This article treats humor as one of the rhetorical arts which educational leaders must possess to facilitate problem solving among teachers, students, and parents.

A Rhetorical Legacy for Leadership: Humor

by Jane Clark Lindle

Introduction

The perennial quest for the secrets of leadership have yielded volumes of studies, personal memoirs, and dissertations. These studies have ranged from inventories of desirable qualities to cataloging of appropriate behaviors to more complex attempts to study leadership holistically and in context (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan and Lee, 1982; Immegart, 1988; Murphy, 1988). Far from clarifying the complexities of leadership, most of these studies have succeeded in mostly reductionistic, overly simplistic descriptions (De Vries, 1990). Among the commonalities of these studies are repeated references to "a sense of humor," but unfortunately, few of these studies focus specifically on the meaning of humor to leadership.

The purpose of this article is to review the literature on humor and to suggest possible relationships between humor and leadership. Like leadership, humor has long fascinated scholars and the general public. But unlike leadership, humor is rarely studied seriously.

Humor Theory and History

In ancient, and some modern circles, humor and laughter were treated as mysteries to be unraveled by early philosophers and medieval physicians (De Rocher, 1980). Aristotle defined comedy as "an ugliness which is not painful or destructive" (De Rocher, p. xii). All who are familiar with the Greek mask for theatre recognize that comedy is *ying* to the *yang* of tragedy. It is the thin line, recognized by Aristotle, between laughter and tears, pleasure and pain, ugliness and beauty that has baffled and represented the ambivalence of most treatises on humor.

Laurent Joubert wrote *Treatise on Laughter* in 1569. Joubert was a medieval physician who searched for mechanical answers to the ambiguous emotions of humor. Joubert was influenced by his knowledge of Aristotle and also spent much of his treatise trying to explain the underlying pathos of humor (De Rocher, 1980).

The historical concern with the dark side of humor is also found in the Enlightenment Era. Thomas Hobbes provided one of the earliest "theories" of humor known as the "superiority theory" (La Fave, Haddad and Maesen, 1976; Morreall, 1987; Mulkay, 1988). Hobbes believed that laughter was usually expended to denigrate someone else. The "superiority theory" has been tested by both metaphysical analysis and psychological research (Holland, 1982; LaFave, Haddad and Maesen, 1976).

Many humor researchers believe that Freud's work perpetuated "superiority theory" (Holland, 1982, p.47; O'Connell, 1976, p.314). Recent humor researchers suggest that Freud's work presented its own ambiguities about humor. On one hand, Freud presented humor as the essence of psychological maturity; on the other, he pointed to humor as a denial of reality and a manifestation of mental illness (O'Connell, 1976).

Freud's work represents the beginning of modern psychologists' interest in humor. Kohut offered a theory in 1978 which attempted to settle the extremes of Freud's writings on humor. Kohut defined humor as a form of self reflection, but sarcasm was to be distinguished as a defense mechanism (Strozier, 1987). Other psychologists returned to Aristotle and Kant for "incongruity theory" (Morreall, 1987). This theory used a cognitive explanation for laughter. That is, that laughter is the result of a surprise to the mind. Punchlines are thus illogical, unexpected twists to events (Giles, Bourhis, Gadfield, Davies and Davies, 1976; Morreall, 1987; LaFave, Haddad and Maesen, 1976; Rothbart, 1976; Shultz, 1976; Suls, 1983).

The cognitive approach has led to research by developmental psychologists. They suggest that children who produce and understand humor are more competent academically and socially (Masten, 1986; Ziv and Gadish, 1990). Results on gifted children are somewhat mixed, but nevertheless, much of today's developmental and cognitive research on humor explores the relationships between humor, creativity and giftedness (Bruner, 1987; Fern, 1989; Fry and Allen, 1976).

Sociologists trace their interests in humor to the 1970's (McGhee and Goldstein, 1983). Much of this focus involves groups, productivity, organizational development, and problem solving (Bertcher, 1987; Burford, 1985; Davis and Kleiner, 1989; Duncan and Feisal, 1989; Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap, 1990; Hamilton, 1991).

In general, it has been found that humor can increase task performance, job satisfaction, and improve climate (Decker, 1987; Duncan and Feisal, 1989; Ziegler, Boardman and Thomas, 1985). Some of the advantages of humor in work groups relate to "incongruity theory" as humor is seen as a means to problem solving. Thus, the ability to seek the unexpected, the incongruous, in the situation may lead to another perspective on the problem. In addition, humor is a socially acceptable and desirable outlet for stress on the job (Formisano, 1987; Iuzzolino, 1986; Lefcourt and Martin, 1986).

