

## **“My Job’s a Joke!”: Humour in the Workplace<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

*Why does humor, which is seemingly irrelevant and occasionally irreverent, pervade serious management meetings? (Consalvo 1989: 286)*

Humour has been a popular topic of research in many different disciplines over a long period of time, including areas as diverse as management literature, anthropology, psychology, and biology (Hay 1996, Vinton 1989). In the workplace there is an inherent hierarchy which affects the way language is used in interactions. Humour in the workplace is a particularly interesting area, because it instantiates these asymmetric power relationships between managers and their subordinates.

In workplace interactions, as in other social spheres, one of the more obvious and well-recognised functions of humour is to disguise a less acceptable message. Winick (1976) notes that humour enables people to make socially risky comments, i.e. humour is used to reduce the degree of face threat. In relation to language and power in particular, it is interesting to focus on the difference between the way managers use humour in repressive discourse versus the way their subordinates use humour as a contestive strategy, thereby challenging the authority of their superiors (Holmes 1998). Humour disguises the potentially problematic message in both cases.

### **Repressive and contestive humour**

The notions of repressive humour and contestive humour are taken from recent work by Holmes (1998). Repressive humour is a development of the notion of ‘repressive discourse’ proposed by Pateman (1980) (and subsequently used by Fairclough 1989). Repressive discourse results from the exercise of unequal power (Pateman 1980: 83), and it takes the form of covert expressions or controlling utterances whose intent is hidden by the use of particular discourse strategies. One such strategy is the use of humour. Hence repressive humour is a strategy whereby the higher status member ‘sugars the pill’ of a controlling utterance such as a directive or a criticism through the use of humour. Because humour appears to reduce social distance and emphasise solidarity, it superficially reduces the asymmetry of power and status. In reality, in particular interactions, such

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on an unpublished Masters paper. For a more detailed discussion see Marra 1998.

humour may rather emphasise status differences and reinforce the authority of the superior.

In contrast to repressive humour is 'contestive humour' proposed by Holmes (1998), when subordinates use humour as a means to challenge or disagree with their superiors. The underlying notion is that of 'only joking': i.e. humour attenuates the potentially negative repercussions of a serious statement. As Graham et al. suggest, "individuals may veil socially unacceptable behavior behind the cloak of humor" (1992:162). Pizzini makes a similar point: "Because humour officially does not count, persons are induced to risk sending messages that would be unacceptable if stated seriously" (1991: 481).

### Analysis

In this section I will illustrate the concepts of repressive and contestive humour with examples from meetings recorded at three New Zealand private sector organisations as part of the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP).<sup>2</sup>

#### EXAMPLE 1 (WORKPLACE A)

##### *1a Repressive*

Context: The group have got carried away on a topic that is not related to the job in hand and have broken into smaller groups. Penelope, the chairperson, attempts to control the conversation.

Penelope: settle down

Group: [laughs]

In 1a Penelope uses an imperative. Since this is obviously too strong given the context of a group of senior managers, she uses a humorous motherly tone of voice as a softening strategy. She acts like a mother or a teacher with a group of children, instead of the chairperson controlling a senior management meeting. The group takes the point that they have moved too far off track: the humour precludes anyone taking offence. To do so would appear unreasonable.

##### *1b Contestive*

Context: In his administrative role, Edward has been required to collect information from the group, which he feels is unnecessary. George, a newcomer to the organisation, asks why they bother.

George: why are we recording this information

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Edward: because Grant wanted it  
Group: [laughs]

Edward appears to be merely stating a fact, yet the implicit criticism is apparent to all. Because he uses a humorous tone of voice, he cannot be considered to be unreasonably undermining or challenging Grant's authority. Nevertheless he has conveyed his disagreement with the process clearly.

EXAMPLE 2 (WORKPLACE B)

*Repressive and contestive*

Context. Barry has asked Callum to speed up his team. Callum feels this is unfair.

Callum: everyone has been running around like crazy men since our phone call this morning

Barry: not altogether a bad thing

Callum uses humour to describe the effects of the extra work he has been forced to make his team do. By describing them as *running round like crazy men* he indicates to Barry, his superior, that Barry was expecting too much. Barry, however, responds using repressive humour, saying this is what he expects from the group.

EXAMPLE 3 (WORKPLACE C)

*3a Repressive*

Context: Sandy refers to Seth by his position in another sub-project with the aim of getting him to hurry up and give this group some results.

Sandy: we're really going to have to put some pressure on the [sub-Project A] person

Seth: good point

The sub-project A person is in fact Seth, one of the addressees of Sandy's comment. Sandy thus attenuates his criticism of Seth by humorously referring to him indirectly and by position as if he were not one of those present. Seth replies in the same vein, humorously maintaining the fiction that he is not present.

*3b Contestive*

Context. Seth doesn't want to directly accuse his superior, Sandy, of having made a mistake.

Sandy: which is [A]

Seth: which they don't have any more // [laughs] \

Sandy: / [laughs] \

In this example, Seth laughs as he makes the statement that [A] doesn't exist any more, thus suggesting that Sandy knew this already. It is clear, however, that Sandy was not aware that A has disappeared.

### **Conclusion**

The use of humour to reduce face threat is an effective method of attenuating directives and criticism, and is widely used in meetings. Both contestive and repressive humour are strategies which reflect speakers' sensitivity to power differences which are only superficially masked by these strategies.

One answer, therefore, to Consalvo's question regarding the pervasiveness of humour which was quoted at the opening of this paper, is that humour offers advantages to both the powerful and the less powerful in formal meetings. In a democratic era, it provides an acceptable tool for those with formal status to 'do power', while also giving the less powerful an acceptable means to voice their disagreement and challenge their bosses.

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