1964). In the case of high-quality LMX, the leader and subordinates mainly exchange social emotional resources, and the subordinates, based on the principle of social exchange, will try to return OCB to the leader, such as helping others, being responsible and supporting reform.

### 3.1.2 “Leadership Humor→Bornout→OCB” Path

According to the resource conservation theory (Hobfoll, 1989), leadership humor, as a social emotional resource, can effectively guide subordinates to deal with the pressure at work and alleviate the burnout caused by long-term work pressure. Meanwhile, subordinates who obtain resources through the form of leadership humor have sufficient resources to implement in-role and out-of-role behaviors (Cropanzano et al., 2003). However, the empirical test shows that there is no significant correlation between leader's humor and subordinates' job burnout, and job burnout is negatively correlated with OCB.

### 3.1.3 “Leadership Humor→Positive Emotion→OCB” Path

According to the "expander-construction" theory (Frederickson, 2001), the humor of leadership can stimulate the positive emotions of subordinates, make them in a highly energetic activation, happy and engaged emotional state (Tang Chaoying et al., 2011), promote the work enthusiasm, activity ability and active behavior of subordinates, and make them unconsciously make more OCB. At the same time, subordinates who experience positive emotions have strong social skills and benevolent tendencies (Isen, 1984), which make them perform conscientiousness and help others. Furthermore, subordinates who experienced positive emotions performed OCB to maintain or prolong their positive emotions (Staw et al., 1994; Koopman et al., 2016).

## 3.2 The Path of Negative Leadership Humor

Huo (2012) constructed a negative path model of sarcastic leadership humor based on social comparison and attribution theory (as shown in Figure 2).

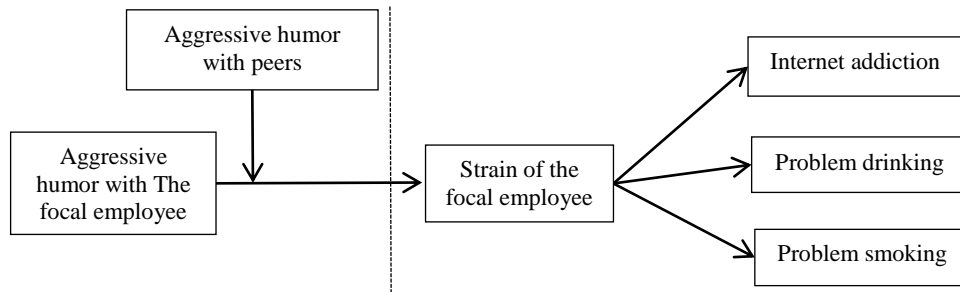


Figure 2. The negative path model of leadership humor

Note: From Huo (2012).

First, humor of negative leaders, as negative social emotional resources, will send aggressive and humiliating signals to subordinates (Liu et al., 2019). In organizations with unequal distribution of power, subordinates rely more on leaders for promotions and salary increases, so they cannot take "revenge" in the face of leaders' attacks and humiliations. Instead, they can only turn into negative emotions such as anger. Negative emotions accumulate over time, leading to the formation of subordinates' pressure.

Secondly, organizational members tend to compare with each other the leadership behaviors and rewards they receive (Myers and Crowther, 2009). If the mocking humor of the leader is rarely directed at other subordinates, the subordinates will think that it is their own inappropriate behavior that stimulates the mocking humor of the leader (Bowling and Beehr, 2006), and thus produce a sense of pressure (Tepper et al., 2009). On the contrary, if other subordinates also become the target of sarcastic humor, the subordinates will attribute the sarcastic humor to the leader, and the effect of sarcastic humor on subordinates' pressure will be alleviated. Subordinates who have been under high stress in the workplace for a long time will engage in negative behaviors to relieve stress (Moore et al., 2007), such as smoking and drinking, slow down from work and absence from work.

### 3.3 The Dual Role Path of Leadership Humor

Yam (2018) used benign violation theory (McGraw and Warren, 2010) and social information processing theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978) to construct a theoretical model of dual effects of leadership humor with both "positive" and "negative" effects (see Figure 3).

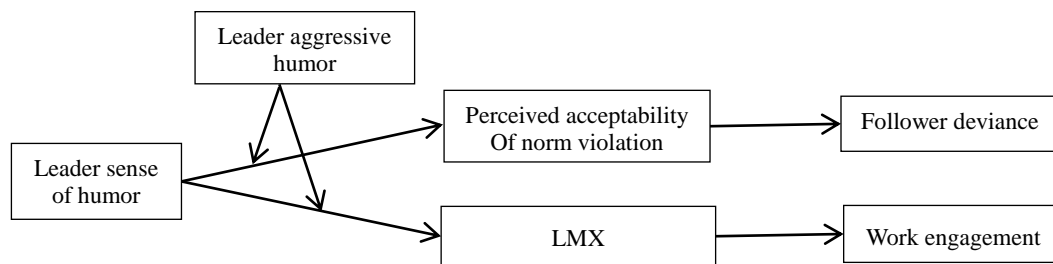


Figure 3. A dual role path model of leadership humor

Note: From Yam (2018).

