

**Laughter and Leadership**

by

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**Abstract**

This paper will discuss the role of humor in effective leadership, particularly as it pertains to leading through change and innovation – breaking new ground and going against the grain in whatever form. Here we will examine the scholarship, the inferences of creative scholars and the results of the few validated empirical studies which establish a link – a significant relationship between the use of humor and better, more compelling leadership styles and certainly more creative modes of motivation. Also, implications will be drawn and recommendations for future study will be made.

*“When the going gets tough, the smart lighten up.”*

John Morreall (p. 199)

## **Introduction**

*“Funny as it may sound, humor is absolutely essential to the success of any organization.”*

Randall Munson (website 2004)

During this writing – well, more exactly, this rewriting, America mourned and celebrated the passing of a much celebrated ex-president, Ronald Wilson Reagan. Much hailed in some circles as “he who ended the Cold War” and a great president, equally vilified by others who found his trickle down economic policies, clandestine international schemes, swaggeringly bellicose rhetoric and the dramatic proliferation of the military abhorrent. Nonetheless, almost all seem to concede that his moniker as “The Great Communicator” was well deserved ... And when the topic of quality of leadership was discussed, at the top of the lexicon was “Dutch’s” undeniable sense of humor. Even his most strident detractors admitted to yielding to his humor and succumbing to his charm. “He’s just the kind of guy you can’t help but like” cooed former Speaker Dan Rostenkowski. (CNN, 2004)

Reagan the man was charming. Reagan the president was controversial. Reagan the man, with his sense of humor, seemed to win out in the post-mortem poll. His humor made him an irresistible leader, which speaks volumes for the potency of laughter when it comes to leading change, especially unpopular change ... and isn’t a lot of change unpopular? Reagan took the Republican Party and much of the country on a not altogether savory abrupt right turn – and the majority followed willingly. After all, he was elected twice and the current administration still rides his coattails. Humor was indeed his most potent ally.

## **Humor & Creativity Linked**

*“Many theorists have suggested a close association between creativity and humor.”*  
Teresa M. Amabile

Gary Davis (1999) writes that “An especially frequent creative trait is a good sense of humor” (p. 85). The relationship between humor and creativity has been long established. Frank Wicker (1982) in his article “A Rhetorical Look at Humor as Creativity” lists a number of humor types, under the heading of something he calls a “*trope*”, which he uses to refer to a “device for stretching the meanings of symbols” (p.175). The list of *trope* types includes *metaphor*, *metony*, *antiphrasis*, *oxymoron* as its basic variants. Many of these *trope* types parallel the intrinsic dynamic of basic CPS tools. *Metaphor*, for example, equates a joke with “a momentary vacation” (p. 175) as in VIR, Excursions, Word Dance, SCAMPER and Hitch Hiking. *Oxymoron*, literally meaning -- from the Greek, “witty-foolish”, is a forced combination. Thus, in structure and effect, the building blocks of humor mimic some of the most commonly utilized tools in classic creative problem solving. Mary Murdock and Anita Ganim (1993) show that at least thirteen various definitions of humor highly correlate to the conditions necessary for optimizing Person, Process, Product and Press for effective CPS (p. 62).

Koestler (1964), who invented the “bisociation theory of humor” as part of his comprehensive theory of creativity, is probably the often cited author on the topic (Wicker, 1982, p. 179). He describes “the collision of two frames of reference” that are seemingly incompatible (Wicker, 1982, p. 179). Wicker (1982) states that a popular definition of a creativity as something “original and appropriate” is “highly correlated” with the fundamental dynamic of a joke, in that a joke, just as creativity, must incorporate both “surprise and resolution” (p. 180) – or just another way of phrasing “Divergence” and “Convergence”.

Essentially, Wicker concludes that “*Troping* and joking are two overlapping ways people can be creative and achieve a balance between freedom, incongruity, or novelty on the one hand,

and accuracy, resolution or appropriateness on the other. [It is like] the balance between the loose, global quality of right-brain-thinking and the tight, consistent use of categories in left-brain-thinking.” (Wicker, p. 180.) Thus, creativity and laughter at least highly overlap, if not highly correlate. In sum, where there is humor there is always creativity.

