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ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of groups in the workplace and the demand from workers for a fun work environment, there is no model that explains how successful organizational humor can impact work groups. The purpose of this article is to present a model, based on Hackman's framework of group effectiveness, that can be used to understand the relationship between successful organizational humor and group effectiveness. We explore the ability of successful organizational humor to influence groups through its positive impact on group productivity, viability and learning. Based on the literature from several disciplines, we propose that successful organizational humor can have a positive impact on a variety of group processes (e.g. effective communication, development of group goals, management of emotion, etc.) and outcomes (e.g. group productivity, group viability, and development of group members), which contribute to overall group effectiveness. The model has the potential to both advance theory on organizational humor and to offer value to practicing managers by providing an understanding of how two seemingly unrelated factors (humor and group effectiveness) are in fact related in a meaningful fashion.

KEYWORDS

groups ■ human resources & industrial relations ■ humor ■ job/employee attitudes ■ management

Humor is an important contributor to group productivity because of its positive effect on a variety of factors relevant to management such as group cohesiveness, communication (Duncan, 1982), creativity (O'Quin & Derks,

1997), and stress reduction (Morreall, 1991). More recently, a limited number of empirical studies in the field of management have been conducted which indicate that humor has a positive relationship with performance (Avolio et al., 1999) and is associated with leadership effectiveness (Priest & Swain, 2002). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that humor is an important element in the organizational culture of numerous firms such as Southwest Airlines (Barbour, 1998), Ben & Jerry's (Castelli, 1990), Sun Microsystems, and Kodak (Caudron, 1990). Katherine Hudson (ex-CEO of the Brady Corporation) reports that humor can 'foster *esprit de corps* . . . spark innovation . . . increase the likelihood that unpleasant tasks will be accomplished . . . [and] relieve stress' (Hudson, 2001: 46).

Humor is particularly relevant to the modern workplace. Today's workforce is noticeably different from the past. Anecdotal evidence from the popular press indicates that today's workers expect work to be enjoyable. Younger workers (18–25) in particular, want to have fun at work and are more likely to leave firms when work is boring (Levine, 2005). The campus environment at firms like Google, Microsoft and other firms is evidence of the importance of addressing the demand for a fun and relaxed workplace.

Not only do today's workers expect the workplace to be fun, but more and more people are employed in jobs where creativity, successful teamwork and collaborative problem solving are required as opposed to relatively mechanistic task productivity. It is well documented that groups (e.g. teams) are an integral part of the competitive advantage for many firms (Lawler, 1998; Strozniak, 2000). Consequently, managers and employees, especially those working in knowledge-intensive industries, require a variety of tools in order to motivate, resolve conflicts with, and inspire their fellow co-workers and group members. These groups are a source of knowledge, innovation, and synergy that is hard to replicate. Therefore, finding ways to keep groups intact is of value to management. Humor has the potential to address both of these issues (employee retention and group viability) by contributing to creating a fun environment that employees find attractive.

Humor creates a positive mental state that serves as a social lubricant (Romero, 2005). When humor is used in groups, people experience positive affect which facilitates more efficient and effective social processes. Efficient social processes require less energy and effort to establish a social bond and effective social processes are more likely to achieve a social bond. Since social processes are an important precursor to group performance, we propose that humor contributes to group effectiveness through multiple variables. Although previous models of group effectiveness have taken social aspects into consideration, most have not examined the role that emotions, particularly humor, play in groups.

Overall, while research and anecdotal evidence suggests that humor does have an impact on groups, there is currently no overarching model to describe the rich nature of the effects of humor on groups. In other words: humor happens, it happens a lot, but it is not clear why it happens or what it does. Specifically, no theory has been proposed to explain the relationship between humor and group effectiveness despite the need for such a theory given the importance of both variables. As such, this article lays the groundwork for a conceptual model of the mechanisms by which the successful use of humor contributes to group effectiveness.

In this article, we utilize Hackman's (1986) normative theory of group effectiveness; where effectiveness is composed of a) productivity, or the degree to which the group's product or service meets the needs of stakeholders, b) individual development, or the ability of the individual to learn from his or her experiences within the group as well as from other group members, and c) team viability, or the degree to which members of the group are able to continue working together in the future. In groups that work together over time, a singular focus on performance would eventually harm member well-being, group viability, and eventually, stakeholder satisfaction (Sundstrom et al., 1990). In contrast, we explain how the positive use of humor can facilitate long-term group effectiveness by having an impact on all three aspects of group effectiveness. We begin by defining humor and provide a brief review of humor theory. Next, we develop propositions about how humor supports each of the three aspects of group effectiveness and integrate these propositions into an overall model of how humor impacts group effectiveness. Finally, we provide a discussion about the model, inappropriate uses of humor (which may result in a negative impact on group effectiveness), and implications for both research and practice.

