LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS: THE ROLE OF HUMOR

____________________________

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies
School of Professional Studies
Gonzaga University

____________________________

Under the Supervision of Heather Crandall, Ph.D.
Under the Mentorship of David Givens, Ph.D.

____________________________

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

____________________________

By
Peggy E. Collins
December, 2012
We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

[Signature]
Thesis or Project Director

[Signature]
Faculty Mentor

[Signature]
Faculty Reader

Gonzaga University
MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

ABSTRACT

The role of humor in life is an important one. Though important, few people can explain humor, and can only describe instances of humor. This qualitative study was based on three common communication theories relative to humor: incongruity, relief, and superiority. Senior academic leaders discussed their particular use of humor and their leadership styles through semi-structured interviews. Examination of humor theories and leadership styles revealed a mix of leadership styles (transformational and transactional), and a blending of humor styles, with an emphasis on self-deprecating humor.

Humor is a potentially critical communication skill, and a leadership skill. It is also likely a coping strategy leaders can utilize to deal with the daily opportunities and challenges they face. Therefore, this study is potentially valuable for current and future leaders to understand, develop, and incorporate humor into their repertoire of critical skills.
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION
Introduction 5
Definitions of Terms Used 7
Organization of Remaining Chapters 8

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE
Philosophical/Ethical Assumptions 10
Review of the Literature 11
Humor and Theories of Humor 13
Leadership Styles and Definitions 16
Studies on Humor and Leadership 10
Rationale 23

CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY
The Scope of the Study 25
Methodology 26
Confidentiality 28

CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY
Introduction 29
Data Analysis 29
Results of the Study 30
Discussion 38

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS
Limitations 44
Further Study or Recommendations 44
Conclusions 45

REFERENCES 48

APPENDIX
Script for Requesting Participation 52
Questions 53
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Some believe that academic leadership is a highly social endeavor. As such, senior leaders in higher education must deal with the realities of financial crises, political controversies, demographic shifts, technological advances, complex missions, and values in a unique social structure that requires a distinct set of understandings and skills. Leaders must possess certain critical skill sets to lead and manage their organizations. Additionally, many theories of leadership give a central place to the importance of communication in order to engage and motivate individuals and organizations.

Effective leaders tend to be excellent communicators, and they modify their communication styles to meet the challenges they face. It has been suggested some senior leaders utilize a “selective” style of humor to decrease tension, facilitate collaboration, gain buy-in and to encourage teamwork.

Humor is something most people enjoy. People like listening to or watching something humorous occur, and often engage in humor as instigators by telling stories or jokes, or showing humorous pictures, comics, or films. But often, people cannot really explain what humor is.

Some may “laugh ‘til it hurts,” but afterwards the sensation left is often a mixture of relaxation, pleasure, an “exhilarating calm” or sometimes an increase in positive, happy feelings and energy. In other words, one usually feels good. Humor has been credited with providing health benefits, both on a physical and “psychic” level (Decker and Rotondo, 2001; Vecchio, Justin, and Pearce, 2009).
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Most people have likely experienced humor either by being the recipient or perpetrator; but if one is asked to explain what it is, descriptive words are seldom readily available. It seems to be a “you know it when you see it” sort of term.

Humor may be useful in higher educational settings. Because of the perception of education as a serious endeavor—which it is—there is a tendency for those in the academy to normally appear serious. This seriousness does not abate as someone moves into a senior leadership position. Facing pressures of attracting and keeping good faculty, students, and staff, dealing with chronic budget issues, and being in positions of having to appease or explain things to people who simply want things done “their” way can surely deprive one of any sense of humor. It would seem such positions require humorlessness.

Or, perhaps senior leaders in higher education possess a sense of humor. The positions may require them to control their humor carefully. On the other hand, since they are senior leaders, maybe they do not; instead, they may allow humor to be displayed in many settings. If one does have a sense of humor it could be interesting to see how it is used, and how a sense of humor may tie in with the person’s position in senior leadership.

In positions where there is considerable pressure from above, below, and often on either side, the ability to use humor to alleviate the pressure could be valuable. It is not just good for health, but humor has the potential for opening avenues for conversation, understanding, connection, and alliances.

A study to explore the possibilities is important, given the constant pressure to perform, the never ending changes, and the need, especially now, for senior leaders to know how to use every communication tool available to obtain what is needed to keep colleges and universities functioning, whether it is money, people, or positive relationships with the community.
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Studies abound regarding humor. There are many studies about higher education, and studies about senior leadership in higher education. There are myriad studies about leadership styles. However, there are relatively few studies about leadership and humor, even fewer on education and humor’s effectiveness in that setting, and only one study at this time about senior leadership in higher education and humor; a dissertation completed in 2009 by Carrica. There is one other dissertation study, but it is still unavailable (apparently Shaquille O’Neal has not obtained all of the requisite signatures). Thus, humor among senior leaders in higher education is an area of communication and leadership which is still ripe for study. This study specifically addresses the connection between humor and leadership styles among senior leadership in higher education, and the effectiveness of humor use in leading an institution of higher education.

Definitions of Terms Used

Higher Education Organizations: Institutions that grant masters or doctoral degrees, such as universities. Also known as academic institutions.

Senior Leaders/ Senior Leadership: People in the following positions; President/Chancellor, Vice President/Vice Chancellor, Provost, Vice Provost, Dean.

Humor Types: There are numerous types of humor within the three theoretical concepts. For this study, sarcastic humor, irony, and self-deprecating humor are described below.

Sarcastic Humor: A form of humor that is either degrading someone or something. Usually, there is a slight mean-spiritedness, but not always. Sarcastic humor is a type of humor that would come under the theory of superiority humor.

Irony: Humor that looks at the human condition in a way that is unexpected. Ironic humor is a form of humor that would be considered part of incongruous humor.
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Self-Deprecating: This is a form of humor wherein the individual makes fun of him or herself. It is a form of humor that is included in the superiority humor theory; however, it is directed inward rather than outward.

Leadership Styles: There are numerous leadership styles. However, for this study, three leadership styles are considered, including transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire.

Transformational leadership is a style where a leader considers the abilities of others, and encourages all to reach their highest potential. Transformational leaders are visionary, and very encouraging to their subordinates and followers.

Transactional leadership encourages an exchange; one does something, and the leader gives something in return. This is normally in the form of an exchange of money for work; however, there are other transactions which can occur.

Laissez-faire leadership is centered in the concept of status quo. The leader expects others to do things without much input or comment from the leader, and problem solving and challenges are handled by subordinates.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 first includes a section on philosophical and ethical assumptions. The literature review contains a discussion of both humor theories and leadership styles. Following is the rationale for the study.

Chapter 3 includes information on the scope, which was limited to senior leaders at three institutions of higher learning, and study methodology. The methodology, a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, and protection of confidentiality is explained in this chapter.

