

The Use of Humor in the Multicultural Working Environment

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The human race has only one really effective weapon, and that is laughter. The moment it arises, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place.

—Mark Twain

Abstract Humor, as a ubiquitous phenomenon, appears in all kinds of human interaction, including in the working environment. Since a big part of contemporary business communication is cross-cultural, it is vital that managers and other people involved in an organization know how to use humor in the multicultural workplace as its proper use may be a powerful managerial tool. This article presents briefly the theories of humor, the types of humor, and the role of humor in the organization. Given that humor is culture-specific, it gives examples of how Britons, Americans, Germans, and the French use humor in the workplace.

Keywords Humor · Culture · Cross-cultural communication · Workplace

1 Introduction

Humor is a universal and fundamentally social phenomenon. People use it as a form of expression in all kinds of interaction. Thus, it also influences the working environment, including individual employees, teams of workers, and entire organizations. Managers and other people involved in an organization who fail to recognize the role of humor, and are either reluctant or unable to see the multiple benefits it brings, or perceive the threats connected with its improper use, are likely to face problems in situations when people use it. An awareness of the omnipresence of humor is even more important in multicultural enterprises, whose number is constantly increasing in the contemporary world of business. Although humor is

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practiced in all latitudes, by people of all nationalities and religions, and in all ethnic groups, there are differences in the ways people use it and understand it, caused by the different cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes they hold. Therefore, those who resort to humor must possess knowledge about what makes people laugh as the improper use of humor may destroy relationships, offend, alienate, reduce morale, or undermine efforts to achieve goals.

This article discusses different cultural attitudes to humor with a focus on types and functions of humor as well as its influence on the multicultural working environment. It looks at examples of proper and improper uses of humor and explains how humor can establish an immediate rapport or backfire in situations when the two parties share, or do not share, a common culture.

2 Theories of Humor

It would be no exaggeration to claim that humor is as old as mankind. Since time immemorial, people have resorted to humor as one of the ways of coping with various situations ranging from the entertaining to survival in times of crisis. Yet the word *humor* was not used in its modern sense of “funniness” until the eighteenth century, when Lord Shaftesbury used it in his 1709 essay “An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor” (Morreall, 2013).

What is humor? Dictionaries offer many senses of the word. Humor is defined as

1. A comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement: the humor of a situation.
2. The faculty of perceiving what is amusing or comical: He is completely without humor.
3. An instance of being or attempting to be comical or amusing; something humorous: The humor in his joke eluded the audience.
4. The faculty of expressing the amusing or comical: The author’s humor came across better in the book than in the movie.
5. Comical writing or talk in general; comical books, skits, plays, etc.
6. Humors, peculiar features; oddities; quirks: humors of life.
7. Mental disposition or temperament (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/humor>).

The original sense, though, was “bodily fluid”, specifically the four chief fluids of the body—blood, phlegm, yellow bile (choler), and black bile (melancholy)—whose relative proportions were thought to determine a person’s physical and mental qualities (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>).

Many scholars, philosophers, and scientists have attempted to define humor, giving rise to numerous theories of humor. Elsevier’s Dictionary of Psychological Theories lists 56 such theories (Roedelein, 2006, pp. 285–286), deriving from various fields of study such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, literary history, and linguistics. Basically, they all attempt to answer some fundamental questions

concerning the essence, purpose, and functions of humor. Morreall (1987) claims that “a good way to get the insight necessary for constructing a comprehensive theory of laughter is to examine the three traditional theories; though none of them is adequate as a general theory, they each have features which belong in a general theory” (p. 129). Following this approach, we have chosen to present the three theories that he proposes: the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory.

The superiority theory holds that laughter results from a person’s feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of him- or herself. The theory can be dated back to Plato and Aristotle, who in their various works touch upon the role of feelings of superiority in finding something laughable. Plato claims that we laugh at what we find ridiculous in other people; thus, laughter originates in malice. He perceives excessive laughter as an “overwhelming of the soul” and as such it should be avoided because it leads to other violent emotions and loss of control over oneself (Attardo, 1994, p. 19).