Humor

Humor in general has been the subject of academic inquiry for many years, and this has led to numerous definitions of humor. Martineau (1972: 114) defines humor as 'any communicative instance which is perceived as humorous'. Crawford posits that humor produces a 'positive cognitive or affective response from listeners' (1994: 57). However, for purposes of this article, Romero and Cruthirds's (2006) definition of organizational humor is most relevant: *amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group or organization*. We recognize at the outset that there are many attempted uses of humor that do not result in these positive emotions and cognitions; for example, failed humor, put-downs,

misinterpretations, etc. These instances of humor (whether failed humor, or humor that is intentionally negative in nature) currently fall outside the parameters of the model we present. However, due to the nascent nature of current theory and research on humor and group effectiveness, we feel that it is important to focus on the positive aspects of humor at this point in time.

Humor theories

The humor literature contains three primary theories of humor; incongruity theory, relief theory, and superiority theory. Incongruity theory is based on the premise that surprises and uncommon circumstances engender humor (Meyer, 2000). 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. Relief theory postulates that humor triggers laughter which releases tension (Shurcliff, 1968). Freud (1928) suggested that humor releases repressed emotions that are associated with the humor theme. Superiority theory postulates that humor is used to gain control (LaFave et al., 1976) and feel superior (Ziv, 1984) by laughing at people or things. For example, ethnic humor is often a manifestation of perceived superiority over a group. Put-down humor and mocking are other examples that represent humor as a superiority mechanism. These three humor theories can be thought of as contingency theories of humor since they explain how humor works in different situations.

Successful use of organizational humor

Humor can be thought of as a 'double-edged sword' (Malone, 1980) because what is funny to one person is not necessarily funny to another. Some humor can be seen as an attack or a put-down. Humor can also be used as a way to deflect criticism or to diminish or devalue a critic. While these are all important possible outcomes and intentions of humor, we intentionally focus on positive humor and positive outcomes of humor in this article.

Dewitte and Verguts (2001) propose three classifications of jokes. Class one jokes fail to elicit a humorous response (e.g. laughter) because they are based on a premise that is too mundane. For example, if an elementary school student were to tell a typical kid's joke to an adult, it would be unlikely to elicit a laugh. Class two jokes are successful because they strike the right balance between novelty and acceptable content. Additionally, these

jokes elicit laughter or other forms of humorous response (e.g. cognitive or emotional). Class three jokes fail to elicit a humorous response because they are too absurd or offensive. This typology can be extended to all humor attempts. Therefore, successful organizational humor (class two humor) strikes the right balance between novelty and acceptable content. Knowing whether humor will be successful requires judgment and an understanding of the audience on the part of the person using humor. Determining whether humor is successful is mostly based on the outcome but also on the intent, which is interpreted by the audience. Therefore, one can seek to use successful organizational humor based on intent and judgment. While a positive outcome is not a 100 percent certainty, it is a reasonable expectation in many work situations where people know each other and work expectations are predictable.

Additionally, successful use of humor in groups is based not only on class two humor attempts, based upon an understanding of an individual, but also upon attempts being interpreted as humorous by all members of the group. Certainly, many uses of humor in groups are intended to single out individuals rather than to bring the group together (for example, using humor to disguise individual criticism or using humor to devalue an individual or an idea). However, at its best, humor in groups leads to a sense of pleasure that comes ‘not from creating it, but from sharing it’ (Weick & Westley, 1996). That is, successful collective humor serves to reaffirm group identity in terms of ‘who we are, what we are doing, and how we do things’. The assumption throughout this article is that successful organizational humor is being used and will therefore generate the benefits that are the focus of the article.

Humor and group productivity

While Hackman’s (1986) model of overall group effectiveness lists three distinct aspects of effectiveness (productivity, learning and viability), productivity is perhaps the most salient of these. Productivity measures vary from group to group depending upon the task in which the group is engaged and the concerns of key stakeholders. Recent research indicates that humor is related to both individual and unit performance (Avolio et al., 1999). Collinson (1988) found that humor can be useful in controlling group production via work group norms. There is evidence that humor produces an increase in physical and psychological energy (Dienstbier, 1995) resulting in workers who are likely to put forth more effort when engaging in challenging tasks. In examining how humor enables groups to be more productive, we will focus on the

ability of humor to influence several key variables: communication, leadership, and collective cognitions.

Communication

Poor communication may be the single most cited cause of interpersonal conflict and lack of group productivity (Thomas & Schmidt, 1976). Since communication is the vehicle by which group members interact with each other, create goals, plan strategies, and critique ideas, it plays a critical role in both group productivity and overall group effectiveness. Humor helps to ensure good communication by inducing positive affect, which in turn makes people more receptive to the receiver and message. This is why it is common to see politicians and other high profile individuals use humor to realize this benefit (Meyer, 1990).