Chapter 4 provides commentary on the data analysis and the study results, which through coding resulted in six themes relating to humor and to leadership.
Chapter 5 provides information on areas where the current study could be expanded or improved. Recommendations about what can be gleaned from the study are included. Lastly, the conclusions include a connection between the philosophical and ethical assumptions of this particular study, and how information contained in the study aids in responding to those assumptions.
“Humor is a very complex phenomenon, involving cognitive, emotional, behavioral, physiological, and social aspects” (Martin 2000). Because of this, it is important to understand that humor does have impact on those who hear it or see it, as well as those who “deliver” it. Decades ago there was a phrase that resonates as much now as those many years ago. This phrase was based in communication, and how to treat others in that communication. The phrase consisted of three very short sentences. The phrase is “Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?”

These three small questions are based in the idea that humans are deserving of respect, kindness, and truth. All indicators point to the initiator of this “triple test” as Socrates, who used it to determine whether someone should repeat something or not, particularly if the intent was to consider it as fact. It is not confirmed that these sentences actually came from Socrates; however, there are no definitive sources for these questions.

It is important to have truth, because false communications really do no one good. There are times when bald truth is not helpful. That does not mean lie; it simply means that instead of telling someone “that dress looks like crap on you,” being kind can come to the fore and saying “a different design would flatter your small waist better” is truthful and kinder and still says the same thing overall. Several of the communication theories in Griffin’s (2009) text emphasize “truth” but, just as with the above rationale, there is truth and then there is truth with kindness.

Humor can be truthful—or not. Much humor has a slight tinge of truth, but at times is not really truthful at all. Raskin states “It is not unusual for humor researchers to apologize for their subject or at least to attempt to ‘elevate’ it be declaring humor a form of truth” (1998, p. 103). But
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Raskin appears to base this on the assumption that all humor researchers believe all humor is truthful, and that is not the case.

Saying things that are kind are usually better, but sometimes being kind does not resolve matters. Thus, being truthful but unkind may be necessary. With humor, this may occur more often than might be expected. There are instances when humor is needed to deliver messages that may be seen as unkind, and humor might deliver those messages less painfully and more effectively than truth or kindness can.

Finding out if something said is necessary is also difficult at times. This is particularly true in the case of humor. Some might feel that humor is unnecessary. However, given the information on health benefits, physical (Martin, 2004), mental, and psychological, presented in the following pages, it would appear that humor actually is necessary for moving forward on many levels and in many instances. Ultimately, humor may be one of those rare instances when the adage of “Is it true, is it kind, is it necessary” applies, either in part of in full, in many instances.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Hoff indicates that most higher education institutions are in a “transformational state” at this time (1999, p. 217). This is due to the significant changes in how funding is obtained, and in the public perception of universities. For example, university governance has shifted from solely top down to faculty groups having more input (e.g., the University of California system). Governments have placed more restrictions and requirements on public institutions while significantly reducing the amount of funding (Hoff, 1999). This pattern has been in place for over a decade, and is not likely to change any time in the near future.

With the need to work with faculty groups who possess more say than in the past, it is important for senior leaders to consider how they communicate. Simply saying “this is how it will
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

be done” is no longer the case. One has only to see the debacle of the University of Virginia’s Board of Visitors firing of the university’s president (who is well-regarded by the faculty) to realize the faculty’s voice must be considered. So, it is important to know how to engage with faculty at levels other than the top-down patterns of the past.

Costs of running institutions have gone up. Tuition increases are one way universities have obtained additional funds, and for research universities additional monies are obtained through grants, but these monies do not begin to offset the increased costs. Because of this, more members of senior leadership are asked to aid in bringing in money to offset the potential shortfalls. This means communicating with people outside the institution in ways that were unexpected a decade ago. This is not only true of university presidents, but also for many senior leaders. Money is “gifted” to universities through bequests, endowments, and other means. But parting people from their money is more difficult than it sounds. Thus, senior leaders must have not only good communication skills, but great communication skills to bring the money into the coffers, as they must convince individuals and grant-based organizations to contribute, rather than relying on government largesse as in the past.

Part of effective leadership in colleges and universities now requires the above financial skills to be added, or enhanced, in the repertoire of attributes of senior leaders. What this implies is that good communication skills are connected to the perception of good leadership. Those who can communicate with others in a way that creates connection while still ensuring they are clearly the “leader” will have the advantage of being able to get what is needed. Although Hoff (1999) does not mention humor as an essential part of communication, the majority of studies reviewed do (e.g., Avolio, Howell, and Sosik, 1999; Carrica, 2009; Nilsen, 1994; Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2009).
A study to explore the humor possibilities is important, given the constant pressure to perform, the never ending changes, and the need, especially now, for senior leaders to know how to use every communication tool available to obtain what is needed to keep colleges and universities functioning, whether it is money, people, or positive relationships with the community. The question this study was intended to answer is: How do senior administrators in higher education use humor to lead their organizations?

The study of humor among senior leaders in higher education is an area of communication and leadership that is significantly lacking. The study conducted specifically addresses the connection between humor theories (superiority, relief, and incongruity) and leadership styles (transformative, transactional, or laissez-faire) among senior leadership in higher education, and how this use is connected to leading their organizations. The next section of this study will discuss humor theories, leadership styles, and previous studies relative to humor and leadership.

Humor and Theories of Humor

What is humor? Most people know how it is experienced, but how it is perceived is likely an individual perception. Humor is generally considered a form of communication. Crawford indicates that humor is “verbal or nonverbal communications which elicit positive cognitive or affective response from listeners” (1994, p. 57). According to Romero and Cruthirds, Crawford’s definition works well as there is no insistence that both sides of “a humor exchange” find the same thing funny (2006, p. 59). Robert and Yan make the case that people communicate for a reason; there is a “social motivation” (2007, p. 210).

Humor has often been touted as having health benefits by increasing levels of the hormone catecholamine which, after the laughter ends, leads to a period of reduced blood pressure, muscle relaxation, and reduced heart rate (Morreall, 1991; Crawford, 1994). Some believe the benefits
are similar to those of exercise (Crawford, 1994; Wallinger, 1997). Decker and Rotondo (2001) and Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir (2003) indicate there are “psychic” benefits to humor as well. In general, humor makes people feel better.

Decker and Rotondo (2001) indicate that using humor not only relieves frustration and boredom but aids in getting messages out to others. Additionally, humor helps modify behavior, and encourages learning and creativity (Decker & Rotondo, 2001; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). It would appear humor is useful for many purposes, and can be communicated in many settings and in a number of styles. Both Crawford (1994) and Wallinger (1997) indicate that for humor to have any effect, however, it cannot be held in one person but must be shared—communicated—with others.

Although there are several ways researchers have labeled and categorized humor theories, three are the most common and traditionally used in research as well as in general use. Superiority humor, relief humor, and incongruity humor are the theories used in most studies, particularly in the seminal work about humor relative to leadership styles by Avolio et al., (1999). These three humor theories will be used in this paper, and in this study. As it is possible those who participate in this study may use all three styles of humor, it is necessary to ensure inclusion and discussion of all three.