Similarly Aristotle, Plato’s student, considers laughter to be a form of derision. For him comedy is “an imitation of men worse than average” so the amusement that results from it consists in derisive laughter at that which is ugly in men (Attardo, 1994, p. 19). However, Aristotle disagrees with Plato in that he sees humor as a “stimulation” of the soul, which puts people in a good mood, rather than an “overwhelming”. Also, he notes the practical aspect of the use of humor as a rhetorical device in argumentation (Attardo, 1994, p. 20).

In modern times, it is the seventeenth-century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes who makes the strongest statement of the idea that laughter originates in a sense of superiority on the part of those who are laughing towards the objects of their laughter, the butt of the joke. For Hobbes, the human race is made up of individuals constantly fighting with one another. Laughter results from winning a victory in that battle. It is then “nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (Morreall, 1983, p. 5). Humor, then, results from a sense of superiority derived from the disparagement of others.

One of the most active contemporary representatives of this theory is Charles Gruner, a professor of speech communication at the University of Georgia, who presents a more positive perspective on the superiority theory as opposed to the more negative views of his predecessors. He views humor as a “playful aggression”, which he understands as a game, competition, or contest. Since it also involves winners and losers, it seems that the element of superiority and some form of winner/loser logic is considered indispensable for “successful humor” (Martin, 2007, p. 45).

The incongruity theory offers a radically different explanation of what humor results from. This theory can be traced to Francis Hutcheson’s 1750 “Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees” (Critchley, 2002, p. 3) but it is Immanuel Kant and later Arthur Schopenhauer who made major contributions to its development. According to this theory, humor resides in an intellectual recognition of incongruity between what we know or expect to occur, and what

actually occurs in the joke, gag, or blague (Critchley, 2002, p. 3). The idea of incongruity is crucial to Kant's account of laughter, which he defines as an "affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (Morreall, 1983, p. 16). In other words, when the punchline comes, the tension is gone and the listeners experience comic relief. Schopenhauer's views are somewhat different. We do get something in the punchline: something that we were not expecting, something that completes the story but in an unexpected way. Amusement derives from a mismatch between a thought and a perception. He defines it in the following way: "the cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (as cited in Morreall, 1983, p. 17).

The relief theory, which emerged in the nineteenth-century work of Herbert Spencer, claims that humorous laughter is a manifestation of the release of pent-up nervous energy (Critchley, 2002, p. 3). "Humor releases tensions, psychic energy or (...) releases one from inhibitions, conventions and laws" (Attardo, 1994, p. 50). The most influential proponent of this theory is Sigmund Freud, who approached the subject in two works: "Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious" (1905) and "Humor" (1928). According to Freud, laughter is connected with three types of phenomena, each of which uses specific mechanisms to accumulate energy and then to release it in the form of laughter. These are wit and jokes, humor, and the comic. Laughing at jokes enables the release of sexual or aggressive impulses that are usually suppressed. Laughter resulting from humor is seen as a defense mechanism. It originates as a reaction to a stressful or fearful situation and comes from the release of energies associated with negative feelings. In the third case, the energy release is caused by nonverbal stimuli (Sampietro, 2013, p. 20).

Theoretically, there are no grounds for assuming the existence of differences in basic cognitive or psychological processes of humor mechanisms across cultures. After all, all cultures laugh at incongruities and their solutions, and mechanisms such as surprises, superiority, and tension relief seem universal. But there is enough evidence to claim that not all cultures always laugh at the same things.

3 Types of Humor

Mulkay (1988) claims that human interaction appears to fall into two basic modes, serious, and humorous, irrespective of cultural context. This claim applies to all levels of communication from interaction between individuals to mass communication. Humorous communication may employ various styles of humor. Researchers propose that there are four such styles which can be employed in the working environment, each either positive or negative in type (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006, p. 59): affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating.