The social acceptability of humor is frequently the topic of business research. Here again the lines of research are strongly influenced by the two theories—"superiority" and "incongruity". In the superiority arena, are researchers who seek to identify the "butt" of jokes in the working relationships between managers and laborers (Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap, 1990) and among workers (Duncan and Feisal, 1989). When humor has a superiority focus, it can be unhealthy. Some of the inappropriate uses of humor include defensiveness, masking of aggression, self-display, and avoidance of issues (Bloch, Browning and McGrath, 1983).

Some political studies of organizations look at humor as brinkmanship. Incongruity may be the underlying theory in work which looks at brinkmanship—a political strategy used by those with less power to challenge authority in socially acceptable ways (De Vries, 1990; Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap, 1990; Thompson, 1981).

Linguistic scholars' interest in humor also may be founded in "incongruity theory" (Flieger, 1991; Gruner, 1976; Raskin, 1985). A concern with semantics, language, and hermeneutics is part of the postmodern era and an attempt to attach meaning

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to behavior, words and symbols (McKenzie, 1992). Much of this interest dates to the ancient Greek interest in rhetoric and to a current concern with critical thinking (Rottenberg, 1991). Along with a postmodern revival in the rhetorical arts, debate and argument are seen as more complex models of intelligence than cognitive theory (Billig, 1991; Kuhn, 1992).

Argument as a problem solving strategy requires the use of wit or irony as exemplified in Plato's writing of Socratic instruction (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1991; Keough, 1992). Playing with ideas in an argument can lead to the incongruous (Raskin, 1985; Rottenberg, 1991). The incongruous can force us to rethink the situation and perhaps re-solve the problem.

In summary, the long, but sporadic, history of humor theory and research leaves a legacy of complexity. Humor is both pain and pleasure. Humor theories promote both a separation of people by class or condition (superiority) and a bringing together of group members in problem solving or alleviation of stress (incongruity). Our analysis of the tangle of humor theory and research begins and ends with the Greek gift of the rhetorical arts in which humor played a complex role. Humor's contribution to leadership is probably no less complex and certainly less understood.

The Relationship between Humor and Educational Leadership: A Proposal

No analysis of leadership is complete without some salute to "a sense of humor." Although many now recognize humor as a useful coping mechanism (Lefcourt and Martin, 1986), the development of a sense of humor and the production of humor appear as mysterious to moderns as did laughter to the ancients. Some believe that humor cannot be taught to educational leaders (Hoehinghaus, 1989). Yet there is also literature which suggests that education can be enhanced by the use of humor (Cornett, 1986).

It is the thesis of this paper, that if any of the rhetorical arts can be taught, then humor is amenable to instruction as well. Humor requires no more or less than critical thinking skills. The difference may be that humor is easier to produce than some more complex mental exercises. The foundation for most humor is incongruity, the ability to play with ideas.

Some humorists have suggested that the more graphic the ideas, the easier to produce the incongruity (Machan, 1991; Cornett, 1986). Graphic depiction of ideas is a fundamental requirement of story telling, and thus, more support for teaching humor is found. If you can teach people to tell stories, you can teach them to produce humor.

Besides the graphic, conveying humor requires an awareness of local culture and the sacred and powerful symbols of that culture (Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap, 1990; Machan, 1991). Today, most educational leaders are urged to learn the culture of their organizations (Deal, 1987). Humor production requires one more step beyond understanding that culture, to reproducing it in graphic pictures. These pictures must allow others to see both the possibilities and the incongruities of their situations. Humor can also provide an acceptable outlet for stress and dissatisfaction produced by that culture.

As useful as humor has been shown to be, there are cautions of which leaders must be aware. Some of the cautions represent that thin line seen on the Greek mask of the theatre between tragedy and comedy.

For instance, stress reduction is necessary in the hopes of solving problems. On the other hand, humor as a stress reducer must never be used as a means of avoiding issues.

As another area of caution in the production of humor, leaders must recognize not only the power of incongruity, but the pitfalls of superiority. In other words, humor at the expense of individuals or sub-groups in an organization's culture is always detrimental. Aggrandizing one's self through the use of humor at the expense of another will always backfire. Using humor as a defense is also useless. In contrast, some research suggests that exchanging dignity through a leader's use of self-effacing humor increases his/her power and accessibility (Duncan and Feisal, 1989).

With some of these tips in mind, today's educational leaders can see the advantages of incorporating humor in their repertoire. In addition, using humor may enhance their own development as critical thinkers and skilled rhetoriticians.

Summary

Although the relationships between humor and leadership are not well explored, humor has an extended, if not rich history. Using the historical connections between humor and rhetoric, the implications for leadership and the use of humor become more apparent. The advantages to leaders using humor include enhancement of problem identification and solving, relief of stress, increased performance, improved job satisfaction, and a better climate. Leaders should avoid using humor as a mechanism for self-veneration, issue avoidance, defensiveness or aggression and superiority. Although humor is acknowledged as a legendary quality of leadership, perhaps the rhetorical antecedents of humor can improve the skills of any educational leader.

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