Superiority Theory. The theory of Superiority humor is the oldest. First written discussion about Superiority theory was by Plato and subsequently Aristotle (as cited in Morreall, 1987). The basis of the theory is directing humor at others in a way that implies, or even clearly states that they are inferior people or groups (Hughes, 2009; Lynch, 2002; Lyttle, 2007; Martin, 2004; Meyer, 2000; Morreall, 1987; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). This includes humor which is a putdown of another person or group, or at times oneself (Hughes, 2009) and is
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

usually considered an aggressive form of humor, particularly when used in describing someone else.

Wallinger (1997) infers all humor comes from aggression; however, superiority humor demonstrates this most clearly. At times superiority humor is effective for discouraging the violation of group norms through gentle ridicule (Martin et al., 2003; Robert & Yan, 2007; Wallinger, 1997). Disparaging someone is not a positive form of humor, but may assist in moving someone back into line (Hughes, 2009; Martin et al., 2003; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). Examples of superiority humor would be an instance wherein someone tells a story about a foolish thing she/he had done, or making fun of someone else (e.g., “is that your third eye, are you Cyclops, or is that a zit in the middle of your forehead” or a “dumb blonde” joke).

**Relief Theory.** As the name indicates, relief humor is used for relief, to release tension or strain (Hughes, 2009; Lynch, 2002; Lyttle, 2007; Martin, 2004; Meyer, 2000; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008; Wallinger, 1997). Initially, Sigmund Freud led the discourse on the notion of humor as a physiological release of energy (as cited in Morreall, 1987). The format of relief humor often used is when joking about a negative situation or one with negative possibilities, and then attempting to put the situation in a context of controlling it (Crawford, 1994; Martin, 2004; Morreall, 1987; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). Relief humor is also a way to release energy, so in tense situations, the use of humor brings about that release (Robert & Yan, 2007; Vecchio et al., 2009). Saying “well, we missed out on the 11 million dollar account, but we did get the two 5 million ones, so let’s party” is an example of relief humor.

**Incongruity Theory.** Incongruity theory is based on the premise of humor being used for something other than ridiculing others. Instead, there are indications of humor in which “an expectation is suddenly transformed into nothing” (Kant, as cited in Morreall, 1987, p. 48).
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Incongruity humor is often used to demonstrate the oddness of a situation (Hughes, 2009; Lynch, 2002; Lyttle, 2007; Martin, 2004; Meyer, 2000; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). The thing that is found to be funny is something that would be illogical, ambiguous, or unexpected (Hughes, 2009). Robert & Yan state “the humor producer essentially relies on his or her knowledge of the expectation systems held by the audience to create the experience of incongruity with the audience…by juxtaposing a primary expectation system with a secondary expectation system…” (2007, p. 217). Jokes often fall into this category when talking about the odd things that happen from day to day, for example. The jokes often found in Gary Larson’s The Far Side® cartoons are often good examples of incongruity humor, such as a deer with a target on its chest, and another deer saying “Bummer of a birthmark, Hal” (Release date: 6/2/1986).

As with humor, there are different leadership styles. Leadership styles are varied as humor styles are. However, the relevant literature mentions three particular styles. The next section will discuss the leadership styles most commonly referred to in the reviewed studies, and that will be used for this proposed study.

Leadership Styles and Definitions

Leadership style has an effect on how a member of senior leadership interacts with others. Leaders are individuals, and so each one is likely to possess a leadership style that has many similarities, and some differences, compared to other leaders within an organization. How and if a leader incorporates humor into her or his particular style is likely to be unique. However, it may be that particular humor styles and particular leadership styles tend to work better together, or are perhaps unconsciously melded together.
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Of the studies reviewed, most were concerned with three particular styles; transformational, transactional, or laissez-faire. Although there may be others, these are the most commonly cited and studied, and the most well-known, based on the literature reviewed for this study. These included the seminal study in humor relative to leadership style by Avolio et al. (1999), and subsequent studies including Carrica (2009), Holmes and Marra (2006), Hughes (2009), and Romero and Pescosolido (2008).

**Transformational Leadership.** Transformational leadership “appeals to the moral values of followers in an attempt to raise their consciousness about ethical issues and to mobilize their energy and resources to reform institutions” (Yukl, 2010, p. 261). Transformational leaders are credible leaders, as a general rule (Carrica, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). They inspire others, demonstrate trustworthiness, are visionary, and provide feedback to followers (Carrica, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Communication is a common part of such leadership in that one of the most important aspects is creating and maintaining strong interpersonal relationships (Carrica, 2009). Transformational leaders encourage other people, such as subordinates, to excel, and to become leaders as well. An example of someone who has demonstrated transformational leadership would be Mahatma Ghandi. He inspired others to follow his methods of using nonviolence to obtain their goals. Those who followed his path included Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Dr. Jesse Jackson. It has been suggested that Michael Crow at Arizona State University is a transformational leader.

**Transactional Leadership.** Transactional leadership, on the other hand, “motivates followers by appealing to their self-interest and exchanging benefits” (Yukl, 2010, p. 261). Another term used is contingent leadership (Carrica, 2009). Rewards (and punishments) are based on how well the person complies with what the leader wants. Transactional leadership ensures the use of values
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

driven by ensuring both the leader and the follower get something from each transaction (Yukl, 2010), such as work for pay. Transactional leadership is possibly the most common form, based on the exchange of money for work. An example of a transactional leader would be the owner of a restaurant, who pays employees in exchange for their work.

Transformational leadership “appeals to the moral values of followers in an attempt to raise their consciousness about ethical issues and to mobilize their energy and resources to reform institutions” (Yukl, 2010, p. 261). Transactional leadership (also called contingent leadership) on the other hand, “motivates followers by appealing to their self-interest and exchanging benefits” (Yukl, 2010, p. 261). Rewards and punishments are based on how well the person complies with what the leader wants. In many instances, transformational leaders are transactional leaders as well, and in some cases the reverse is true. In any organization where there is an exchange, transactional leadership will occur (Yukl, 2010). However, the transformation leader will go beyond the motivation of “exchange” and into a deeper relationship with both the organization and followers.

Laissez-faire Leadership. Laissez-faire leadership is, as per the title, is a form of leadership which takes a “hands-off” approach to leadership. This means followers get little, if any response or interaction from this kind of leader (Northouse, 2004), and tend to be unresponsive to the organization. Additionally, laissez-faire leaders tend to shove issues or responsibilities onto others, in accordance with their style of leadership (Northouse, 2004).

Transformational and transactional leadership styles are likely the most common styles for leaders in higher education. The combination of the intense challenges of the positions, the need for nimble decision-making, and the fact most adversaries are going to be very intelligent and quick to respond to any questions or threats demands successful university leaders be of like
In the rare instance that a laissez-faire leader would make it to the highest levels of the academy, the person would probably receive a no-confidence vote early on. However, there may be examples of leaders in higher education who utilize the laissez-faire style of leadership.

