

The Origins of Workplace Humor and its Definition



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Abstract

This paper describes a phenomenon that has been determined by many scholars as a trivial behavior in daily lives but few definite descriptions were given upon the humor-entity within the work environment. Likewise, the early writings had neglected the origins of such a phenomenon from the literature perspective. Hence, and by utilizing the phenomenological research paradigm, a through literature review was conducted to attempt to the set research gap where it was found that workplace humor is derived from the quality of work life approach which is a significant part of the techno-structural intervention. It was also concluded that workplace humor is defined as any amusing activity or communication within the organization that would result in positive emotions and reactions in the individual, work group, and organization.

Keywords: Humor, workplace humor, humor at work, quality of work life, origin, definition.

1 INTRODUCTION

Workplace humor was regarded as a tool that contemporary managers and leaders shall utilize in order to build and sustain better and productive work environments. However, behaviorists' intern to dig more into the roots of such a phenomenon had deprived many researchers from attempting to the subject matter. Even that being somehow neglected, a sound definition was not presented or at least was not known to the behaviorists in the field. Hence, the objective of this paper is to determine the origins of workplace humor in terms of its field and to provide a clear definition of the phenomenon. The phenomenological research paradigm was adopted since this study is descriptive in nature.

2 ORIGINS OF WORKPLACE HUMOR

Scholars had categorized the processes of organizational development (OD) into small groups in order to concentrate on accomplishing the set duties of the subjected field. However, few thinkers did not comprehend the meaning of such grouping and they considered the processes as groups of skills, techniques, and approaches of the OD discipline (Mullins, 2002). These groups that were termed interventions are set based on planned change activities which are intended to assist an organization to become more effective in solving its problems (Huse and Cummings, 1985). Hence, the approaches are grouped in terms of their intention for solving

specific problems forming an area of interest in the OD field. Yet, according to Huse and Cummings (1985), the interventions are the following four:

- **Human-Processual Intervention:** Focuses on the human side of organizations where it studies the interaction processes within the members such as communication, problem solving, leadership, and group dynamics
- **Techno-Structural Intervention:** Focuses on organizational technology and structures that links people. Such technology includes work methods and work flow, while structures include division of labor, hierarchy, and work design
- **Human Resource Management Intervention:** Focuses on the mechanisms for integrating people into organizations by studying the personnel practices such as reward systems, career planning, and career development
- **Strategy Intervention:** Focuses on the proper thoughts and methods for utilizing the resources to gain a competitive advantage. Such areas are as strategic choice, environmental assessment, and corporate culture

2.1 Quality of Work Life (QWL) Approach

The Human-Processual intervention was explained by its implementation base as it emphasizes on the significance of the human factor in the organization (Huse and Cummings, 1985), which is the heart of the organization (Mullins, 2002). In other words, organizations are explained for their development attempts by their human beings as the basis of discussion. However, this explanation is somewhat ambiguous as it deprives the right of the other factors of the organization to take a role in the organizational development attempt where the ideal explanation is reaching the level of human initiative, choice, and factors at the level of social, political, and economic context or structure (Watson, 2006). It is the individual humans and their surroundings of the societal, political, and economic aspects that affect in the formation of the procession. This in fact, is demonstrated by the Techno-Structural intervention. From a much thorough view on this intervention, it is quite evident the level of work related matters it embraces where one of the most significant approaches to tackle such matters in the workplace is what is termed as quality of work life.

Quality of Work Life – simply connoted by QWL – approach is viewed as a way of thinking about people, work, and the organization as a whole in order to spread well-being among workers as well as promoting organizational effectiveness (Huse and Cummings, 1985; Bruning and Turner, 2009). The meaning of the “well-being” is understood from the wordings of Kopelman (1985) where he defines QWL as: "A philosophy of management that enhances the dignity of all workers, introduces changes in an organization’s culture, and improves the physical and emotional well-being of employees" (Kopelman in Martin, 2001, p. 293). Despite the rationality the definition entails, Martin (2001) doubted any performance improvements resulting from QWL programs where he perceived the situation as only improving work conditions, tasks, and structures.