#### 3.3.1 Negative Effects of Leadership Humor

In organizations, the behavior of leaders is often taken as an example and symbol of the "way of doing things" (Shamir et al., 1993). Leadership humor as a kind of benign norm violations, marked the organization in violation of the norms of acceptability, subordinate violations will follow the leaders to participate in this specification, then eventually lead to subordinates in the unconscious behavior of violating workplace organization specification has increased dramatically, threatening the whole organization of benign operation (Robinson and Bennett, 1995).

### 3.3.2 The Positive Role of Leadership Humor

The use of humor by leaders implicitly sends signals to subordinates that they do not pay attention to the hierarchical differences between them, implying that the communication between leaders and subordinates is inclusive and open. Through information processing and processing, subordinates find that leaders dilute hierarchy and take a tolerant attitude, thus perceiving and believing that the relationship between themselves and leaders is social exchange oriented (Cooper, 2008; Decker and Rotondo, 2001), thus establishing a high quality LMX between them. Under high quality LMX, subordinates can safely be their true selves and fully devote their energy to work; on the other hand, subordinates believe that they should repay the support of leaders through active work, so as to improve their work involvement.

## 4. Boundary Conditions

This section summarizes some boundary conditions that affect the positive, negative and duality of leadership humor based on existing research.

### 4.1 Boundary Conditions of Positive Leadership Humor Pathway

Under certain situational factors, positive leadership humor has different effects on subordinates' positive attitude and behavior. Therefore, scholars focused on the situational factors that are more conducive to the effectiveness of positive leadership humor, such as subordinates' organizational structure preference and relationship conflict between leaders and subordinates.

#### 4.1.1 Organizational Structure Preference

Subordinate organizational structure preference refers to subordinates' preference for formal, normative, clear and mechanical organizational structure (Neuberg and Newsom, 1993). Subordinates with low preference for organizational structure can greatly satisfy their expectation of intra-organizational equality and preference for informality in the face of leaders' intention to dilute their sense of hierarchy through positive humor. Therefore, the implementation of leadership humor is bound to be recognized and accepted to the maximum extent, and then play the maximum effect (Pundt, 2016). On the contrary, subordinates with high preference for organizational structure will consider the humorous behavior of leaders as "not serious", and thus generate resistance and antipathy (Friesen et al., 2014). Therefore, the effectiveness of humor of leaders is bound to be greatly reduced.

#### 4.1.2 The Moderating Effect of Relationship Conflict

Relationship conflict refers to the tension, hostility and annoyance caused by the conflict of personal values and interpersonal styles (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). According to the leadership classification theory (Nye and Forsyth, 1991), under high relationship conflict, leadership humor can effectively reduce interpersonal tension caused by relationship conflict (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), which is considered to be effective leadership behavior (Nye and Forsyth, 1991). And will get the strong recognition of subordinates, and then leadership humor has a strong effect on organizational performance. Comparatively speaking, in the case of low relationship conflict, leaders do not need to deliberately adopt humorous behaviors to alleviate contradictions and conflicts, so the effect of leader humor on subordinates' attitudes and organizational performance is weak (Mao et al., 2017).

### 4.2 Boundary Conditions of Negative Leadership Humor Pathways

The effect size of negative leadership humor also has significant situation dependence. Therefore, scholars focused on some boundary conditions that can buffer or avoid the negative effects of negative leadership humor, such as subordinates' personality traits and power distance orientation.

#### 4.2.1 Personality Trait

Negative leader humor not only makes subordinates feel great psychological pressure, but also causes them to have negative emotional experience (Shi Guanfeng et al., 2017). Extroversion, as a positive personality trait, helps subordinates to form more effective self-regulation habits and skills, so extroversion subordinates can alleviate negative perception through their emotional regulation ability when facing negative leadership humor. Instead, neurotic as passive personality traits that subordinates lack enough self-emotion regulation ability (Johnson, 2014), therefore, high neuroticism subordinates in the face of passive aggressive the leadership of the humor, can only use their limited resources for the control and adjustment, to subordinate status in serious self-emotional resource depletion.