Studies affirm the possession of a sense of humor as an important characteristic of good leadership (Avolio et al., 1999; Crawford, 1994; Decker & Rotondo, 2001; Holmes & Marra, 2006). People in senior leadership roles agree (Gallos, 2002; Nilsen, 1994; Sturnick, 1996). Lynch indicates those who are skilled at using humor are usually more skilled in social milieus (2002). Humor is an important part of communication as well (Avolio et al., 1999; Carrica, 2009; Wallinger, 1997) so it would appear that good leadership, good communication, and a sense of humor work well together. The few studies relating to humor and leadership will be discussed next.

Studies on Humor and Leadership

Avolio et al. (1999) conducted a survey study about humor and leadership styles in a conservative banking institution. This was the first study connecting the two areas. The results did not entirely mirror their presuppositions, but significant new information was obtained. Laissez-faire leadership and humor did not fare well as employees felt the leaders were insensitive to their needs (Avolio et al., 1999). Overall, employees felt better about their situation of having a laissez-faire leader, but did not find the leadership better due to humor use (Avolio et al., 1999).

Transactional leaders (Avolio et al. use the term “contingent reward leaders”) used humor more effectively along with people who were considered transformational leaders (Avolio et al.,
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

However, performance of followers was positively related to transformational leaders and their use of humor, but negatively related to performance for transactional leaders.

Three of the main limitations for this particular study included the fact that as an old banking institution, it is conservative in nature and therefore humor is limited in use. The second limitation is that 97 percent of the participants were men (Avolio et al., 1999; Carrica, 2009; Vecchio et al., 2009), leading to the question of whether this study would have similar outcomes with a larger female population involved. Lastly, there was no breakdown of the style of humor used (Carrica, 2009). However, as this was the first study testing the connection of humor and leadership style, it opened the door to future study in these areas.

Decker and Rotondo (2001) studied humor use, leadership behaviors, and gender. They noted the topic of humor and gender has been heavily studied. Combining these topics with the effect in the workplace, however, was rare in studies. Their goal was to determine how (or if) manager gender affected the perception of leader behavior and effectiveness relative to the use of positive or negative humor. This was conducted through surveying business school alumni, who were asked to rate their managers. Unlike Avolio et al. (1999), fully one third of the respondents were females, and fully one third of the respondents had female managers, providing a population size that allowed for gender information to be teased out of the results.

In their results, Decker and Rotondo (2001) found male managers used humor more, and for both genders, use of positive humor enhanced both perceptions of the leaders and work effectiveness. Negative humor use decreased such perceptions. The interesting note was that females received higher ratings for using positive humor than males, but received lower ratings for using negative humor than males. They concluded “humor can play an important role in the work environment” (Decker & Rotondo, 2001, p. 459).
Priest and Swain (2002) studied leader effectiveness and the use of humor at a military academy. These studies involved use of measures evaluating transformational leadership, and others which rated their perceptions of humor in their leaders. Results indicated leaders who were considered good had higher humor ratings than leaders who were considered bad leaders. Additionally, they cautioned that humor use does not make a poor leader a better one, but enhances a good leader’s effectiveness (Priest & Swain, 2002). Limitations on the study include the fact that one of their two surveys had a return rate of less than 10 percent, which brings validity into question. Also, this study was conducted on military academy freshmen, and it could be that their ideas of what is humorous are quite different than that of an older population in a less limited setting.

Nilsen (1994) conducted a five year informal study through taking notes while attending meetings with senior academic leaders and faculty. She created a simple Likert-type scale and assessed what types of humor prevailed and who expressed humor most often. In her results she found women tended to use self-deprecating humor far more than men. Additionally, trading insults was common among people of relatively equal status, and never included either a president or provost. The majority of such humor was instigated by men. In meetings, the person who chaired the meeting was most commonly the primary instigator of humor. She indicated there were few women involved in comparison to the number of men in most meetings during the five years she took notes. Although this was not a scientific study, her points about who did or did not initiate humor are worthy of further review. Additionally, this was one of the few articles regarding humor in higher education among senior administrators.

Vecchio et al. (2009) studied the use of relief humor in high schools. They noted none of the previous studies had been conducted in a non profit or public organization. This, they feel,
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

limits the types of job enhancements or rewards available to employees, and they determined relief humor could be seen as a small part of the compensation for the lack of other extrinsic rewards (2009). The surveys were sent to a large number of high school principals, who were supposedly rating their lead teachers. Of those who responded, surveys were sent to the lead teachers. The surveys included measures on the principal’s use of contingent rewards, the principal’s integrity, and use of humor.

Results of Vecchio et al., (2009) indicated low amounts of humor equaled lower performance. Low contingent reward and low humor use equaled lower performance as well. The leader’s integrity, and use of contingent rewards also affected how much influence humor had. They suggest humor, integrity, and contingent reward were tied together. The major limitation of this study was that principals were not involved in their rating; rather, they ratings were based on teachers’ opinions (Vecchio et al., 2009).

Carrica’s (2009) study of community college presidents follows in the footsteps of Avolio, et al. (1999) in comparing leadership styles and humor use. Carrica focuses on the styles of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership, and draws the connections to four humor styles: affiliative, aggressive, self-defeating, and self-enhancing. Affiliative humor is in the style of incongruity humor, aggressive and self-defeating fall into line with superiority humor, and self-enhancing humor is related also to the incongruity humor style.

She conducted a survey which was sent to community college presidents throughout the United States. The surveys contained several measures on leadership and on humor. Carrica (2009) determined affiliative and self-enhancing humor would relate positively to both transformational and transactional leadership styles, whereas self-defeating (self-deprecating) and
aggressive humor styles would have a solid negative relationship. She also predicted all four styles of humor would have a negative relationship with laissez-faire leadership.

The survey results substantiated her hypotheses indicated above. The study was limited in that only community college presidents’ self perceptions were measured. Additionally, in reviewing the study, considerable emphasis was placed on transformational leadership, with considerably less discussion on transactional leadership and nearly none on laissez-faire style of leadership. If the results indicated few or none were within those particular leadership styles, it is an area that should have had further discussion. However, Carrica moves the understanding of humor styles and leadership styles forward through this study by looking at an unstudied group, comparing leadership and humor styles by gender (although this was not a specific focus of the study), and asking the principals about themselves, instead of the opinions of others.

**Rationale**

One of the major weaknesses in the studies of humor or of higher education is the same weakness prevalent in a multitude of studies across a multitude of disciplines. Many of the studies reviewed are surveys of college students, usually those within the discipline the study is based on. Thus, if humor is the topic and the study is viewed from a sociological perspective, freshmen sociology students are the participants; if it is based from a communication perspective, the participants are often new communication students, and this is a common practice. This is fine for a starting point. However, generalizing across populations from a group of young college students creates a fairly limited assessment of a topic. In this study, no data will be collected from current college students.