Humor impacts communication by signaling important or sensitive information (Adelsward & Oberg, 1998), by reducing resistance through the creation of positive affect (Kupier et al., 1995; Meyer, 1997), and by increasing the persuasiveness of a message (Greatbatch & Clark, 2002; Lyttle, 2001). Humor also has the potential to make a message more inherently interesting, thus increasing listener attentiveness and reducing the need for repetition and additional explanation (Gruner, 1976). Sharing humor creates a precedent of agreement between two individuals. Consequently, by initiating a flow of agreement, humor can make persuasion easier. In other words, if one agrees with someone's humor by laughing, agreeing with serious messages later on would maintain the trend in agreement. Ironic and self-effacing forms of humor in particular have been shown to increase persuasiveness (Lyttle, 2001), due in part to the healthy work climate and positive affect that are created by the successful use of humor (Decker & Rotondo, 2001), and the reduction of feelings of punishment and blame (Kahn, 1989).

Group leaders can use humor to influence behavioral norms primarily in order to foster a more open environment and encourage all group members to speak their mind. Vinton (1989) found that humor lowers status differences and equalizes people in organizations where teasing and joking is permissible and commonly directed at members from all organizational levels. Martineau (1972) describes how humor can be used to initiate social interactions and maintain relationships. He proposes that humor can be used to build high morale and cohesion, good communication patterns, and strong social bonds; all of which enhance group norms of open communication.

Crawford (1994) suggests that humor can be used to break down power structures that symbolically separate management and employees by

improving communication. Additionally, Coser (1960) found that humor decreases the social distance between supervisors and subordinates. We suggest that the reduction in social distance that results from humor use facilitates closer relationships between leaders and followers. This encourages free and more open communication within the group, which is congruent with high group performance.

Improved communication effectiveness will lead to fewer misunderstandings and a freer exchange of information. Humor improves the quality and increases the frequency of inter-group communication concerning negotiations, clarification, information gathering and sharing, and can improve performance. Therefore, we suggest the following:

Proposition 1: Successful use of organizational humor promotes increased quantity and quality of group communications, which increases group productivity.

Leadership

Many theories of group effectiveness include a component about group leadership. For example, Hackman (1986) proposes that the leader's role as a coach for group performance is integral. Cohen and Ledford (1994) suggest that the leader is essential in shaping group goals, expectations, and evaluations. Similarly, Manz and Sims (1987) advocate that leaders should engage in 'encouraging' behaviors, especially behaviors that encourage the group to engage in self-management processes. In particular, leaders have been shown to favorably impact group productivity through their influence on group goals and the goal-setting process (Cohen & Ledford, 1994; De Souza & Klein, 1995). We believe that humor relates to group leadership, specifically in regards to charismatic leadership.

Charismatic theories of leadership emphasize emotions, values, and the importance of leader behavior in 'making events meaningful for followers' (Yukl, 1999). Indeed, recent research on leadership has suggested that emotion is a significant component of leadership, both in terms of the characteristics and behaviors that predict who will emerge or be chosen as a leader (Goleman et al., 2001; Wolff et al., 2002) and in terms of the behaviors and tactics that allow an individual to successfully lead a group (Druskat & Pescosolido, 2006; Pescosolido, 2002). Since leadership has been demonstrated to play a large role in group effectiveness, the question then becomes, *how can a leader use humor to positively impact the group?* We suggest that leaders manage group emotions with humor in order to achieve higher performance.

Wasielewski (1985) and Yukl (1999) describe the relationship between charismatic leaders and their followers by suggesting that charismatic leadership is intimately tied to the leader's ability to model and redefine emotion and emotional responses. Wasielewski (1985) suggests that the ability of charismatic leaders to identify, empathize with, and model emotions and emotional behavior is critical to their success and that they gain legitimacy by modeling appropriate emotional behavior for their followers. This aspect of leadership was further argued by Pescosolido (2002) as he discusses the role of emergent group leaders as manager of group emotion. He suggests that the ability of a group leader to engage in the management of emotion is dependent upon 1) a certain amount of ambiguity in the group's performance context, 2) a level of comfort regarding emotional expression within the group, and 3) leader charisma and empathy. While humor would have little impact on the ambiguity inherent in the group's performance context, it can have an impact on the remaining two variables.

Druskat and Wolff (2001) have developed the concept of *emotionally competent group norms*, which describe the establishment of group behavioral norms specifically for identifying and working with emotions within the group. The establishment of emotionally competent group norms leads to higher levels of trust, participation, collaboration, and productivity within a group (Wolff et al., 2006), and has been specifically linked to effective conflict resolution (Jordan & Troth, 2004). Among the emotionally competent group norms cited are those involved in regulating group emotions and building the group's capacity to respond to emotional challenges. Humor can serve as a method to build both of these behavioral norms within a group.

