

Review and Prospect of Leader Humor Research

Ying Wang¹

¹ School of Economics, Tianjin University of Commerce, Tianjin, China

Correspondence: Ying Wang, School of Economics, Tianjin University of Commerce, Tianjin 300134, China.

Received: April 1, 2022

Accepted: April 19, 2022

Online Published: April 28, 2022

doi:10.20849/iref.v6i1.1115

URL: <https://doi.org/10.20849/iref.v6i1.1115>

Foundation Item: Humanities and Social Science Research Program of Ministry of Education (Grant No. 20YJA630057).

Abstract

Leader 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 leader humor has made some progress in both theoretical and empirical aspects, people gradually begin to pay attention to the overview of leader humor. Through literature review, this paper summarizes some outcome variables of leader humor, and analyzes the positive effects of different types of leader humor from measurement. Finally, the essential difference between the leader humor and the leader humor duality, how to choose the mediating variable, how to choose the Y variable and how to choose the moderating variable are discussed. This paper launches the research from the perspective of the positive role of leader humor, and provides a systematic and in-depth research framework and ideas on related issues.

Keywords: leader humor, outcome variable, positive effect, review and prospect

1. Introduction

In the modern workplace, the humorous behavior implemented by leaders can not only promote the communication between leaders and subordinates, enhance the positive emotions of each other, and reduce the grade difference perceived by subordinates (Cooper, 2008; Mallett & Wapshott, 2014), alleviates the pressure of subordinates in the institutional environment, and is conducive to relieving the tension or anxiety generated by conflicts (Parrish & Quinn, 1999). Therefore, many leaders have begun to incorporate humor into daily management activities as an effective management strategy (Dampier & Walton, 2013). For example, Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, made a pact with his underlings that he would dance the hula on Wall Street if they turned in record profits in their fiscal year. As a result, the underlings make record profits and Sam dances in a grass skirt in the financial center of the United States. Spring, a famous long-distance transportation company, held a special event in five business negotiation centers in the United States, requiring the five centers to come up with a new idea that makes subordinates and customers smile every day. Kodak added a "humor room" for subordinates to be happy; Sun sun company in April 1 every year on April Fool's Day to encourage subordinates to play tricks on the leadership.

Leader humor can be divided into positive and negative attributes (Martin et al., 2003), among which positive leader humor includes affinity humor, self-reinforcing humor and moderate self-deprecating humor. Negative leader humor includes aggressive humor and excessive self-deprecating humor (Gkorezis, Hatzithomas, & Petridou, 2011). Negative leader humor is very aggressive and offensive to subordinates (Martin et al., 2003), which is not conducive to the establishment of a positive and harmonious interpersonal relationship (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). Positive leader humor aims to improve subordinates' job involvement, job satisfaction and performance by mobilizing their positive emotional experience (Vinton, 1989; Robert & Wilbanks, 2012; Wood, Beckmann, & Rossiter, 2011; Goswami *et al.*, 2016), alleviating work pressure faced by subordinates (Cooper et al., 2018), which has attracted the attention of many scholars.

Positive leader humor can change subordinates' attitudes and behaviors from three theoretical perspectives: physiological, psychological and social relations. From the physiological perspective, positive leader humor can strengthen human physiological function. For example, humor can promote blood circulation, relieve fatigue and

pain and enhance the function of immune system by improving the subjective experience of subordinates' positive emotions. From the psychological aspect, positive leader humor can make subordinates feel that the leader has no "arrogance", dare to fully express the difficulties or ideas in the current work with the leader without safety pressure, and meet the emotional and belonging needs of the subordinates in the high-pressure work. At the same time, in terms of social relations, the kind and comfortable humorous behavior of leaders will strengthen the communication between leaders and subordinates, and reduce the power distance between leaders and subordinates.

2. The Classification, Measurement Methods and Analysis of the Result Variables of Leader Humor

2.1 Classification of Leader Humor

There are positive and negative leader humor (e.g., self-enhancing humor, affiliative humor). Negative leader humor includes self-deprecating humor and aggressive humor (Martin et al., 2003; Gkorezis et al., 2011). Cooper (2005) first defined positive leader humor as a kind of prosocial behavior in which the leader deliberately shares interesting events to produce positive emotions or positive perceptions among subordinates (Romero & Cruithirds, 2006). Pundt and Herrmann (2015) further pointed out that positive leader humor is both a discontinuous social behavior and an interpersonal communication strategy, the core of which is that the leader intentionally creates interesting verbal or nonverbal activities to make certain subordinates or the whole team laugh and entertain (Pundt and Venz, 2017). Positive leader humor in the workplace includes at least three characteristics: first, positive leader humor is the prosocial behavior of leaders on purpose; Second, positive leader humor can mobilize the positive emotional state of subordinates; Third, positive leader humor has an impact on subordinates' attitudes and behaviors (Butler, 2015; Duncan, 1982; Barbour, 1998).