An additional limitation has been one of qualitative versus quantitative data. Studies indicated survey use as the method of choice, which leads to important information as to use of
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

humor, but no information as to why it is used. The only study found relating to humor among senior leaders in higher education is survey-driven. None of the data would indicate if humor use is indeed helpful to senior leaders in leading their organizations.

There are numerous studies relating to humor and to leadership styles, but not a significant number. At this time, little attention has been given to leadership style and the connection of humor to senior leadership in colleges and universities. With only one study (Carrica, 2009) currently available on the topic, senior leadership in higher education have clearly been overlooked. In this researcher’s discussions with members of senior leadership and many subordinates, it appears there are people who are very interested in this topic.

It appears many formal studies on humor have been survey-driven. Considerable data have been gathered that provided a base for further study. However, it is important to consider what senior leaders may have to say regarding their use of humor. Several have mentioned interest in finding out if they are funnier than the jobs they are in would indicate. It would be important to determine if humor is effective as a tool in leading institutions of higher learning. This research examines, through a semi-structured interview, the following question:

RQ 1: How do senior administrators in higher education use humor to lead their organizations?
Studies on humor abound. Studies on leadership are plentiful. However, studies exploring humor in context to leadership style are less common, and as mentioned earlier, there has been only one study in the realm of higher education. That study explored the connection of humor and leadership styles among community college presidents (Carrica, 2009). The scope of this study was limited to senior leaders from three higher education institutions in California.

It is possible that leaders in institutions of higher learning may use humor differently, perhaps more often, or not at all. The topic was limited to finding if there is a connection between leadership style and using humor as an aid to leading institutions of higher education.

Participants

Participants in this study were adults in senior administrative positions at institutions which grant graduate degrees. The criteria for determining who is in senior administration include people whose positions would normally ensure their inclusion in presidents’ cabinets or councils. This usually means presidents, chancellors, vice presidents, vice chancellors, deans, and provosts.

These individuals have been selected due to potential participant availability to the researcher and their interest in the topic under study. Senior administrators have normally been in higher education for a considerable period of time, although there are exceptions. Potential participants the researcher proposes to interview have been in university or research settings for at least ten years. Anecdotal evidence suggested the participants are respected professionals at their respective institutions, and would have possibly been good representatives of both the academic and administrative sides of their organizations.
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Methodology

Participants were recruited by email or in person, requesting their participation. The individuals are all known to the researcher, and most have already indicated some interest in the topic. However, all were formally asked if they were willing to participate in semi-structured interviews for the purpose of the study as scripted (Appendix A). Those who participated did not receive any inducements, nor were they paid for participation; participation was of their own free will.

Those who agreed chose the time and location of the interview, within the parameters of time, to ensure comfort and privacy. After a short, friendly exchange the participant was given the opportunity to ask any questions about the ability to decline or terminate participation at any time during the interview, or to have direct quotes removed, if used, up to the final write up of the thesis.

This study was qualitative in nature, using a semi-structured interview format. Previous studies that focused on leadership styles and humor have been generally quantitative (Avolio et al., 1999; Carrica, 2009; Decker & Rotondo, 2001; Priest & Swain, 2002; Nilsen, 1994; Vecchio et al., 2004). Although data collected and reviewed have been extremely useful, it would be valuable to find out how and why leaders perceive that—if it is indeed the case—humor is useful in accomplishing work in their positions. Due to the positions the potential participants hold the one-on-one interview process has been selected. It was important to have participants who were not hesitant to speak or share ideas and opinions. Additionally, given the work schedules of the potential participants, it was possible a more fulsome discussion of the topic would create a greater depth of information than would be obtained through a survey, which may or may not be answered as completely as one may hope.
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

There was one semi-structured interview conducted with each participant. The interview was open-ended so the participant could speak freely in response to the questions. If needed, additional probes were used to expand on statements. It was expected the interview would last approximately 30 - 45 minutes. The interview was taped as well as notes taken, with advance agreement of the participant. Rather than full transcription, the tapes were reviewed by the researcher to ensure consistency and accuracy for quotes, and to ensure confidentiality was maintained.

One pilot interview was conducted to test and refine the interview questions. Although questions changed during actual research based on responses and interaction with the participants, this was a tentative check to see if the initial questions were valid. The questions were, in part, based on where previous study questions gleaned data; so, questions were modified as interviews and data collection progressed. Maxwell (2005) indicates that any component may need modification during the study, and that in qualitative work it is essential to continually assess how well the components are working. Thus, questions were added to aid in obtaining richer data.

Maxwell indicates that although a structured approach allows for a more solid “comparability of the data across individuals, times, settings” and are good for answering questions about differences, an unstructured approach allows for more focus “on the particular phenomena being studied” (2005, p. 80). For this particular study, then, it was determined a semi-structured interview would be most effective.

It is important to know how senior leaders use humor, when they do, and to what purpose, and why they choose, or choose not, to use a particular style. This research created an opportunity to clearly examine and clarify data with the goal of meeting the objectives presented earlier in this paper.
Confidentiality

Confidentiality is paramount to ensuring protection of participants in research studies. Sieber indicates “confidentiality refers to agreements with persons about what may be done with their data” (1992, p. 52). Thus, the following steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality of each participant.

Each participant was advised at the time of the request to participate that confidentiality will be assured. The participant was asked to provide a pseudonym of her or his choice to ensure anonymity beyond the researcher. Only the researcher and the participant know the real identity connected to the pseudonym. If any direct quotes were used, the pseudonym was also used. Although participants’ names are known to the researcher, their data is not directly connected to them in the study.

Along with using pseudonyms for the participants, the names of the institutions were also changed, using the terms University of A (UA), University of B UB), etc. The protection of participants’ privacy by changing names and identifying features is an important issue in the reporting of interview data.
Chapter 4

THE STUDY

Introduction

The study was conducted over a period of ten days. Initially ten people were asked to participate through either an email (Appendix A) or in person, with a copy of the request (Appendix A) handed to the person to consider on their own time. Ultimately eight people from three different academic institutions chose to participate in the study. Interviews were scheduled, usually through an assistant. One potential participant was unavailable.

Each appointment period was one hour to complete all aspects of the interview, including greetings, general information about the study, the opportunity to ask questions, the interview, and wrap up. The interview contained a series of open-ended questions (Appendix B). Extensive notes were taken; taping of the interview was done for review purposes. Rather than full transcription of the tapes, their use was simply to verify accuracy in the notes that were taken during the interview. Once review was completed, the tape was erased.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through coding. Coding requires data be disassembled and then rearranged “into categories that facilitate comparison” or data are organized “into broader themes and issues” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96). In this instance, the latter coding format was used. Themes emerged from the data and were developed as data were reviewed and placed with the themes.

This was done through extensive review of the notes, and reviewing each of the taped interviews. The first theme involved the meaning of humor as determined by each of the participants. The second theme focused on humor style; on how each person described the type of humor she or he tends to use. The third theme detailed actual humor use; on when, where or why it
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

occurs. The fourth theme was about leadership style, and how participants described their styles. The fifth theme related to the idea of the value of humor use in the context of the academic setting. The sixth theme involves the perceptions of the role of humor in leadership development.