That in fact, shall be responded by noting that QWL programs do not have a direct influence on performance where it first affects on factors that will in turn affect performance and that is why they are referred as interventional approaches. For instance, management shall improve the communication channels among organizational members such that decisions are transparent which will ultimately affect performance in any form (Huse and Cummings, 1985). Figure 1 exhibits the way a QWL program would affect work productivity where it shall be stated that by implementing the QWL approach in the workplace, the communication, motivation, and the capabilities of the organizational members will be improved which eventually means a positive-indirect effect on the other organizational development interventions too. As a matter of fact, one of the effective ways to spread a healthy work life

and improved harmonization is by having fun or precisely humor at work (Glasser, 1994; Barsoux, 1996).

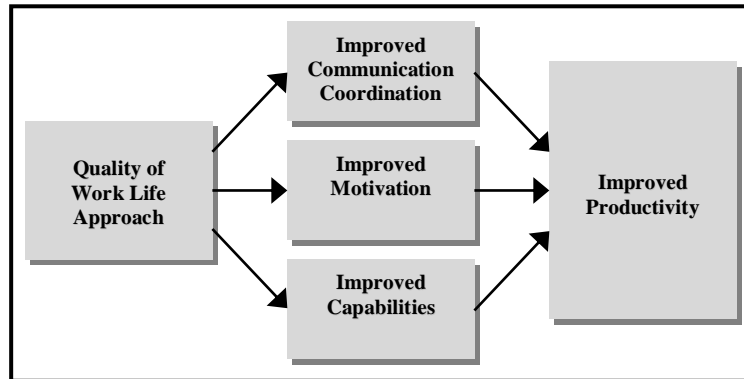


Fig. 1. How QWL Affects Productivity (Huse and Cummings, 1985, p. 204)

2.2 QWL and Fun

Imagine a workplace where people love their work environment, and they are calm, stress-free, and happy all day long; obviously, people who are in good spirit will be much productive than others who are not (Barsoux, 1993; Glasser, 1994; Templar, 2003; Urquhart, 2005). And fun is one of the ways to support the mentioned work conditions' set (Barsoux, 1993). People, in fact, like to be with employees who are friendly and having fun with them (Glasser, 1994; Collinson, 2002; Macks, 2003; Templar, 2003). Therefore, laughter creates a bond that brings people together (Caudron, 1992; Stauffer, 1999; Craumer, 2000) and this is the main aim of the QWL programs as previously stated by Kopelman (1985), which states that spreading fun in the workplace is an essential method in improving the QWL and humor in turn is a primary technique of developing funny environments. The Freibergs (1997) in their description of the fun strategy that Southwest Airlines had adopted; demonstrated the significance of humor in the meaning of a proper QWL approach by stating that: "When you are having fun at work, it does not feel like work at all; its better than tolerable, its enjoyable. Having a job that is fun is certainly worth holding onto; people are more likely to accept ownership of their responsibilities, and much more inclined to go the extra mile and do whatever it takes" (Freiberg and Freiberg, 1997, p. 205). Hence, many behaviorists had recognized the importance of such a tool in improving the work ambiance and pointed that some degree of fun by humor should be injected in every work placement (Newstrom, 2002).

3 REALM OF WORKPLACE HUMOR

From a psychological perspective, it was apparent that humor at work was studied at different phases in terms of its feasibility and usability and not upon the literal meaning of the term (Al Saeed, 1990; Barsoux, 1993). It justifies the exerted efforts by many behaviorists to illustrate the consequences of humor via diverse situations that humor would have beneficial or harming outcomes (Duncan *et al.*, 1990) where eventually was viewed as the essence of humor at work. But who really understands what workplace humor shall be to be judged upon. Yet, it is viable to provide a thorough description of humor itself and determine its association with other terms such as fun and laughter before defining it within the work ambiance.