Druskat and Wolff (2001) cite several examples of group members using humor to regulate the emotional tenor of the group, and suggest that key aspects of regulating group emotion involve finding creative ways to both acknowledge group members' emotions, as well as being fun ways to relieve stress and tension. Humor can be one creative way to reduce stress (Dixon, 1980) perhaps by creating a shared perception of reality (e.g. a shared joke) to protect the group (Francis, 1994). Conflicts and debates can be softened with humor and therefore lead to less dysfunctional conflict (King, 1988) and negative emotions. In a related study, Smith et al. (2000) found that humor was an important part of conflict management strategies such as smoothing, avoiding and confronting. Finally, Hampes (2001) found that humor was related to empathic concern, a key component of emotional intelligence, and suggests that individuals with high emotional intelligence use humor to improve their relationships. A possible explanation for this relationship may be that humor is used to manage relationships with people by addressing difficult issues yet engendering positive affect. Specifically, Nezelek and Derks (2001) found that humor use is a coping method that is positively related to

positive social interactions. Since humor reduces social distance and boundaries (Coser, 1960), and causes leaders to be perceived as socially attractive (Smith & Powell, 1988), we propose that the use of humor by group leaders contributes significantly to their ability to manage group emotions, and thus influence group goals, efficacy and behavior (Pescosolido, 2002). Therefore, the following is proposed.

Proposition 2: Group leaders who successfully use organizational humor are better at managing group emotions, which increases group productivity.

Collective cognitions

Recent research has suggested that group level collective cognitions and beliefs have a major impact on group behavior and consequently group performance. For example, research has been conducted on the impact of group culture, shared mental models (Druskat & Pescosolido, 2002), shared group goals (De Souza & Klein, 1995), group transactive memory (Moreland & Argote, 2003), and group (or collective) efficacy (Gibson, 2003). Group collective cognitions impact group performance by their effect on group member attitudes and behavior such as goal commitment, group cohesion, communication with other group members and development and enactment of task appropriate strategies. We believe that group culture and shared group goals in particular will be positively impacted by the use of humor within groups.

Collinson (1988) found that humor, in the form of joking and teasing, served as a foundation of group culture. Humor can be used to communicate values, beliefs, expectations and other important elements of a group's culture (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Vinton, 1989). Coser (1960: 88) indicates that humor serves as a vehicle to communicate 'reaffirmation of the collectivity and of the values held in common'. Reaffirmation of the reasons for forming the group and re-emphasis of shared values reinforce the group's culture. Humor can also be used to indicate the appropriateness of behavior patterns (Janes & Olson, 2000) and therefore aids in the development of clear group norms. For example, inappropriate behavior might become the focus of harmless jokes and teasing, thereby indicating that the behavior is inappropriate. Coser (1959) suggests that humor is a factor in creating a shared interpretation of a given circumstance by highlighting commonalities within the group and creating a sense of equality among group members. For example, telling a funny story about a leader of the organization leads to a shared view of the leader. Additionally, if the leader tells the story, this aids in creating a norm emphasizing that 'we are all human here, we are all

allowed to make mistakes'. Other similar examples would likely create other norms and highlight cultural values based on shared interpretations of many events and situations. When people feel a common emotional interpretation, its effect is strong and long lasting (Pescosolido, 2002). The positive emotions that successful humor engenders provide the basis for shared emotional interpretations and therefore contribute to a strong organizational culture.

Martineau (1972) claims that humor can be used to create strong groups as well as initiate and maintain social relationships. Strong groups are characterized by high morale and cohesion, little social distance, good communication patterns, and strong social bonds. Weak groups lack these favorable characteristics. Martineau (1972) indicates that humor is an important factor in strong groups when humor is viewed as favorable to the group. Inversely, humor is a factor in the evolution of weak groups when humor is not favorable to the group. It is conceivable that strong groups have positive attributes because of the higher levels of trust that result, in part, from the more frequent use of humor (Hampes, 1999). Strong groups may result when humor is applied as a socialization tool (Vinton, 1989), when humor reduces social distance (Graham, 1995), and when humor is used to increase the sense of group identity. Therefore, humor can be an important component of strong group culture and have an influence on other culture variables mentioned above. Therefore, the following is proposed:

Proposition 3: Successful use of organizational humor in groups encourages the development of a strong performance oriented group culture, which increases group productivity.

In addition to culture, group goals are another collective cognition that is important to group productivity. Research suggests quite strongly that having clear, shared goals is an important factor in increasing group productivity and reducing group conflict (De Souza & Klein, 1995; Weldon & Jehn, 1991). Additionally, Jehn and Shah (1997) found that groups with higher levels of friendship had more commitment to the group and to group goals. We suggest that successful use of humor can increase commitment to group goals through several means: first, through the positive influence of humor on within-group communication, second, through the positive effect of humor on the perception of psychological safety, and finally by its positive impact on group member relationships (discussed in detail below).