Since each person had her or his own way of describing humor, humor styles, leadership and leadership styles, and each had her or his own world view, the open-ended questions provided a venue for the researcher to find key words (e.g., self-deprecating, collaborative), which helped in the analysis and development of the results.

Results of the Study

The meaning of humor

It was necessary to have some understanding about what humor actually meant to each participant, as it would provide a window into one’s humor style. As per the introductory question, several mentioned they had spent some time prior to the interview giving consideration to what they thought about humor and its role in higher education.

Although several assigned similar meanings to humor (e.g., lighthearted, pleasant, funny, makes me laugh) others elaborated more fully as to how they viewed humor, such as going against expectations, either in a non-threatening or painless way. One thought of humor as a form of communication, which could be either positive or negative.

One person said:

Humor is a parable. If a leader understands a parable as a tool, it is useful. Humor is a parable to help people relax, and understand better. It can be used as a vehicle for people to understand a volatile issue.

All participants had opinions about what humor was. Although most considered humor from a positive viewpoint, one mentioned the possibility that it could be negative. In seeking information on how each participant assigned meaning to humor, it created an avenue to deeper
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

discussion of humor itself, and for those who had not given as much thought it seemed to move
their thinking into the direction of the rest of the interview.

Humor style

Of eight participants, all found humor to be part of their repertoire as leaders. Several liked
to tell funny stories, or perhaps would inject one-liners, but telling actual jokes was not a common
form of humor delivery for these participants. Only a few found themselves capable of telling
jokes. However, the regularity of using humor at work and the styles of humor differed, in some
instances considerably.

All appeared to use several styles of humor, but the most mentioned style to be used was
self-deprecating humor. One person mentioned that using self-deprecating humor is “a natural part
of me. I don’t risk other individuals feeling threatened.”

Another uses self-deprecating humor often:

…especially if I have to be restraining or disappoint someone. In a tense
confrontation, I am not sure if it’s deliberate or a habit. But it seems giving bad
news through self-deprecating humor reduces the tension.

Interestingly, in several instances the form of self-deprecating humor was based on self-
identified ethnicity or some other personal identifier (e.g., bad eyesight) that contained a
stereotypical essence. It seemed that in using such humor there was a self-deprecating quality, but
not as much a diminishment of oneself as a humorous acceptance of one’s own group uniqueness
(e.g., all Scottish people are thrifty).

At the same time, some participants who use self-deprecating humor and those who do not
made cautionary points. One mentioned “I occasionally use self-deprecating humor, but one has
to be careful, because too much self-deprecation appears un-genuine. You don’t want to be too
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

much Dangerfield versus too much Seinfeld.” Another person stated “Sometimes I see self-deprecating humor as a defense mechanism. Too much is not good.”

Two participants indicated that they enjoy occasional sarcastic humor. One said the sarcasm is always based on a third party, such as famous people, and not on people actually known personally to the participant. The other participant stated, “Humor is part of me. I enjoy my humor. If it strikes me funny I run with it. I’m occasionally sarcastic. Everyone is fair game at least once.”

One participant mentioned that irony, or humorous commentary on the human condition was a good form of humor. Additionally, sports humor was effective as it could be enjoyed by everyone. Several mentioned enjoying cartoons, such as Far Side or Dilbert. One said “I love Dilbert, which reflects on those crazy parts of jobs. Knowing others get it makes the crazy parts easier.” Others also enjoy some humor on television, such as Stephen Colbert. An example mentioned was “when he was getting trained in dressage. He interviewed the trainer, then interviewed the horses.” Humor of those types is shareable with others, it was noted. Also, teasing or joking about some stressful situations at work helped in reducing the stress levels, such as during cabinet meetings.

Nine of the participants were clear regarding the types of humor were completely inappropriate when it came to the workplace. Several indicated that vulgar, racial, political, sexual, or religion-based jokes must be avoided. One mentioned the necessity of avoiding gender based jokes. “Guys can tell weight jokes to each other, but never across the sexes,” was the advice of one participant. Teasing others was not acceptable for most. As one mentioned, when growing up “I was the most sensitive to teasing, so I got it the worst; which is why I don’t tease.”
Based on the comments of the participants, humor delivery often had a self-deprecating note to it. However, it was not the exclusive style of humor used. When it came to the type of humor all seemed to think about using, it was the first mentioned, but upon further discussion, stories of all kinds, not just self-deprecating, came to the fore. There was some unanimity on the idea that certain types of humor were off limits, particularly jokes that denigrated others, or jokes that were especially vulgar or egregious in those aspects.

**It Depends**

In discussing when, where, and why humor was to be used, the answer was fairly consistent. The answer was: “it depends.” Several mentioned that humor was seldom deliberately planned. On rare occasions, a couple of people report using humor in public speaking engagements, but this too was not consistent. On the occasion of using humor in those settings, it was normally a story to help set the tone, or to connect with the audience. Other participants indicated they never start any speech or presentation with a joke, and rarely a humorous story. Again, the audience and the occasion determined the way to start the event.

Humor was often used at meetings by some of the leaders. The idea of humor was to help their teams “re-center” or get another perspective out by breaking the group up so they could think afresh. For one leader, the fact that the group had developed a collaborative relationship allowed humor to become a common part of meetings. The leader’s team now jokes with the leader, and the colleagues do the same with each other, within the group setting. Two others mentioned staff meetings are comfortable settings in which humor is engaged in regularly.

One participant indicated if the setting and the mood of the group needs a change, “or when just starting out a meeting, I’ll try to get people’s attention through humor.” Another participant said that team meetings seemed to need some humor at some point, but determining
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

when to bring up some humorous remark was purely intuitive. This participant also reported it was easy to determine when it is definitely not the right time or place to inject humor. For example, at cabinet meetings there are times when one knows it’s necessary to “lighten it up a bit.” One story mentioned was a cabinet meeting, when it was stated one’s spouse could not attend a dinner engagement and another leader offered to attend, but qualified the engagement by saying, I’ll wear a dress but we are not holding hands.” Humor was used to not only create a laugh, but to keep the limits clear.

Several participants mentioned not using humor around people they don’t really know well, so there was some hesitation about making humorous remarks around donors, alums, trustees, people with different cultural norms, or with new colleagues or leaders. It was clear that humor is best reserved for those with some degree of familiarity and understanding of where the other person or people are “coming from.” A participant also stated that the cultural norms of each institution make a difference in how well humor does or does not work. “Some places are just not funny, and I couldn’t be funny. Others have a much lighter, fun sense, and I can allow myself to use humor often.”

A participant summed up the rules of humor engagement well:

Know your audience (sarcasm is often not good). Timing is important, so humor doesn’t minimize something truly serious. Don’t allow humor to distract from the importance of the main topic.