Affiliative humor is an example of positive humor. It is perceived to be neither threatening nor hostile. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) call it "a social lubricant"

(p. 59) that contributes to the positive atmosphere in the workplace as it enhances social interaction and acts as a bond which brings people together. Those who use this type of humor joke around, tell funny stories, and play harmless practical jokes on their colleagues to facilitate communication within a particular group, lessen tensions and help build interpersonal relations, thereby improving the overall atmosphere and creating a positive working environment.

Unlike affiliative humor, which is more group orientated, self-enhancing humor is centered more on the individual. People who exhibit self-enhancing humor usually have a good-natured attitude towards life and are not easily overwhelmed with problems. They use humor as a coping mechanism for dealing with stressful situations as it helps them maintain a positive perspective and look at problems from a different, more humorous angle. They also use it to boost self-esteem and positively enhance their image relative to others in the organization.

Aggressive humor is an example of negative humor directed at others. It is used to manipulate people by means of indirect threat or ridicule. As Romero and Cruthirds (2006) observe, it is used to “victimize, belittle and cause others some type of disparagement” (p. 59). People who utilize this style of humor make themselves feel better at the expense of others so that they can show their superiority in rank or status. Aggressive humor often leads to alienating people and undermining relationships and so does not bring positive effects for the organization. However, mild aggressive humor is believed to have positive functions. The use of satire or teasing enables one to express disagreement or reprimand without causing negativity as the message is delivered in a humorous way.

Self-defeating humor is directed at the person using it. People resorting to this type of humor ridicule themselves to entertain others or to seek their acceptance. In organizations it usually serves to reduce the speaker’s status level and make him/her more approachable so that the distance between leaders and followers can be diminished.

4 Humor in the Workplace

Humor in the workplace has not always been considered desirable. In 1940, the management of the Ford company fired John Gallo, one of its employees, only because he was laughing at work (Collinson, 2002, p. 167). However, the approach to humor and its role in the workplace has changed over the years. More and more companies have started to appreciate the role of humor and prompt its use among their workers. Southwest Airlines, for example, is known for encouraging its employees to laugh and joke in the workplace. The management assumes that people rarely achieve success if they have no opportunities to laugh and have fun (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006, p. 62). Eastman Kodak, Price-Waterhouse, Hewlett-Packard, and Digital Equipment have designated some areas of their company premises as places where employees can have a laugh and have fun, which, they believe, will help the employees to relax, inspire creative thinking, and

thus improve their performance (Morreall, 2008, p. 460). IBM and AT&T employ humor consultants who provide training on how humor mitigates stress, improves relations with customers, and promotes creativity (Morreall, 2008, p. 449). These examples show that work and play are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Although humor may be informally regarded merely as a means of communicating levity, there is much scientific evidence to suggest that an understanding of the multifunctional role of humor can produce numerous benefits in the workplace. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) identify several areas in the humor literature that may be of special interest to organizations. These include stress perception and management, creativity, group identity and cohesion, communication, leadership, and organizational culture (p. 60). Studies show that humor may be a powerful tool in the field of management.

It goes without saying that stress can have a negative influence upon individual and group performance. Humor helps reduce such stress, and in this way contributes to improving performance. Joking about a stressful situation makes it look less threatening and thus more controllable, which eases the tension. Also, humor allows people to distance themselves from a situation causing stress. It provides the sense of proportion and detachment, making it possible for people to see things from a different perspective and explore alternative solutions to a problem. As Brian Pitman, chief executive of Lloyds Bank, maintained, "It is absolutely crucial to have a sense of humor, because it's the only thing that will keep you afloat when you hit the rocks. A sense of humor is vital to success" (Simcock, 1992, p. 153).