2.2 The Measurement Method of Leader Humor

As for the measurement of positive leader humor scale, the leader humor scale designed by Avolio et al. (1999), Gkorezis (2016) and Cooper (2018) is the most representative. In order to measure the frequency of leaders' humor use in social communication, Avolio et al. (1999) proposed a scale measuring the frequency of leaders' humor use in a single dimension, whose reliability and validity have been verified by many studies (Vecchio et al., 2009; Gkorezis etc., 2014; Pundt, 2015; Gkorezis etc., 2016; Pundt and Venz, 2017). Cooper (2018) independently developed a humorous leadership scale with three items, representing items such as "how often do your leaders express themselves to you at work", and proved good reliability of the scale through for-profit organizations and non-profit organizations (Cronbach's coefficient was 0.94 and 0.95, respectively). In order to better reflect the self-deprecating humor of leaders, Gkorezis (2016) adapted the 2-item scale developed by Martin and Gayle (1999) and added 2 items, namely "my leader makes fun of his own shortcomings" and "my leader makes fun of his own failures".

2.3 A Review of the Partial Outcome Variables of Positive Leader Humor

2.3.1 Positive Emotions

Positive emotion refers to "the emotional state with pleasant feelings generated by internal and external stimuli and events satisfying individual needs" (Guo Xiaoyan & Wang Zhenhong, 2007). Scholars who uphold the emotional event theory believe that the occurrence of positive emotions is an immediate response of individuals to meaningful events and a temporary pleasure (Davidson, 1990; Fredrickson, 2001); However, scholars who uphold the theory of cognitive evaluation believe that positive emotions are the result of mutual recognition and evaluation by both parties in the process of the continuation of meaningful events, which is manifested as pleasure feedback (Lazarus, 1991). Due to the differences in subordinates' personality traits and conscious preferences, the same event may trigger different levels of positive emotional states. High-activated mood refers to the emotional state in which subordinates show more passion, enthusiasm, and excitement. Madrid et al., 2014 low-activated mood refers to the emotional state of subordinates who are comfortable, relaxed and happy (Madrid *et al.*, 2014).

Positive leader humor has a unique function, different from self-deprecating and mocking leader humor. The purpose and function of the implementation is to mobilize the positive emotional state of subordinates and produce positive effects in the workplace (Romero & Pescosolido 2008). Positive leader humor can stimulate the positive emotional state of subordinates from physiological, psychological and social relations at the same time. For example, in terms of physiological function, when positive leader humor makes subordinates "laugh" or "laugh heartily" to the point of tears, subordinates' adrenaline, norepinephrine and hormone secretion will increase rapidly, and at the same time, they will be short of breath and pulse rate will accelerate (Bekinschtein et al., 2011; Bennett et al., 2014). In terms of psychology, positive leader humor can create a relaxed and pleasant organizational atmosphere, making subordinates temporarily forget unpleasant or unhappy things, and generate

instant pleasure, comfort, expectation and illusion in their hearts (Robert & Yan, 2007; Peng Kunxiali & Li Yingwu, 2017). At the same time, in terms of sociology, leaders make their subordinates happy with friendly and comfortable humorous behaviors, which is a manifestation of their willingness to establish positive exchange relations with them (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015).

Therefore, positive leader humor can promote communication between leaders and subordinates, enhance mutual trust, reduce subordinates' sense of hierarchy difference, and stimulate subordinates' positive emotional state.

2.3.2 Job Burnout

The occurrence of job burnout may be caused not only by long-term repetitive or labor-intensive work, but also indirectly by the disagreement with the organization's policies such as salary, promotion, participation and value realization. Freudenberger (1974) first proposed that job burnout is caused by physical and mental exhaustion and emotional exhaustion of individuals under heavy work pressure. Maslach (1976), in his first article on job burnout, proposed that helping professionals would suffer from job burnout under long-term emotional stress. Lauderdale (1982) believed that the increasing gap between the goals set by individuals and their success in daily life would lead to disillusionment of ideals and emptiness, thus leading to individual job burnout. Leiter (1992) believed that job burnout was caused by the crisis of individual self-efficacy. Maslach et al. (2001) further pointed out that the mismatch between individuals and organizations in workload, remuneration, consistency, value and other factors may also cause job burnout. Maslach and Jackson (1981) first proposed a theoretical model of job burnout composed of emotional exhaustion, deindividuation and low sense of accomplishment based on the overview of job burnout by a large number of scholars. Emotional exhaustion refers to the fatigue state caused by overuse of psychological and emotional resources, which is a result of stress response caused by stressors in the workplace. Deindividuation refers to an individual's indifference and neglect of work objects and environment, perfunctory work, and stagnant personal development. Low sense of achievement refers to that individuals lower their evaluation of the value and significance of their work and doubt their own abilities, resulting in reduced enthusiasm and self-efficacy (Maslach et al., 2003).