3.1 What is Humor?

Humor is a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon that it does not lend itself to a single generalized definition (Cooper, 2005; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). A general thematic definition was made by the biologists as they had illustrated humor as a gesture-reaction by moving fifteen muscles on the face allied with a change in breathing, hence, it is a physiological attention towards a very sophisticated stimulus (Al Saeed, 1990). As a first technical temptation though, psychologists had defined humor as a normal verbal conduit of communication (Cooper, 2005) whereby there is a sender and a receiver with the underpinning properties of encoding, noise, and decoding (Avolio *et al.*, 1999). Others had flourished the previous thought into sets of emotions shared by an agent (person) with another individual (target) that is intended to be amusing to the target and that the target perceives it as an intentional act (Hornblow, 2003; Cooper, 2005). On the other hand, many writers had understood humor in other forms such as fun and jocularity where humor was viewed as a holistic picture of any funny activity (Davies, 2002) and the latter viewed humor as a tool for generating laughter (Linstead, 1985; Nevo *et al.*, 2001). It is evident though to distinguish between humor and a sense of humor as the first represents a behavior and the latter is simply a trait (Cooper, 2005; Yip and Martin, 2006).

From another perspective, humor is said to deal with incongruity that is disorder and abnormality (Barsoux, 1993; Yarwood, 1995; Barsoux 1996; Watson, 2006). It simply means that people often laugh about the things that worry them most (Barsoux 1996; Watson, 2006), which eventually retains their sanity and rational thinking into the proper order (Watson, 2006). The meaning of incongruity is understood in the unexpected circumstances that a tightrope-walker might face along his walk towards the other end of the mountain and yet he glimpses (laugh's) downwards and remind him of the possible intimidations that might be faced if he will fall down (Watson, 2006). This depicts the real life of human beings while they pass through their journey of life and how they address possible discrepancies. However, and, the formal definition is to understand humor in terms of its actions as stated by Romero and Pearson (2004): "We define humor as amusing communications that unite, direct, and energize people in ways that benefit the individual, group or organization" (Romero and Pearson, 2004, p. 53). Nonetheless, it is quite significant to notify on other forms of meanings of humor particularly the ones that explain it in terms of its justification of usage such as in the work of Jean Barsoux (1993) as he stated that humor could be a sword, a shield, or a value whereas others stated that humor could be aggressive, self-enhancive, and so on (Martin *et al.*, 2003; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). Above all, almost all behaviorists agreed that humor is a communicational tool between human beings regardless of any intentions that could drive such an act.

3.2 Defining Workplace Humor

Generally, any activity of laughter, fun, or amusement used in the work environment is termed workplace humor (Duncan *et al.*, 1990). However, provided that humor is a communicational medium between people (Avolio *et al.*, 1999; Hornblow, 2003; Cooper, 2005), then workplace humor should be explained in the context of the relationships among the organizational members. For the most part, these relationships can take any form such as weekend parties, birthday parties, sports days, camping and barbeque plans, and others (Dandridge, 1986) but humor is much deeper than just refreshing activities. It is tied to the sensitive relationships between peers and their bosses (Malone, 1980) where drives or reasons for such humor usage are evident (Duncan and Feisal, 1989). Romero and Cruthirds (2006) put it in a very general form by saying: "We propose that organizational humor consists of amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization" (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006, p. 59). As a trivial example though, an

employee always praises his/her boss by telling silly jokes where the boss, in return, might make the employee his/her right hand and involve him/her in some of the decision making process (Duncan *et al.*, 1990) or might be lenient in giving away the employee few days off without reducing his/her leave account (Barsoux, 1993). These instances and more are natural in any work setting that it was thought of humor and work as mutually exclusive activities. Thus, it is evident that workplace humor is associated with relationships among employees and their managers where it is controlled by specified determinants (Duncan and Feisal, 1989). In addition, the work setting is not restricted to either being in a private sector entity or a public sector entity since workplace humor is manifested enough at any work setting (Yarwood, 1995; Aufrecht, 2001).

4 CONCLUSION

This paper provides a description of the origins of workplace humor in the arts field of study by referring to it being a way to foster quality of work life approach within the work ambiance. It was found that humor, fun, and joking are terms that shall be used interchangeably since they refer to the same meaning of spreading joy, happiness, and laughter among the audience but the context will change the meaning since fun denotes to the act for feeling the pleasure whereas joking is the act of telling jokes. A concluding note shall be emphasized on the definition of workplace humor as it is defined being any amusing activity or communication within the organization that would result in positive emotions and reactions in the individual, work group, and the organization.

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