Participants were very clear about when the time was not good for humor, but were not sure what made them determine when the time was right, beyond sensing or intuiting it was a good time to say something. Meetings, at least those with people the leader knew, allowed for more humor than those in which strangers or new people were in attendance. Surprisingly, humor was seldom used at the beginning of presentations or speeches by participants in this study.
Leadership style

As leaders, each participant was asked to describe her or his leadership style. Rather than asking if one was a laissez-faire, transactional, or transformational leader, descriptors from the participants about how each perceived the role of leader provided a relatively clear understanding of one’s leadership style.

Several of the terms that reflected leadership styles included talking about “partnerships with those I lead to accomplish goals,” or “empowering those I lead to do their jobs without me. It is essential to support the professional development of others.” The words “collaboration,” “participative,” and “delegate” were used extensively by participants when discussing leadership roles. Several noted that in institutions with shared governance, collaboration and compromise were essential for both institutional success and their success as leaders.

Participants stated that modeling was important for up and coming leaders. A couple mentioned this. One of the participants stated:

I try to help people think differently. I have a responsibility to lead by example. I want my group members to be involved, so I believe in participatory leadership. Leaders are made, not born. Some people have charisma, but not many, and it doesn’t make them automatic leaders. I believe in modeling as a leader.

Some participants discussed the necessity of temporarily filling roles in ways that are not their optimal leadership styles. One participant stated the need to “drive decisions and actions in a state that is weak,” and another said there is a need right now to be very “task oriented…since there are rapid changes (at the institution) and that makes goals change rapidly.” Yet another mentioned the desire to be collegial and a consensus builder, but “I am willing to cut to the chase.”

The leadership role was observed by one participant this way:

My duty is to be a catalyst for change. It is different than just leading. I listen well, attend to forces, listen to people to see if they are ready for the change. Senior leaders don’t steer, and don’t build the car. Instead, we remove the barriers for the car; remove
the barriers to change. I’m not a top down leader. One must understand how to agree and disagree to solve issues. Being an effective leader also means you can say “crap, I don’t know.” Get help; be collaborative.

Results of the interviews show two leadership styles working in tandem: transformational and transactional. Overall, the predominant leadership style is transformational. These leaders want to bring success to their institutions, and along with being leaders themselves, they want to bring up and coming leaders into the top tiers successfully as well. However, transactional leaders fulfill important roles as well.

Even though nearly all leaders were willing to delegate some of the responsibilities and tasks, none of them were laissez-faire leaders. All were comfortable with making decisions when necessary, and would take charge if a situation arose, rather than waiting for another person to do so. Additionally, the tone from these leaders was a desire to encourage subordinates to be hands-on in their everyday work as well.

Value of humor use in the leadership role

It was evident all of the leaders consider humor a valuable tool in the leadership role, even if it is not used as extensively as it could be. Several indicated the value of humor in meetings for relieving stress. As one participant mentioned, “sometimes humor just resets the tone. It can correct the direction of a situation or a meeting. It’s good for morale.” Another participant felt it is “effective for moving the agenda along.”

One leader discussed a tense cabinet meeting, when it was clear the group was somewhat stuck:

I taught them the lion’s roar. You stand, shake your head back and forth (it was demonstrated for the researcher), and then let out a roar. At first they all thought it was silly, but they all did it. They did look silly, but it worked. It released tension and everyone laughed.

According to another participant, humor use is essential to work:
Life would be very boring without it. It’s a very valuable skill. It makes a person less officious, more human. I have a hard time talking with people who take themselves too seriously. The right humor can take the edge off. How can you survive without it? It helps with mental health.

Humor’s role in leadership development

The idea of teaching leadership development met with clear approval. The idea of including humor was one none had heard of. This brought up the challenge of whether teaching humor or humor appreciation is important to potential leaders.

Several stated this could be difficult for those people who have no sense of humor, or as one person stated, “it could be a challenge for someone who is ‘Spock cognizant.’” But statements affirming the need for some type of understanding of humor included “leaders need to know what they can accomplish through humor,” “it is important in leadership development,” “learning to develop your sense of appropriateness, and how to use humor effectively.” Several mentioned the need for humor simply to help with health and well-being in stressful positions.

One participant said you “can’t really teach people to have a sense of humor, or even to appreciate it. But leaders need to know what they can accomplish through humor.” This participant mentioned the use of humor in building teams, in such events as “attending a cooking school, which we then turned into a cooking contest. We did a line dancing class together. We were all laughing because we were competing but having fun.”

Overall, the participants indicated that not only was the idea of leadership development important, but helping potential leaders with the concept of humor as an aspect of leadership would be helpful for those who desire to move up in academe.

At either the beginning or end of nearly all of the interviews, the researcher provided three The Far Side® cartoons, and asked which one appealed most to each person’s sense of humor. Cartoon one showed a man in a tuxedo slumped over a piano, with sheets of music scattered
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

about, and two people peeking in through a door. The caption read “Shhhhh!... The Maestro is decomposing!” (Release date 09/01/1989). Although one person found the play on words of the “maestro” cartoon humorous, three preferred the cartoon about dinosaurs, which showed several dinosaurs stranding around, smoking cigarettes, with a caption reading “The real reason dinosaurs became extinct” (Release date 12/15/1982). The third cartoon, preferred by three people showed two chimpanzees in a tree, with one grooming the other. The caption read “Well, well – another blonde hair…. Conducting a little more ‘research’ with that Jane Goodall tramp?” (Release date 08/26/1987). Each cartoon was selected based on one of the three humor theories. The Goodall cartoon was an example of superiority humor, the maestro was relief humor (dealing with death), and the smoking dinosaurs were incongruity humor (dinosaurs smoking?).

Discussion

In reviewing the data, several clear points emerged. First, humor was seldom used intentionally. Instead, humor emerged based on the situation at hand and the other people involved. This was true whether it occurred during a meeting or in one-on-one discussions. This was consistent at all levels of senior leadership. The few indicators of deliberate humor were during presentations, and even these were very rare. After seeing politicians (e.g., the President of the United States) begin discussions in large groups with humorous anecdotes, a possible assumption was that academic leaders started most, if not all, speeches and presentation the same way. Evidently, this was not the case.

Another outcome that was noted was the type of humor that was most commonly referred to, and most commonly used by the participants, as discussed in the interviews. The most surprising result was the majority of the participants using self-deprecating humor. Self-deprecating humor is a form of superiority humor, but turned inward (self-focused) rather than
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

toward someone else. Previous studies have indicated that overuse of such humor may create a negative view of the humorist by intimating the person is weak or flawed (Carrica, 2009; Hughes, 2009). Several participants in the study mentioned the necessity of avoiding overuse of self-deprecating humor, as it could appear insincere.