Humor also increases creativity. Barsoux (1993) observes that "humor and creativity have a lot in common. Both involve divergent rather than convergent thought processes: free-wheeling associations, the discovery of hidden similarities, and leaps of imagination" (p. 46), all of which are conducive to creative thinking. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) also emphasize the link between humor and creativity, claiming that due to the relaxing influence of humor people become less likely to criticize mistakes or new ideas and more open to accepting new solutions, even those that involve risk taking (p. 62).

Within organizational settings, humor is important not only to individuals but also to groups. As Barsoux (1993) puts it, "humour is central to any collective endeavour" (p. 92). People respond more positively to each other when humor is present. It helps build group cohesiveness and enhance group identity, and thereby increases efficiency and productivity. The use of humor enables a group to protect itself against outsiders. Simultaneously, it allows its members to identify themselves with a group by recognizing its common values and perspectives. Shared laughter helps people satisfy the need to feel accepted as group members since humor creates strong bonds between those who share it. McGhee defines it in the following way:

Shared laughter and the spirit of fun generates a bonding process in which people feel closer together - especially when laughing in the midst of adversity. This emotional glue enables team members to stick together on the tough days, when members of the team need each other to complete a project and assure quality customer service (as cited in Romero & Cruthirds, 2006, p. 61).

All business activity involves communication. Whatever we do, we need to exchange information and ideas and maintain relationships. Humor facilitates communication as people who use it communicate positive emotions, which, in turn, improves understanding and acceptance of messages. On the other hand, the effective functioning of a business unit requires that managers should tell people when they are not performing well. Humor allows them to deliver criticism without alienating subordinates or diminishing their motivation. Humor can be also used to defuse the criticism leveled at us by others. It can serve to disarm aggression. As Barsoux (1993) points out, “by pre-empting the laughter of others, we steal their thunder” (p. 74). Humor plays an important role in negotiations. It not only contributes to a constructive climate for negotiation but also allows negotiators to be tough and firm without being overly aggressive (Barsoux, 1993, p. 57). Mutual laughter helps establish rapport and is a sign of consensus, which are prerequisites for successful bargaining.

Humor can also be used as a tool to display power relations in an organization. Managers can utilize it to define their status, strengthen their position, or maintain and enhance social control. It can serve to express leaders’ superiority over their subordinates but also to reduce social distance between leaders and followers, and to relieve tensions at various organizational levels (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006, pp. 62–63).

Humor forms an important part of organizational culture. It is a means of communicating and maintaining organizational values and norms of behavior. It also serves to punish and ridicule those who fail to observe them. Humor increases the satisfaction of both subordinates and superiors, and promotes team-orientated behavior. However, managers and employees can never take it for granted that the use of humor will always bring positive results. The main problem is how individuals perceive humor and what they associate it with. We must bear in mind that humor is a double-edged sword. Therefore, what some consider humorous may elicit contradictory, if not conflicting, emotions from others. Thus, we all need to be aware of the negative effects of humor. Humor has to be geared to the audience and occasion, otherwise it can have a damaging effect on organizational operations. When ill-timed, confusing or communicated poorly, it can lead to destruction and frustration and increase levels of stress which are usually already high in a strongly competitive environment. If used to diminish an idea or when forced, humor can reduce creativity and distract people from the group’s main task. Use of too much humor by managers can bring them negative effects too, as it can lead to loss of credibility. Especially detrimental to organizations is aggressive humor, which may undermine relationships, alienate individuals or the whole groups, and humiliate and hurt (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006, p. 65). Additionally, we all have to be aware of the fact that people may take legal action against those who use sexist, racist, or ethnic humor that offends the values of others.

