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Review

Leader humor: A double-edged sword

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Abstract

Leader humor has been considered one of the most promising yet least understood influential tools by psychologists and management scholars. Here, I review the growing body of research on leader humor and its implications for followers and organizations, showing that despite being theorized as a positive leadership tool, leader humor can function as a double-edged sword in bringing both beneficial and detrimental outcomes for followers and organizations. In the process, I identify six distinct mechanisms (three positive and three negative) through which leader humor affects followers. In a way, leader humor can be used to reduce or increase the social and psychological distance between leaders and followers. I also discuss the directions for future research on leader humor.

Addresses

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Introduction

Around the world, many great leaders use humor to connect with and influence followers. In order to help leaders improve their ability to use humor, many organizations even provide humor workshops to their managers. Moreover, an increasing number of leaders are reported to actively create interesting stories as well as speeches with the intention to amuse followers [1]. Despite the recognition that the use of humor is inherently linked to power in human society and organizations [2], rigorous academic studies of leader humor have just started to grow over the past few years. Some researchers go so far as to conclude that humor is the most promising but least understood communication strategy leaders utilize [3].

Consistent with prior research, I define leader humor as the extent to which a leader communicates or shares stimuli intended to be amusing to a follower [4,5]. In this review, I propose that while effective use of humor can help leaders improve their leadership effectiveness, ineffective use of humor can do the opposite and results in detrimental outcomes for followers and organizations. In a way, leader humor can either reduce or increase the hierarchical and psychological distance between leaders and followers, leading to positive and negative consequences for followers' well-being and job-related outcomes. Thus despite its positive connotation, leader humor is a double-edged sword and must be wielded with caution.

For leaders, simply telling jokes or sharing interesting stories with the intention to amuse followers would not deliver the expected beneficial outcomes. Leader humor is embedded in social relationships and resembles a tango that takes two parties to dance. Not all humor expression is perceived to be equally and effectively witty, amusing, and appropriate [6,7]. The appreciation of humor is a uniquely individual response, meaning that what is amusing to one person is not necessarily funny to another and sometimes can be perceived as aggressive and negative. Although there are multiple types of humor leaders can express, scholars primarily focus on affiliative and aggressive humor due to their interpersonal orientations. As I will show below, leader affiliative humor (or positive humor), which amuses followers to facilitate relationships, generally brings beneficial outcomes for followers and organizations. In contrast, leader aggressive humor (or negative humor), in the form of sarcasm, teasing, and belittling, is largely counterproductive [8]. In addition, when not received well by followers, positive leader humor can also bring negative outcomes. In this article, I will discuss evidence regarding leader humor's beneficial vs. detrimental impacts on follower outcomes by outlining six distinct pathways (three positive and three negative) via which leader humor operates.

The beneficial effects of leader humor**Generate positive emotions while alleviating negative emotions**

When followers find the humor funny and appropriate, leader humor can elicit positive emotions in followers [9]. The playful verbal and non-verbal communication

of interesting and unexpected stories shared by leaders can trigger the dopaminergic reward centers of followers' brains and produce various positive emotions for followers such as joy, amusement, and happiness [10]. Leader display of humor also transmits leader's positive emotions to followers who receive those humorous communications via the emotional contagion process [11,12]. Yet it is worth noting that followers only experience positive emotions when they judge leaders' humor as funny, appropriate and meaningful [13]. Not only does a positive leader humor display generate positive emotions for followers, it also helps alleviate follower negative emotions. For example, by telling jokes that followers find amusing, leaders help followers relieve stress and mitigate strain. Thus many early studies on leader humor focus on its effects on follower emotional outcomes and show that positive leader humor is correlated with stronger job satisfaction, greater work engagement, enhanced affective commitment, improved follower morale, as well as diminished intention to withdraw [14–18].

Signal information to shape a positive view of leaders and the job

Leader humor is not just about emotionally cheering followers up. Leaders can also use humor to signal important information about themselves and their expectations for followers. Successful leader humor will make the leader appear witty in the eyes of followers and induce positive cognitions, including inspiration and creative thinking for followers [19]. Leaders can also make fun of their own failures and mistakes to show they are tolerant towards followers' setbacks and errors, thus encouraging more learning behavior among followers [20]. The jokes shared by leaders alleviate boredom for followers and make the tasks more enjoyable [21]. When leaders communicate with humor, followers also experience an enhanced level of work autonomy and self-efficacy to complete the task [22,23]. Leader humor also inspires followers to broaden cognitive patterns, improve their thinking flexibility, and boost their creativity [24]. Followers are also more likely to perceive the leader expressing humor as open to different perspectives and motivate them to engage in boundary-spanning behavior [25]. By sharing interesting stories and telling amusing jokes, leaders can also cultivate a workplace culture characterized by fun, enthusiasm, and innovation, as opposed to passively following established procedures and repeating routinized activities [24,26]. Given that leaders are considered representatives of their organizations, the expressed support and affability associated with positive leader humor can also increase perceived organizational support and facilitate follower job-crafting behavior involving knowledge development and challenge resolution [27].