One might also argue the opposite, as most new ideas are subjected to laughter – This could apply to world peace, boats that fly and the giraffe – nature’s own “ridiculous” creative adaptation. Gary Davis (1999) lists humor as one of 16 vital characteristics of a creative person (p. 81). Davis (1999) further breaks down humor into four components: “childlike freshness, playful, plays with ideas and sharp witted” (p. 81). Scholars such as Torrance, Behrens, Eysenck and Karlin are among the those who have all created various creativity and humor assessment measures, which also establish an undeniable correlation.

Humor also has a pronounced link to creative genius and creative eminence. Michael Gelb (1998) relates that Leonardo da Vinci had a wicked sense of humor and an abundant taste for the bizarre. “[He liked drawing and painting freakish subjects]. On one occasion he held a dinner party for the most grotesque-looking people in town. He regaled them with joke after joke until their features became even more contorted through the effect of hysterical laughter ... Leonardo’s contemplation of opposition and paradox took many forms ... It is expressed in the love of *puns, jokes and humor* [with respect to all of which he was a master]” (p. 145).

Albert Einstein likewise was famous for his pervasive, impish sense of humor. He sometimes presented his theories as jokes. Right before his theory of relativity was confirmed, Gelb (2002) writes that Einstein said, “If Relativity is proved right, the Germans will call me a German, the Swiss will call me a Swiss citizen, and the French will call me a great scientist. If proved wrong, the French will call me Swiss, the Swiss will call me German, and the Germans will call me a Jew” (p. 321) Little wonder that

Gelb (1995) writes, “The most creative and successful people are those who laugh regularly -- particularly those who can laugh at themselves” (p. 111).

### **Laughter, Spirituality & Health**

*“The human race has only one really effective weapon and that is laughter.”*

Mark Twain

The relationship of laughter and well-being are also long-established. Perhaps Norman Cousins (1979), in his book, *Anatomy of an Illness* first established this link most profoundly (p. 12-15). Cousins laughed his way back to health from a potentially terminal illness by watching comedy tapes and went on to found the Mind-Health Center for Wellness at Stanford University. In longevity studies (Morreall) in cultures where many people claim to be 120 to 150 years old (Pakistan, central Asia, the Sudan, Ecuador and Mexico) it has been found that “These cultures shared certain world views, values and emotional traits, including high esteem for old people and a belief in a purposeful universe. *Most striking of all is their customary HUMOR, vitality and joyfulness* (1997) (p. 49). Seemingly everywhere around America, “Laughter Clubs” have spawned in which the faithfully mirthful gather in the early morning hours – not unlike Tai Chi groups to belly laugh their way to serenity and happiness. The Laughter Project in Saratoga Springs, New York attracts hundreds to its retreats each year. Native Americans called laughter “massaging the soul”. No doubt laughter is salubrious and essential for human fulfillment.

### **Laughter & Leadership Now**

*“We’re focused on fun and profit ... and know how the two go together.”*

Herb Kelleher, CEO Southwest Airlines

One of the recent developments in the study of leadership and creativity is a focus on Emotional Intelligence. In his book *Primal Leadership*, Daniel Goleman (2002) (pp. 14, 15 & 35) asserts, “Research on humor at work reveals that a well-timed joke or playful laughter can

stimulate creativity, open lines of communication, enhance a sense of connection and trust, and, of course make work more fun ... The artful use of humor typifies effective leadership ... What is particularly telling [is] that these successful leaders use of humor strongly correlated with the very emotional intelligence competencies we have found to be key to a leader's superior performance. These EI competencies are the vehicles of primal leadership." In saying this, Goleman profoundly connects laughter and leadership in its most contemporary understanding.

Karen Williams (2003) writes, "Laughter opens our energy channels and places us directly in the present moment, where memories of the past no longer burden us, and speculations about the future seem irrelevant. The ability to laugh at one's own foibles and shortcomings in an essential characteristic of leadership. True leaders radiate personality and good humor (web site abstract). Bryan Lattimore (1994) enumerates at least six "benefits" of humor. "Humor can be used:

1. As a way to break the ice in stiff or uncomfortable business situations.
2. As an effective bonding technique – a wonderful way to build common ground with other employees.
3. As a way to break down resistance.
4. As a much-needed way to improve the content, enjoyment, and ultimately the productivity of meetings.
5. As a way to assign work when people can't take any more.
6. As a wonderful way to ease and control tension."