It seems reasonable to surmise that the higher levels of communication that occur in groups due to the effective use of humor would in turn lead to a higher level of shared group goals. Humor serves to facilitate communication between group members, specifically by reducing social distance between members and facilitating the expression of emotions and values.

Consequently, group members are able to engage in more effective communication processes, leading to group members being more informed about processes, requirements, and externalities that might influence group effectiveness. This greater level of awareness and information exchange among group members should in turn lead to a more informed (and consequently more accurate) collective goal setting process. Greater opportunity for discussion and information sharing during the goal setting process would allow individual members to share their reservations, as well as the rationale for such reservations, before goals were set. Sharing of this information, as well as the responses by other group members, should result in group-set goals that have a higher level of 'buy in' by all group members than would occur if goals were set in a brusque or perfunctory manner. As such, we propose that the use of humor would be especially functional in the early development of clear and shared goals.

The positive impact of effective humor on group psychological safety (discussed in detail below) could also lead to an increase in commitment to group goals due to the increase in openness and honesty when a climate of psychological safety is established. In other words, if effective use of humor leads to higher levels of psychological safety, then open sharing of information, opinions and values is more likely to occur and group goals can then be altered to take into account all relevant information. More specifically, group members will perceive lower barriers to expressing reservations or concerns, or responding to the comments of other group members. Consequently, goals can be tailored to meet the individual needs of all group members as well as the collective needs of the group itself. Again, this more fully developed conversation about group inputs, processes and constraints should lead to a greater understanding of what individual members are committing themselves to, as well as to a greater sense of psychological engagement and ownership in the goal setting process (Kahn, 1990). Therefore, the following is proposed:

Proposition 4: Successful use of organizational humor in groups leads to higher levels of consensus and acceptance of group goals, which increases group productivity.

Humor and learning within groups

Psychological safety and learning

Psychological safety has received noteworthy attention recently in the team learning literature. Psychological safety has been repeatedly identified as being related to a team's ability to learn (Edmondson, 1999, 2004; Kayes,

2004; Tjosvold et al., 2004). Additionally, psychological safety has been shown to affect the performance of teams in numerous settings where learning is essential, including higher education, product innovation, service management, health care, and technology (Edmondson, 2004).

Psychological safety at the group level has been defined as the 'shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking' (Edmondson, 1999: 354), and has been shown to be a key factor in learning in work groups (Edmondson, 1999, 2004; Tjosvold et al., 2004). This construct describes a team member's ability to take risks, feel secure in the face of a challenging environment and feel confident when a member challenges a dominant belief. Groups that develop an atmosphere of psychological safety experience reduced defensiveness, greater ability to make decisions based upon data rather than politics, and greater ability to experiment with potentially risky new behaviors in order to achieve better results (Tjosvold et al., 2004). This falls in line with Argyris and Schon's (1996) description of a 'Model II' approach to organizational problem-solving based on honest reflection, openness and mutual influence which results in learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Consequently, any link between humor and psychological safety (and thus learning) resides in the ability of humor to create a safe group climate for taking risks and constructive conflict. Psychological safety at the group level is strongly influenced by the development of trust, open communication and personal rapport at the individual level. We have already discussed the open communication environment that humor creates and the positive effect humor has on personal relationships. There is also a strong positive relationship between humor and trust (Hampes, 1999). People who are rated high in humor tend to trust other people more than people rated low in humor. Hampes (1999) concluded that people who are high in humor can cope with the stress associated with trusting others, which makes them more trusting. Humor can also be a form of collective sense-making by providing a way for group members to frame and enact shared experiences, create shared interpretations, and affirm and retain their collective interpretation over time by replaying shared humor (Tracy et al., 2006; Weick & Westley, 1996). We propose that the effective use of humor within a group will serve as a means to increase group psychological safety through the intervening variables of trust, communication, sense-making and personal rapport.

Lower stress can lead to psychological safety by contributing to a controllable environment that is less threatening. There is considerable research indicating that humor relieves stress (Cann et al., 1999; Martin & Lefcourt, 1983). Specifically, Dixon (1980) claims that humor is a cognitive stress reducer. Humor provides a sense of power over uncontrollable events (Yovetich et al., 1990) by providing a clear example of an understandable

incident (e.g. joke, funny story, etc.), which serves as a model for managing stressful events (Dixon, 1980). Humor also reduces stress via its effect on anxiety which is a precursor to stress. Smith et al. (1971) found that humor reduces anxiety. They found that subjects in a combination of high anxiety and humorous condition performed better than subjects in a high anxiety and non-humorous condition. These results support the notion that humor and anxiety are incompatible. This finding is also supported by a similar study conducted by Yovetich et al. (1990) which indicates that humor reduces anxiety.