Ethnic humor diminishes the self-esteem of those who are its target, ridicules, and provokes negative emotions. People laugh at those who are not like them and are usually believed to be either excessively stupid or particularly canny. In England, the Irish are traditionally described as stupid and the Scots as canny, while

in Canada, Newfies and Nova Scotians assume these respective roles (Critchley, 2002, p. 69). Either way, some believe that others are inferior to them or at least somehow disadvantaged because they are different from them. Ethnic, sexist, or racist humor, especially in the organizational setting, has the potential to create negative effects and conflicts which may seriously inhibit organizational outcomes, and so they should be avoided in the workplace.

5 Humor as a Culture-Specific Phenomenon

It seems to be common knowledge that humor is universal. Apparently there has never been a culture that does not laugh. Martin (2007) claims that “humor and laughter are a universal aspect of human experience, occurring in all cultures and virtually all individuals throughout the world” (p. 3). Raskin (1984) also says that “the ability to appreciate and enjoy humor is universal and shared by all people”; it is “a universal human trait” (p. 2). He admits, however, that the kinds of humor that people favor differ widely. This view is shared by Critchley (2002), for whom the claim that humor is universal on the basis that everybody can laugh is inadequate as it does not tell us anything about concrete *contexts* for using humor—and it is at the level of concrete contexts that the issue becomes more complex. He maintains that “humor is local and a sense of humor is usually highly context-specific”, emphasizing that “humor is a form of cultural insider-knowledge” (p. 67). The same opinion can be found in Hertzler (1970) who says that the content, target, and style of humor is largely influenced by the values of a society as well as its norms and customs (pp. 51–52). Martin (2007) also agrees that a sense of humor is common across cultures but that different cultures influence the style and content of humor as well as the types of situations in which humor is used and is considered appropriate (p. 3).

It must be conceded that humor is culture-based and that although people representing different cultures share basic concepts, they see, interpret, and evaluate things differently as they view them from different angles and perspectives. As Lewis (2006) remarks, “What is funny for the French may be anathema to an Arab; your very best story may be utterly incomprehensible to a Chinese; your most innocent anecdote may seriously offend a Turk. Cultural and religious differences may make it impossible for some people to laugh at the same thing” (p. 15). It is apparent that multicultural managers and other people working in multicultural environments must be aware of the fact that it may not be enough to learn about the values, norms, social customs, business practices, or etiquette characteristic of a given culture. When they come to a foreign country or meet a multicultural workforce they will inevitably meet different attitudes to humor as well. A lack of familiarity with the multiple aspects of culture, including humor, can weaken a company’s position on the market or even prevent it from achieving its objectives, ultimately leading to failure.

5.1 *British Humor*

The British consider humor to be their greatest natural asset and a national characteristic. As Zeldin (1980) observes, “England, alone in Europe, raised humor to the status of a trait of national character” (p. 72). Barsoux (1993) adds that “Britain has gone on to exalt humour in a way other nations have not. Britain has dignified it with respectability and made a virtue out of it” (p. 152).

One of the most important aspects of British humor, which can hardly be overlooked, is its omnipresence. Most contexts, including working environments, are appropriate for humor. In business “humor is expected at all levels, between all levels, and on all occasions. It is important to be entertaining on every possible occasion, public or private (Mole, 1990, p. 111). There are virtually no topics that must be treated as sacred. Every aspect of work can be humorously commented on, even those that are critical for the survival of the company. As Barsoux (1993) observes, “in Britain, efficiency, productivity and profit are constant targets for wisecracks, often self-deprecating ones” (p. 155). The British attitude towards business is not marked with such deference as in some other nations, mainly because for Britons utilizing humor does not exclude engaging in business. Such an approach to humor results from the fact that the British do not put a firm dividing line between work and leisure. Work is perceived as the extension of life so humor carries over into the sphere of business and adds color to the workplace as it does outside.