### **Empirical Evidence**

*"Creative groups with which I have been associated have been funny. So are creative people I have known. Humor is present in all manner of ways. I am not suggesting that creative activity is all fun, since it is fraught with frustration, detail work, and plain effort. However, humor is an essential ingredient of healthy conceptualization."*

James L. Adams (p. 58)

Daniel Goleman's assertion is more than simple extrapolation. Research, as limited as it has been, seems to validate the connection between humor and effective leadership. Priest and Swain (2002) conclude from a study conducted in the U.S, military, "The results confirm our hypothesis: leaders who were deemed "good" in the eyes of their followers did have a

significantly higher overall humor rating than those leaders who were deemed “bad” ... We showed that good leaders have a warmer style of humorous conduct than do bad leaders.” One would think these findings all that more profound, given that the emphasis in the military on conformity to order, hierarchy and function would seem to be antagonistic to humor (p.177).

Creativity researcher and writer John Morreall (1997) in his book *Humor Works*, cites a similar finding from another study: “In a survey of vice presidents and personnel directors of one hundred large corporations, 84% said that employees with a sense of humor do a better job.” (p.15). Morreall (1997) also cites the early 70’s classic, *Up the Organization*, where it is written that “the traits of a leader include Humorous: Has a full measure of the comic spirit in his make-up. Laughs even harder when the joke’s on him” (p. 212). Morreall (1997) adds that “Self-effacing humor works for leaders because it expresses humility and confidence at the same time” (p. 214).

Morreall (1997) also writes, “Humor is connected with knowledge in two ways. First, it is a good way for leaders to show their understanding of what’s going on ... The second connection of humor with knowledge is that the joking in an organization is a barometer of people’s morale and concerns, and so to know the organization thoroughly, the wise leader pays attention to its current humor” (p. 192). “The ability to see things in depth and from several perspectives is part of creativity and innovation. It is also an important skill in eliciting the best from other people since it encourages them to express themselves openly. In showing that they see the various sides of an issue, too, leaders can handle sensitive situations with grace and fairness, minimizing possible sense, and at the same time achieving their goals” (p. 187).

### **Humor’s Impact on “The Troops”; More Empirical Evidence**

*“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”*

Victor Borge

Not only is humor motivating and laughter elevating from a leadership standpoint, but there is some evidence that simple exposure to laughter and humor may enhance performance of everyone exposed to it. Teresa Amabile (1996) cites one of the few empirical studies on the impact of humor on creativity among high school students in Israel: “[They] listened to a

recording of a popular Israeli comedian before completing some Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking. Although there was no direct connection between the material and the test requirements, students who had listened to the recording scored significantly higher on fluency, flexibility and originality than students who had not” (p. 223). Echoing this finding, Morreall (1997) cites a study where subjects watched a Cosby Show tape with similar results in performance on creative tasks (p. 201).

Patricia Edmonds (2003) writes, “Fun in the workplace, more than ever before, is becoming significant for companies today” according to a survey report from the Society for Human Resource Management. “Companies that promote fun at work are more effective than companies that don’t, said ¾ of the HR personnel surveyed. Research participants credited workplace fun with helping attract new employees, reinvigorating veteran employees, strengthening co-worker bonds and sparking creativity and innovation” (p. 15). Hesmath and Yerkes cite a study in which “Ninety six percent of executives surveyed by Accountemps believed people with a sense of humor do better at their jobs than those who have little or no sense of humor” (p. 19).

### **Future Fatuous – The Need for More Study**

*“The secret to effective management is keeping the five guys who hate me away from the four that are undecided,”*

Casey Stengel, Legendary Baseball Manager

Notwithstanding the compelling studies which confirm the common sense link between humor, creativity and effective leadership, there is a relative dearth of conclusive and inferential studies establishing the role of humor and laughter and leadership. While the relationship seems manifest and scholars, pundits and practitioners point to it, there is insufficient research in this area. Further research may not only more clearly establish this relationship but yield insights, born of empirical data, that could translate into concrete strategies and disciplines to enhance humor as a tool for leadership and a trenchant motivator for those who look to leadership in times of change. More studies are warranted and given the indications of its efficacy, humor

should be studied inevitably as a key means to enhance the outcomes of applied creativity – better organization, better product, better – more motivated people and ultimately, a better world.