Humor also has an impact on learning. Dixon et al. (1989) found that individuals who are high in humor pay more attention when learning humorous material and also recall it better. Therefore, humor functions as an important precursor to psychological safety and leads to more learning. Accordingly, the following proposition is suggested:

Proposition 5: Successful use of organizational humor within groups produces a perception of psychological safety, and consequently higher levels of learning within the group.

Humor and group viability

Humor supports group viability through its role in creating positive affect, fostering group cohesion and reducing employee turnover. Hackman (1986) defines group viability as the ability for the group to continue working as a group over time. As such, there are two major components to group viability: group cohesion (e.g. desire to continue interacting with the other members of the group) and group stability (e.g. the lack of turnover, specifically voluntary turnover) within the group. Both of these components of group viability and their relationship to humor are discussed below.

Positive affect and cohesion

Research on positive affect among group members has shown a strong relationship between positive affect and various dependent variables including cooperation (Forgas, 1998; Isen & Levin, 1972), pro-social workplace behaviors (George & Brief, 1992), helping behaviors (George, 1991), and extra-role behaviors (George & Brief, 1992). At the individual level, positive affect leads to higher levels of self-efficacy (Saavedra & Early, 1991), higher cognitive effort (Sullivan & Conway, 1989) and is related to superior job performance in a variety of occupations (Seligman & Schulman, 1986).

Barsade (2002) specifically examined positive affect at the group level, and found that it led to greater group member cooperation, lower group conflict, and higher ratings of performance.

As mentioned earlier, humor makes people feel good and when this occurs within the context of a group, positive emotions are associated with the group. The positive effect of humor on affect at the individual level is well supported in the literature. For instance, Kupier et al. (1992) found that individuals who scored high on humor had high levels of positive affect. Similarly, Cann et al. (1999) found that humor reduced anxiety and increased positive affect after individuals in their study were exposed to a stress inducing treatment. We believe that the use of humor and its impact on individual affect also has an impact at the group level. This is supported by the literature on emotional contagion (e.g. Hatfield et al., 1994). For example, Kelly and Barsade (2001) suggest a model whereby emotional contagion and sharing at the individual level combines with events and processes at the group or contextual level to create 'group emotion'. Kelly and Barsade (2001) suggest that individual actions can be consciously and intentionally used to 'manage' group emotion, linking this to the literature on charismatic leadership. If emotions at the individual level can be manipulated through a variety of means, and general group emotional states can be impacted by the emotions of individual members of the group, then it seems likely that group emotion can be affected by an individual's behavior such as the use of humor. Therefore, we propose the following.

Proposition 6: Successful use of organizational humor within groups generates positive affect within the group and supports group viability.

Group cohesion is one of the more thoroughly researched concepts in small group studies (Mudrack, 1989). Group cohesion has been defined as 'group spirit' (Staw, 1975), 'a sense of belonging' (Bugen, 1977), and 'sense of commitment to the group' (Piper et al., 1983). Improved group cohesion leads to higher group commitment, lower turnover, enforcement of group norms, improved communication, and other beneficial processes leading to improved productivity (Mudrack, 1989).

Humor use in groups leads to improved group cohesion (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001) by building dyadic, interpersonal bonds between group members as well as by increasing positive affect within the group. For example, humor has been shown to cause a reduction in social distance between group members (Graham, 1995), the assimilation of members into the group social structure (Vinton, 1989), and higher levels of trust between group members (Hampes, 1999). Related to positive affect is interpersonal attraction which Cann et al. (1997) discovered is related to shared humor

appreciation. Furthermore, they indicate that sharing humor successfully overcomes attitude dissimilarity as a barrier to interpersonal relations. Additionally, humor can be used to communicate and enforce group norms (Collinson, 1988; Martineau, 1972), and assist in creating a sense of group identity (Weick & Westley, 1996). All of these contribute to stronger personal bonds and relationships between individual group members and therefore positively impact cohesion.

As discussed above, the use of humor within groups leads to positive group emotions. This is likely to have an additional positive impact on the development of group cohesion. One of the more common definitions of group cohesion is 'attraction to the group' (Mudrack, 1989). The increase in positive emotion within the group, caused by the use of humor, makes the group a more attractive (e.g. fun) place to be for group members. Consequently, one can expect that the use of humor will lead to increased cohesion within the group, due to the development of both positive interpersonal relationships and positive affect within the group. Therefore, the following proposition suggested:

Proposition 7: Successful use of organizational humor within groups strengthens group cohesion and supports group viability.