Ogino and Takigasaki (2004) proposed that emotion is an important factor affecting job burnout. Brouwers and Andre et al. (2000) proposed that self-efficacy has a negative impact on emotional exhaustion, dehumanization has a negative impact, and personal achievement has a positive impact. Michelle (2012) confirmed that subordinates' positive emotions can alleviate emotional exhaustion by affecting individuals' sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in whether he or she can use his or her own skills to complete a certain work behavior. Self-efficacy can determine an individual's choice of behavior and affect his or her attitude and behavior in the face of challenges (Bandura, 1977). That is, an individual with a strong sense of self-efficacy will be confident in his life and work. When implementing active leader humor, if the subsidiary is in a state of positive emotions, it will be taller to the evaluation of their own, self-efficacy increases, prompting subordinates focus on the positive events of occupational stress, sensible deal with the challenges in work, greatly improve the ability to work on their false feeling of competence, thus reduce the job burnout. In addition, according to the resource conservation theory put forward by Hobfoll (1989), when the resources owned by an individual are threatened or potentially lost, or the resources invested cannot be rewarded with satisfactory resources, the individual is prone to pressure, thus resulting in job burnout. Coping with this kind of stress requires the investment of resources to relieve the pressure caused by the continuous consumption of resources. On the one hand, positive leader humor can overlay and build many personal resources, such as enhancing positive beliefs, life goals, social support, etc., on the other hand, it can improve their sense of self-efficacy, which is an important psychological resource (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007). Make them maintain a good psychological state and have an illusion of resources under their control, produce a false high standard, cancel their negative emotional experience, relieve anxiety, and then reduce subordinates' job burnout; On the contrary, if the subordinates' positive emotional state is low, they will not have enough confidence in their own resource conservation, which will increase their job anxiety and pressure, and improve their job burnout.

3. The Future Research Prospects of Leading Humor

At present, the research object of leader humor is relatively single. In the future, more traditional industry samples such as state-owned enterprises, public institutions, party and government organs and high-pressure industries such as entrepreneurial teams and front-line teams can be added as samples. At the same time, the age of the research object is expanded to explore people's subjective acceptance of leader humor in different age groups, so as to realize the theoretical promotion of leader humor in different age groups. In the future, if more research objects are covered and multiple dimensions and variables are considered, the applicability of research results will be greatly improved.

References

- Abel, M. H. (2002). Humor, stress, and coping strategies. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 15(4), 365-381. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.15.4.365>
- Avolio, B. J., Howell, J. M., & Sosik, J. J. (1999). A funny thing happened on the way to the bottom line: Humor as a moderator of leadership style effects. *Academy of Management Journal*, 42(2), 219-227. <https://doi.org/10.5465/257094>
- Carsten, K. W., De, D., & Weingart, L. R. (2003). Task versus relationship conflict, team performance, and team member satisfaction: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(4), 741-749. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.4.741>
- Christian, J. S. *et al.* (2012). Examining retaliatory responses to justice violations and recovery attempts in teams. *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97(6), 1218-1232. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029450>
- Collinson, D. L. (1988). Engineering humor, masculinity, joking and conflict in shop-floor relations. *Organization Studies*, 9(2), 181-199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/017084068800900203>
- Cooper, C. D. (2005). Just joking around? Employee humor expression as an ingratiation behavior. *Academy of Management Review*, 30(4), 765-776. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2014.0358>
- Cooper, C. D. (2008). Elucidating the bonds of workplace humor: A relational process model. *Human Relations*, 61(8), 1087-1115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726708094861>
- Cooper, C. D., Kong, D. T., & Crossley, C. D. (2018). Leader humor as an interpersonal resource: Integrating three theoretical perspectives. *Academy of Management Journal*, 61(2), 769-796. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2005.18378877>
- Cropanzano, R., Dasborough, M. T., & Weiss, H. M. (2017). Affective events and the development of leader-member exchange. *Academy of Management Review*, 42(2), 233-258. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2014.0384>
- Decker, W. H., & Rotondo, D. M. (1999). Use of humour at work: predictors and implications. *Psychological Reports*, 84(3), 961-968. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1999.84.3.961>
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 218-226. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.218>
- Friesen, J. P. *et al.* (2014). Seeking structure in social organization: Compensatory control and the psychological advantages of hierarchy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(4), 590-609. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035620>
- Gkorezis, P., & Bellou, V. (2016). The relationship between leader self-deprecating humor and perceived effectiveness: Trust in leader as a mediator. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 37(7), 882-898. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-11-2014-0231>
- Gkorezis, P., Hatzithomas, L., & Petridou, E. (2011). The impact of leaders' humor on employees' psychological empowerment: The moderating role of tenure. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 23(1), 83-95.
- Gkorezis, P., Petridou, E., & Lioliou, K. (2016). The impact of supervisor humor on newcomer adjustment: The mediating role of relational identification. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 37(4), 540-554. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-08-2014-0161>
- Gkorezis, P., Petridou, E., & Xanthiakos, P. (2014). Leader positive humor and organizational cynicism: LMX as a mediator. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 35(4), 305-315. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-07-2012-0086>
- Liu, F. *et al.* (2019). Affiliative and aggressive humor in leadership and their effects on employee voice: a serial mediation model. *Review of Managerial Science*, 28(2), 1-19.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).