Reduce formal status differences and establish quality relationships

Just like the tango dance moves can bring two parties closer or farther, leader humor embedded in the social interaction can be a move to either increase or decrease the leader-follower distance. When expressing humor appreciated by followers, leaders can reduce the formal status/power differences as well as lessen the psychological distance between themselves and followers, thereby strengthening the relationship [5,28–30]. Specifically, leader affiliative humor sends a strong signal that leaders are willing to interact and communicate with followers as equals and establish close relationships with them. Such humor expression not only strengthens formal exchange relationship but also builds up informal connection characterized by mutual trust, respect and obligation, between the two parties and subsequently leads to increased employee citizenship behavior [5,17]. This relationship-building function of positive leader humor may be particularly crucial for newcomers to adapt to their organizations as it signals the workplace is relaxing and fun [31]. Sometimes, leaders can also use self-deprecating humor to show that they are not necessarily superior in their skills, knowledge, or judgment and, therefore, make themselves appear approachable and relatable to followers [20]. As a consequence, followers would feel that they are valued and supported [32,33]. This satisfies followers' need for affiliation at work [34], which helps resolve the loneliness and social isolation problem pervasive in modern organizations, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 Pandemic [35]. Leader positive humor also helps employees build psychological capital to tackle their work-related problems more proactively [36], induce more voice behavior where followers express constructive opinions, concerns, or ideas about work-related issues because people speak up only if they perceive their voice behavior has high efficacy and low risk [37]. The relationship-building function of leader humor makes employees feel their ideas are valued, and it is safe to express them with leaders. Similarly, observing leaders expressing humor also makes followers feel it is psychologically safe to take risks and explore novel and unorthodox ideas with leaders [35,38,39].

The detrimental effects of leader humor Induce loose interpretation of rules and norms at work

Leader humor, especially the aggressive humor display, can also bring negative outcomes for followers and organizations regardless of how funny they may be. Firstly, leader humor can pose negative outcomes by shaping followers' perceptions of workplace norms and rules. Based on Benign violation theory (BVT), leader display of humor (especially aggressive humor) can signal to

followers that the leader accepts norm violations in the organization and subsequently make followers more likely to engage in workplace deviance where they voluntarily violate important organizational norms and harm the well-being of the organization and other employees [40]. Moreover, leader aggressive humor makes followers less concerned about their social image and leads them to expect that their mistakes or misbehaviors will have no negative repercussions. As a consequence, followers are more likely to show incivility [1] and engage in more negative gossip behaviors as they feel those actions would go unpunished [41]. Under these circumstances, a leader's sense of moral identity is vital in imposing moral constraints and making followers abide by ethical standards [1].

Project power to increase psychological distance and weaken relationships

Because humor is embedded in social relationship, while positive leader humor can strengthen relationship, negative leader humor can weaken it. Leader humor could inflict costs on followers and organizations through the power projection effects associated with leader aggressive humor. Instead of reducing hierarchical differences as leader affiliative humor usually do, leaders' use of aggressive humor can reinforce their positions of power and increase the psychological distance between them and followers [42]. Leader aggressive humor conveys humiliation, causes depression, ostracizes followers, pushes them away from seeking status, and makes them less willing to engage in constructive voice [43]. As a subject of leader aggressive or negative humor expression, followers experience a depletion of their cognitive resources, which dampens self-control, and makes them less likely to engage in subsequent tasks requiring energy and effort [44]. Additionally, the depletion effects associated with leader aggressive humor can foster employee silence and induce more addictive behaviors [45,46]. The negative effects of aggressive leader humor can also spill over to bystanders and cause widespread anxiety and negative affective rumination among other colleagues who witnessed the negative leader humor [47].

Unsuccessful use of humor forms negative leader perception

Finally, negative consequences may still exist even if a leader attempts positive (i.e., affiliative) humor. Not all humor is perceived as funny and appropriate by followers. While effective leader humor improves a leader's image in followers' eyes, ineffective humor can demolish followers' perception of a leader. For example, when leader humor falls flat or fails, followers may form a less positive assessment of the leader regarding their competence and legitimacy [6]. Given that successful humor rests on shared perspectives and experiences, failed leader humor unappreciated by followers also

highlights a lack of mutual understanding in the leader–follower relationship and pushes followers even further away from their leaders. Moreover, failed leader humor decreases follower liking of the leader and reduces respect for the leader, resulting in less advice-seeking behavior [48]. However, the reduced liking associated with failed humor may be more prominent for men than women [49]. Furthermore, not all followers would appreciate leader humor, and an overuse of humor by the leader may make followers perceive the leader as non-serious and frivolous, thereby decreasing leadership effectiveness [50].

Conclusions and directions for future research

The increasing body of research on leader humor has clearly demonstrated that it could have significant implications for many aspects of follower outcomes, ranging from attitudinal outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment, work engagement, and turnover intentions to both in-role and extra-role behaviors such as job performance, creativity, voice, and organizational citizenship behaviors. Research evidence so far consistently shows that positive leader humor (e.g., affiliative humor) bring beneficial outcomes while negative leader humor (e.g., aggressive humor) lead to adverse consequences.

However, is the picture of leader humor as black and white as it appears? Can positive leader humor bring negative outcomes, and is there a bright side to negative leader humor? When measuring leader humor expression, existing studies often conflate the effectiveness of humor with the expression of humor as a behavior. Future research could more clearly separate the two and examine the nuanced cost and benefits of leader humor expression.

So far, most leader humor research assumes that leaders are always the senders of humor while followers are consistently the humor receivers. However, a humorous conversation is often dynamic, and the audience (in this case, followers) may also express humor back. A recent study shows that followers can use humor to convey dissent and increase leader accountability [42], suggesting followers can also actively and strategically use humor in their interaction with leaders. Future research could delve deeper into this dynamic and examine whether and how leaders and followers express humor interactively and its implications for both parties.

Finally, we still know relatively little about what makes leaders engage in humor expression with followers in the first place. Some studies indicate that leaders who endorse more equality between leaders and followers are more likely to express humor [51]. Given that leader humor can also function as an impression management tool [52], future research could explore how impression

management and other motivations affect the extent to which leaders display humor at work.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data availability

No data were used for the research described in the article.

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