Reduced turnover

Based on the literature reviewed, we suggest that humor will aid in reducing employee turnover. As far back as Herzberg (Herzberg et al., 1959), theories of motivation have suggested that workers who experience positive relationships with managers and co-workers will be more likely to be satisfied with their workplace, and consequently less likely to voluntarily seek employment elsewhere. More recently, researchers have uncovered relationships between organizational turnover and workplace stress (Zeytinoglu et al., 2004), negative affect in the workplace (Barsky et al., 2004), and poor relationships with co-workers (Kaldenberg et al., 1995). In fact, a recent study by Maertz and Campion (2004) suggests that a major factor in turnover is 'affect-driven, impulse quitting' (p. 578).

Based on the literature reviewed in the previous sections, employees who experience humor on the job have less work related stress, experience more positive emotions while at work, have a positive relationship with their leaders and fellow group members, and are therefore less likely to leave the group. Therefore, the following proposition is suggested:

Proposition 8: Successful use of organizational humor within groups reduces voluntary employee turnover and supports group viability.

Discussion

Based on the literature reviewed and the theoretical proposals suggested, we developed the Group Humor Effectiveness Model (GHEM), depicted in Figure 1, to explain how humor positively impacts group effectiveness. The GHEM adopts Hackman's (1986) definition of group effectiveness. The model has multiple dimensions focused on the relationship between humor and each of Hackman's (1986) aspects of group effectiveness: productivity, learning and viability. It is an integrative model that explains the mechanisms by which humor contributes to group effectiveness.

It is assumed that successful organizational humor is used and therefore will positively impact the variables in the model. These variables will then in turn lead to increases in group productivity, learning, and viability. As this is an initial model of the effect of humor on group effectiveness, we would anticipate that future research would both test these propositions as well as develop additional propositions regarding the mechanisms by which humor affects group performance.

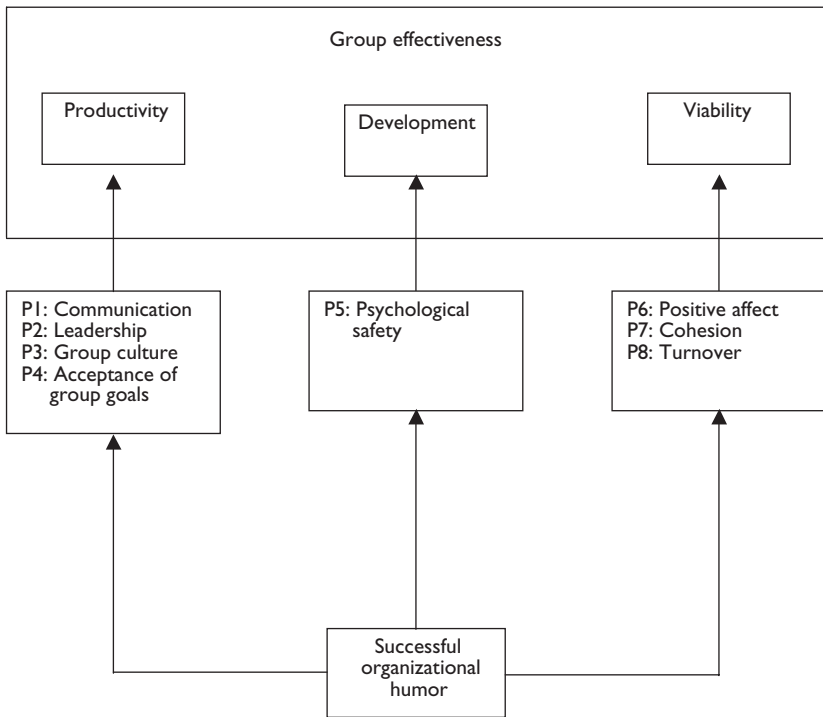


Figure 1 Group Humor Effectiveness Model (GHEM)

Limitations

The model does not explain all the effects of organizational humor. For example, it is conceivable that too much humor may distract people from their work and if so, performance would likely decline. In other words, there can be too much of a good thing. The model does not address this possible curvilinear relationship between humor and performance. The model is designed to explain the relationship between performance and humor within the ascending linear region of the curve.

Additionally, a major assumption in this model is that humor is appropriate, well received, and therefore successful. The model does not currently address when humor is appropriate, or what kinds of humor are appropriate for a given situation. For example, humor may be perceived as unprofessional because in a serious situation (e.g. an emergency room), or some group members may not be receptive to humor. Humor can be perceived as funny by one person or group yet, the same attempt at humor can be quite offensive to others. As such, the model does not take into account situations where humor is honestly attempted, yet fails (e.g. a joke that is told poorly), nor does it take into account situations where humor is used for critical or negative reasons (e.g. sarcasm or a put-down used to discourage or dishearten an individual).