Humor appears in many forms. It is both action-driven and personality-driven. Having a sense of humor is considered a state of mind. Profiles of business leaders in the British quality press almost invariably allude to the individuals’ sense of humor. Having a sense of humor and, most importantly, knowing how to use it is regarded as an advantage. It is also worth noting that among British leaders humor is not inhibited by a strong sense of personal dignity, as it is in the case of the French or the Germans (Barsoux, 1993, p. 167). On the contrary, British managers try hard to avoid being labeled humorless since this might damage their authority. “Humour, as a byword for charisma, social skills and persuasiveness, is what Britons feel management is all about” (Barsoux, 1993, p. 169). As Lewis (2006) observes, “humor is regarded as one of the most effective weapons in the British manager’s arsenal” (p. 197). Thus, humor forms not only part of everyday communication in the workplace but it is also present in formal business settings including meetings, presentations, and negotiations.

A noticeable feature of the British character is that Britons feel at ease with ambiguity, which may result from the vagueness of the language and communication patterns. Britain is a high-context culture. Communication in Britain is less direct and more suggestive. It is not only what is said that matters, but how it is said, by whom and in what context. Tone, gesture, and expression largely contribute to the meaning of a message. What is behind the words is as important as the words themselves. Ambiguity manifests itself in other ways too. Britain has neither a written constitution nor a legal code. Political and legal systems are based on

precedent, inference, compromise, and negotiation. Such a composition finds its reflection in business. As Barsoux observes, “the British have an aversion to working within a rational and systematic framework” (p. 165), “they like room to manoeuvre, zones of discretion, and hidden rules to identify club members” (p. 166). Their attachment to ambiguity and evasion finds its natural support in humor, which makes it possible to express criticism in a jocular way, so as to avoid causing job dissatisfaction, admonish bad behavior without alienating anybody, or challenge authority without appearing to do so.

The prevailing type of British humor is irony and sarcasm. Since they involve saying one thing and figuratively meaning the opposite, they are slightly risky in a cross-cultural working environment as they may be taken literally, causing misunderstanding, confusion or even offence.

5.2 *Humor in America*

One might assume that the attitude of Americans towards humor in the workplace is very much like that of the British. After all, the Americans and the British appear to be culturally similar. They speak the same language and share the same behavior profile. Both societies are system- and task-oriented, informal, strict on timekeeping, and reluctant to show their feelings in business contexts (Tomalin & Nicks, 2007, p. 169). However, one can easily fall into the trap caused by “cultures of similarity”, which occurs when the similarities that exist between the two cultures, as in the case of the United States and the United Kingdom, appear to be so great that differences tend to be masked and ignored. As a result, they fester under the surface of similarity to reveal themselves, quite unexpectedly, in different contexts (Foster, 2014, p. 1). It must be noted, therefore, that although America, like Britain, has a long and renowned humorous tradition in literature and film, humor and business do not add up. As Sir John Harvey Jones, a British top industrialist, observed, “In America they tend to take business more seriously—and a sense of humour tends to suggest you are not a deeply devoted corporate person” (as cited in Barsoux, 1993, p. 153). Barsoux (1993) explains this further, remarking that “humour in business is an un-American activity. Business should not be sent up nor businessman ridiculed because they both embody that fragile thing that is the American heritage” (p. 155). Americans are still motivated by the traditional national imperative of making advances, transforming the environment, initiating change, and reaching their destination. They value individual liberty and economic opportunity. They believe that they are free to be whoever they want to be. To achieve this, they have the right to make personal choices. Hard work is a means to transform the lives of individuals and so work is equated with success, time is money, and business is no laughing matter.

This does not mean, however, that Americans do not value humor, or do not joke in the workplace at all. They employ various forms of humor in both formal and

informal contexts. Jokes inevitably appear in presentations and speeches, but once Americans get down to business, playfulness is gone.

A further constraint on the use of humor in business settings is that the American corporate environment is very litigious. Anyone with a grievance can easily find a lawyer who will take their case to trial. American courts abound in age, sex, and race discrimination cases. Thus, managers must be sure to communicate information to subordinates in a clear and unambiguous way so as to avoid running the risk of being sued for unfair treatment. Humor, with its potential for misinterpretation, does not work to their advantage.