#### 4.2.2 Power Distance Orientation

Power distance orientation refers to the degree to which individuals accept unequal distribution of rights in an organization (Dorfman and Howell, 1998). Subordinates with low power distance orientation think that leaders and subordinates should be in equal status (Bochner and Hesketh, 1994), while negative humor of leadership aims to increase the rank gap between subordinates and leaders, which is contrary to their psychological expectation, thus producing strong negative emotions. A series of deviant behaviors to "retaliate" against the leader (He and Li, 2019). On the contrary, subordinates with high power distance orientation respect and obey authority more, and the negative humor implemented by leaders is in line with their psychological expectations and role positioning, which may buffer the impact of negative leader humor on subordinates' negative emotions, and thus subordinates' probability of deviant behavior is lower.

#### 4.3 Boundary Conditions of Leadership Humor Duality Action Path

At present, there are few boundary conditions to explore the dual effect path of leadership humor. The most representative one is Yam et al. (2018), which analyzed the moderating effect of sarcastic leadership humor on the relationship between leadership humor, job involvement and deviant behavior. Mocking leadership humor is more dismissive (Dews and Winner, 1995). Even if a mocking joke is considered humorous, it is still harmful to interpersonal relationships (Toplak and Katz, 2000) and more likely to cause conflict (Huang et al., 2015). Therefore, sarcastic humor negatively moderates the positive path between leadership humor and LMX. Similarly, mocking leadership humor can signal to subordinates that leaders have a higher acceptance of workplace norm violation, which positively moderates the negative path of leadership humor and perceived norm violation (Yam et al., 2018).

### 5. The Research Prospect of Leadership Humor

After sorting out the measurement methods, action paths and boundary conditions of leadership humor duality research, we believe that future research can be expanded based on the following aspects.

#### 5.1 The Dual Role Path of Leadership Humor

According to the dialectical relationship between the positive and negative effects of leadership humor, there are two feasible directions to study the dual effects of leadership humor.

##### 5.1.1 A study on the Ambidexterity of Leadership Humor at the Organizational Level

At present, there have been researches on the duality of leadership humor, most of which are based on the individual level, that is, leadership humor affects the negative and positive behaviors of individuals by influencing their cognitive, motivational and emotional processes. However, few literatures have revealed the specific mechanism of leadership humor's dual influence on organizational factors. Therefore, future research should focus on exploring the dual role of leadership humor at the organizational level.

##### 5.1.2 The Ambivalent Influence of the Interaction of Leadership Humor Style

Positive and negative leadership humor can coexist. For example, when subordinates encounter difficulties in work, leaders will show positive humor to help them relieve pressure; However, when subordinates make mistakes at work, the leader may use negative humor or sarcasm to urge them to correct. Therefore, the future research can combine two or more kinds of leadership humor, combine one positive and one negative leadership humor in the form of addition or multiplication, and study the duality effect of leadership humor combined with the duality management theory.

#### 5.2 Boundary Conditions of Leadership Humor Duality

In the future, we can introduce some variables such as personality traits, generational differences and cultural differences to explore the boundary conditions of the effectiveness of leadership humor.

##### 5.2.1 Personality Trait

As a relatively stable personality trait (Petrides and Furnham, 2001), emotional intelligence not only affects an individual's perception and understanding of events, but also affects the individual's control and management of emotions, leading to differences in work attitudes and behaviors (Meyer and Allen, 1991). This suggests that emotional intelligence may be a useful moderator for future studies on the relationship between the ambidexterity of leadership humor and subordinates' attitudes and behaviors.

##### 5.2.2 Generation Gap

This difference in values may lead to differences in their perception and appreciation of leaders' humorous behaviors, which will influence the effect of leaders' humor. For example, for the new generation of subordinates

who prefer fun work and relaxed work environment, the leadership humor characterized by humorous and interesting interaction will stimulate their work motivation, and then make them have positive attitude and behavior. This kind of leadership style can make the older generation of subordinates who worship rules and emphasize hierarchy feel out of place, which can have some negative effects.

### 5.2.3 Cultural Difference

Studies on the boundary conditions of leadership humor are mainly carried out in the Western context, and only a few scholars take Chinese enterprises as samples to reveal the mechanism and moderating effect of the boundary conditions of leadership humor on the effect of leadership humor (Shi Guanfeng, 2017; Zhang Yajun and Shang Guqi, 2019). In view of the differences of Chinese and western culture (Niwa and Maruno, 2010), such as the western context is given priority to with individualism, the emphasis on high power distance and collectivism, therefore, the future can be added to the Chinese situation of "high power distance" "high collectivism" and so on adjustment variables, to excavate the circumstances leading humor dual boundary condition for the existence of the effect.

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