Future research directions

While we cannot stress enough that a distinction needs to be made between the positive and negative uses of humor, the potential positive impacts of humor that are highlighted in the GHEM have enough potential to warrant further research into the use of humor within groups and teams. This would involve not only empirical testing of the propositions outlined here, but also theory and research into what environmental, contextual and individual group member factors lead to the successful application of humor within workgroups. Are younger or older workers more receptive to humor in groups? Are groups in firms belonging to particular industries (e.g. technology) or doing a particular type of work (e.g. creative) more likely to benefit from humor use than others? Recent research indicates that there are regional differences in humor use (Romero et al., 2007). How can such differences impact the effect of humor on group effectiveness and organizations? These and other questions remain unanswered but if investigated would build on the GHEM and enhance the body of knowledge concerning humor in organizations. We hope that our model will guide future research in the area of humor and group effectiveness and lead to the testing of specific

humor-based interventions. Therefore, the GHEM is a starting point for research in this important area.

Although we chose not to address the role of negative humor, it is also worthy of theoretical and empirical research. Negative humor in the form of ethnic and sexist jokes has been investigated in the past (Davies, 1982; Lyman, 1987) while, to the best of our knowledge, excessive and distracting humor has not. We see a variety of possible directions for future research on negative humor and its impact on group effectiveness. For example, how do different forms of negative humor affect learning in groups? How does negative humor affect group viability when addressed at non-group members or marginal group members? Is there a difference between a group leader's ability to 'successfully' use negative humor versus that of a low-status group member? Studies such as these would build on the GHEM and could do much to advance knowledge not only in the literature on managing groups but also in the literature on humor itself.

Implications for practice

While some managers are aware of humor's value (Castelli, 1990; Caudron, 1990; Hudson, 2001), they may not appreciate humor's full potential. While Newstrom (2002) and Romero and Cruthirds (2006) provide insights into how managers can use humor in organizations, the GHEM should be a useful framework for educating managers on how to utilize humor to improve group effectiveness. Based on the GHEM, practitioners would be well served if they take humor into consideration when selecting employees, forming teams, selecting leaders and the other situations which impact group effectiveness. For instance, when forming a team that will be placed in a stressful situation, managers could benefit from using, and encouraging team members to use, humor to create psychological safety and higher levels of group cohesion, allowing group members to see the group as a 'safety net' that would enable them to focus on the task at hand, take necessary risks, and experience less psychological and physical stress. Leaders would benefit if they developed their humor skills since it can be an effective tool to employ in managing emotions within groups. Leaders can set the example of effective humor utilization and integrate humor into the organization's culture, thus affecting retention as well as the success of hiring processes. Humor can also be integrated into ceremonies, stories, company mottos, songs and social events (e.g. Southwest Airlines) to build on humor use by leaders. This multi-factor approach would likely result in a strong group and/or organizational culture focused on using humor as a means to enhance overall effectiveness. Therefore, the GHEM provides a structure that can help managers realize the benefits that humor provides to groups and make them more effective.

Conclusion

Most people spend a large portion of their time in groups of various sorts, whether those are work groups, social groups, etc. Understanding both interpersonal and intergroup relations is imperative to successful management and humor is a major component of these relations. This article presents the first model in the humor literature that examines the impact of humor on group effectiveness. The future of organizational humor research has the potential to produce some very interesting and useful results. The model described here can serve as a framework for such research and provide value to researchers investigating the role of humor in organizations and specifically group effectiveness. The article also provides value to practitioners due to the extensive literature review which focuses on outcomes that are relevant to managers and the applied nature of the GHEM, which lends itself to being easily used by managers. Therefore, the article and GHEM provide valuable insights for managers and researchers alike.

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Eric J. Romero is a Professor of Management at CENTRUM Católica, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. His research interests include international management, leadership and organizational humor. He has published articles in the *Academy of Management Perspectives*, the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* and the *Journal of International Management*. He has years of practical managerial experience in several industries and with the US government. He has advised numerous companies and is a speaker at a variety of organizations.

[E-mail: eromero2002@hotmail.com]

Anthony T. Pescosolido is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior and Management at the Whittemore School of Business and Economics at the University of New Hampshire. His research interests are in team and group dynamics, particularly the role that informal leadership, group emotion and collective beliefs play in shaping the lives and performance of groups and teams. His research has appeared in journals such as *Leadership Quarterly*, *Human Relations*, and *Small Group Research*, as well as multiple book chapters. He earned an A.B. in psychology from Harvard College and a PhD in Organizational Behavior from Case Western Reserve University.

[E-mail: tuck.pescosolido@unh.edu]

Erratum

**Humor and group effectiveness
Eric Romero and Anthony Pescosolido
Human Relations, Mar 2008; vol 61: pp. 395–418.**

In the March 2008 issue of Human Relations, the email address belonging to Eric Romero was incorrectly listed as eromero2002@hotmail.com instead of ejromero@pucp.edu.pe. The Publisher regrets this error and would like to offer a sincere apology to Eric Romero.