5.3 *Humor in France*

French managers also tend to place limits on the extent to which they allow humor to intrude on business. They do not usually include it in their presentations, nor is it often used intentionally in meetings, which are more often than not treated as formal occasions. Resort to humor is inhibited by the fear of appearing foolish or frivolous, or even losing personal dignity and intellectual standing. If humor is used by the French managers, it is “more likely to be clever and sophisticated, a glimpse of their intellectual brawn, not their playfulness” (Barsoux, p. 156). However, the French attitude to humor in the workplace, unlike the American, does not result from the glorification of the role of the corporation in society. As has been already mentioned, humor is inhibited by a strong sense of personal dignity and the need for the French to appear conscientious and credible at work.

Another constraint on the use of humor in the workplace, partly imposed by the French language itself, is the lack of a certain psychological intimacy which is indispensable for humor to operate—namely, the predominance of the polite *vous* form of address. French managers, even those who have worked together for years, often prefer not to adopt the more familiar *tu* form of address, and this contributes to interpersonal restraint in communication.

5.4 *Humor in Germany*

To foreigners, Germans often appear intense and humorless. As Lewis (2006) observes, they “do not have the British and American addiction to funny stories and wisecracks” (p. 227). But this is not to say that Germans do not have a sense of humor. They do, but generally prefer to express it in private life. Humor is compartmentalized. Joking is acceptable outside work and among friends. When at work, Germans find it important to focus on tasks and do not want to be distracted by humor.

For Germans business is a serious matter so they see little room for levity in the workplace. Humor is acceptable in so far as it contributes to *Arbeitsklima* and

supports the high task orientation typical of the German working environment. Personal dignity is also at stake here. As Schmidt (2007) observes, Germans “do not mix business and humor until they are sure their counterparts will be able to take them seriously” (p. 23). That also explains why humor in the workplace is never self-deprecating. German managers do not make fun of their own weaknesses as this might suggest inadequacy and would clash with the emphasis they put on personal competence (Barsoux, 1993, p. 157).

6 Conclusion

The significance of humor in the workplace cannot be overstated. Understanding its multifunctional role can produce numerous benefits for an organization. Humor can be useful in reinforcing common group values, bonding teams together, and defining corporate cultures. On a managerial level it can be used to persuade and influence, to motivate and unite, or to express criticism without being abrasive. It may prove useful in crisis situations as it is one of the best stress mitigators; it relieves tension, and provides perspective. It helps one to face threat rather than succumb to it. It can also serve to deflect criticism, cope with failure, and defuse conflict. Simply speaking, humor makes working life more livable. Therefore, an awareness of the use of humor in the workplace would seem to be critical to managerial effectiveness.

However, due to globalization processes, there are more and more organizations that operate internationally or whose workforces are culturally mixed. As a result, a major part of business communication is cross-cultural, which means that in order to transact business, one must communicate with managers, employees, or suppliers who differ in nationality, race, gender, age, religion, and social and educational background. Adler (1991) observes that “foreigners see, interpret, and evaluate things differently, and consequently act upon them differently” (p. 67). She further explains that “the greater the differences between the sender’s and the receiver’s cultures, the greater the chance for cross-cultural miscommunication” (p. 67). Therefore, one must bear in mind that although the ability to appreciate and enjoy humor is universal and shared by all people, each culture has a different perception of what constitutes humor. What may be hilarious in one culture can be far from funny or even offensive in another. To be successful at using humor in communication with business partners who come from different backgrounds, one must be sensitive to cultural differences concerning the way humor is understood and utilized, including its content, target, and style. The examples discussed above, of how Britons, Americans, Germans, and the French use humor in the workplace, illustrate this point. Yet, as Romero and Cruthirds (2006) maintain, “with some careful thought and preparation, anyone can be successful at using humor appropriately in organizational settings” (p. 67).

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