### **It's Out There – People are Doing It**

*“The only way to keep a sense of fun and play in your work life is to consciously choose to make it a priority.”*

Matt Weinstein (p. 51)

*“If you feel blocked, ask your inner child for help. Your inner child loves to play with blocks!”*

Allen Klein, “Swami Beyondananda”  
(Gamez) (p.171)

While we await more conclusive confirmation, many organizations are “Full Speed Ahead”. Here are some initiatives that are currently being taken in cognizance of humor’s important role in leadership, motivation, innovation and creativity:

1. Kodak and Price Waterhouse have established humor rooms (Morreall, p. 201).
2. Despair.Com, which sells humorous “demotivational”/motivational posters, mugs and other items topped \$1 million in sales in 2003 (Despair.com website).
3. The “Unemployed Philosophers’ Guild” which sells creative novelties such as “great genius dolls” and “Freudian slippers” is a viable, going concern
4. Realityworks, an education equipment manufacturer, missed a sales goal by \$60. Rather than lament the minor shortfall, they spoofed it by issuing “Near Miss” slips, ice cream bars and micro-bonuses of \$5 to each employee. (Edmonds) “It was amazing how that got people excited and motivated to keep going.” (p. 15)
5. In their new book, *The CEO and the Monk*, Catell & Moore talk of KeySpan, a huge northeastern power company which wanted to change their corporate paradigm fundamentally. An internal change agent (actually Moore) – an ex-monk turned “Corporate Ombudsman”, orchestrated a full funeral and memorial service which ceremoniously “buried” the old corporation. People mourned their losses, eulogized “the deceased company”, laughed in anticipation of changes to come -- and the message that the “old ways were dead” was emphatically/experientially clear (p. 17). The same company invites in comedy facilitators to take all workers, including the CEO, through improvisational exercises to laugh and bond and team-build.
6. Google and “Ask Jeeves” internet searches for “humor/business consultants” yielded upwards of 125 matches, among them: “The Humor Project; Playfair, Inc., HaHa Institute; Funny Business Inc. and Humor Consultants, Inc.”
7. Chicago’s fabled Second City has an entire division devoted to corporate and business comedy. There are many more competitors, including the Improv Institute, Comedy Sportz, Laugh, Inc. and Wavelength, to name but a few.
8. In her book, *Fun and Gains*, Carolyn Greenwich recommends “Humor Breaks” for greater productivity.
9. Leonard and Swap (1999) relate the stories of two companies who utilize the “moose on the table” technique – When a group encounters a conflict or impasse, a stuffed moose is

thrown out on the conference table or at the “offender” to put everyone on alert in a jocular way, that something controversial needs to be teamed up on and worked out (p. 177).

### **Laughable Conclusions**

*“It’s possible to do serious work without being serious. In fact it’s actually counterproductive to do it any other way. Research on environments that foster innovation shows that playfulness and humor are critically supportive elements. We can be serious about what we’re doing without taking ourselves seriously, **and we must.**”*

Bob Eckert and Jonathon Vehar (p. 37)

Laughter is essential – It is the grease of human relations and a veritable panacea for creative challenges. We need to relearn how to laugh, joke, play and have fun. Want a role model? Sigmund Freud wrote of Leonardo da Vinci, (Gelb, 2004) “the great Leonardo continued to play as a child throughout this adult life thus baffling his contemporaries” (p.313). We would do well to study humor and leadership in new empirical research -- in the lives of creative people of eminence, in interpersonal and organizational relationships, to discover how to foster it, so it permeates our lives and the cultures of the social groups with which we affiliate. Intuitively, viscerally and empirically, from what the available research reveals to us, it is a profound force for the facilitation of change and the betterment of the dynamics of all relationships. Plus, as our bellies, hearts, minds and spirits tell us, it is just plain fun – A divine “hick-UP” into a higher realm.

Ha Ha! Aha! ... Ah! Urp!

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International Institute of Humor and Healing Arts (HaHa Institute)

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