However, it may be that for senior leaders there are several factors at play which encourage use of self-deprecating humor. First, as senior leaders, they are often interacting with subordinates or students who are often much younger. Carrica (2009), Holmes and Marra (2006), and Hughes (2009) indicate the use of self-deprecating humor creates an avenue for a leader to remove barriers, bringing her or himself closer to the level of the other person(s) by creating a connection (i.e., “we all have flaws”). Second, the senior leaders interviewed each conveyed a strong sense of self-understanding and self-confidence. The impression given was that the self-deprecation was as much an acknowledgement of “this is also part of me and I am fine with that” as it was a point of humor. In some cases, this was demonstrated by using humor relative to one’s ethnic or regional background.

Other forms of superiority humor were seldom mentioned, so it appears the use of humor against others or the necessity to enhance oneself was negligible. This was in contrast to previous studies, which indicated superiority humor was seldom used (Avolio et al., 1999; Carrica, 2009). Again, the possibility that these senior leaders are comfortable and confident with themselves might mean that such humor is found to be unnecessary. The only instance was during a job interview, when a group of leaders was to interview a candidate who came overly made up, with a mink coat, and jewelry that was described as “bling.” The institution’s president looked at the provost, who made a “slashing” motion across the neck, as if to emphasize “that one isn’t going anywhere here!” The interview was apparently quite short.
There were some instances of relief humor, particularly in cabinet meetings. Several participants mentioned joking or light humor, when the topic wasn’t too serious, helped to lighten the mood. Such humor was more prevalent in meetings than in other situations. One leader discussed the use of the “lion’s roar,” as described earlier, to help offset the stress in a very tense meeting.

Incongruity humor also was used. Several examples of this were presented, such as the senior leaders “NOT holding hands” at an event were not uncommon, although less common than self-deprecating humor. However, when discussion would turn to humorous experiences, nearly all participants shared stories involving incongruity humor. This seemed to indicate the leaders were not wedded to one particular style, but rather whatever seemed appropriate at the moment was the style that appeared.

The use of humor in various meetings, and especially in ones with significant tension, appeared to help reduce the tension, get the teams back on track and helped them “re-center.” This agrees with Decker and Rotondo (2001) and Romero and Pescosolido (2008), who found humor relieved frustration, modified behavior, and encouraged creativity.

In considering the predominant leadership style of each person, the research indicated that most of the leaders used a combination of transformational and transactional leadership styles in describing how they lead. This was in contrast to Carrica’s (2009) study, in which leaders were either relatively solidly transformational or solidly transactional (or laissez-faire). However, Holmes and Marra’s (2006) study indicated it is not uncommon for leaders to use either style.

These decisive yet collaborative leaders are, for the most part transformational leaders, and transactional style is only a small part how they lead. This was demonstrated by comments that indicated the importance of “learning how to be natural with your own gifts” through modeling, or
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

asking for participation in decision making, or seeing work with subordinates as “partnerships.”

Yukl (2010) mentions that transformational leaders inspire subordinates, demonstrating the use of energy and willingness to change as examples of how current leaders perform, and how upcoming leaders can do likewise. This appeared to be how these individuals normally conduct themselves.

The possibility that these leaders all show transformational strengths could be due to the fact that all of those interviewed are seasoned academic leaders; that is, all have been in leadership positions for many years. Additionally, most seem to understand that the people in subordinate positions will be those who will take their places in the top positions, and to keep academic institutions at the top with quality leaders, it is desirable to have some hand in demonstrating how to lead well.

The blending of both transformative and transactional leadership styles could be the effect of a couple of factors. First, to reach the highest rungs of the academic ladder, a leader will likely have a clear vision for the future, either of the entire institution or for one’s own area, which as a senior leader means leading a group which is large and diverse. Effective visionary leaders realize a vision will only be obtained by doing the work to get there. Not everyone will lead; some will follow, and each person will see someone else’s vision in her or his own way. Thus, transactional leadership, exchanging one thing for another, has its important place. Second, visionary leaders also understand that just doing the work will not move the institution up and forward. Shared understanding of the vision will. Transformational leaders not only share the vision, but encourage others to help “shape” the vision, to help complete it.

None of those interviewed provided any indicators that her or his leadership style was laissez-faire. Again, this could be due to the many years of leading, which would likely have ended earlier under a laissez-faire style—particularly in academia, where decision making,
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

shifting goals, and subordinates who tend to think quickly would force a leader to be fairly quick and adaptable as well.

In other studies (Avolio et al., 1999; Carrica, 2009; Decker & Rotondo, 2001), there appeared to be some strong linkages between a specific leadership style, and this linkage determined the success or lack of it when it came to using humor at work. As all of the leaders in this study had the same mix of leadership style (i.e. transformational/less transactional), and all used different types of humor based on the sense of what was needed at the moment. So, in this study it was clear as far as leadership style, but unclear as to effectiveness of a specific humor style in connection with the leadership style. However, each found the use of humor valuable in moving things forward, whether it was calming people at a meeting or retreat, or using humor to get people’s attention.

Although gender was not considered germane to this particular study, it was noted that participants of both genders had similar leadership styles, and used humor for the same reasons. Self-deprecating humor was not exclusive to women, or to men; both were willing to find humor in their own foibles/flaws or quirks.

It was not surprising that none of the participants had heard of any leadership programs that teach anything relative to humor. There is only one university the researcher found that provides training in the area of leadership development. However, each participant indicated that, in some way, such a program would be helpful, and humor needed to be either understood, appreciated, or its use taught to those aspiring to higher leadership positions.

The cartoons, it was hoped, would provide a little more insight into the particular humor preferences of each participant. However, it ultimately turned into a humorous moment for the
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

participant and the researcher, as each person discussed what they liked—or didn’t—about each one. Both people in each instance got a laugh out of them.

Based on the results, it would appear that senior leaders in institutions of higher learning who participated in this study are individuals who have some shared traits. These show in both leadership style and humor use.

First, all seem to have a predominant desire to be transformational leaders, and demonstrate that desire in their interactions with others; particularly, but not exclusively, subordinates. Additionally, they all have a transactional component to their leadership styles, to varying degrees.

Second, humor use is judicious. Rather than lacking a sense of humor, these leaders appreciate humor, and find it necessary for getting work done at their institutions. However, with the challenges and issues they face on a regular basis, none of them are as free with using humor as they would like to be, but instead make humor use a more valuable commodity when it is used.
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Chapter 5

SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations

The study has several limitations. Most notable is the sample size. As a qualitative study, it is uncommon to have a large sample; however, time restrictions and travel limitations precluded a larger sample size. For this study, the hope was to obtain some repetitive phrasing to develop common themes across the participants, and this was achieved.

Another limitation was the inability to use much of the humorous data, such as stories as reported in the interviews. In many instances, providing the most entertaining or informative details of these personal stories would have unfortunately identified participants or at the least the participants’ institutions. In reality, senior leaders in institutions of higher education are a small group and are often familiar with each other, so some limitations had to be set on what information was presented herein.

The location of the study was California. It is possible that the same study, conducted at universities or institutions in other areas of the United States could find the use of humor, and/or leadership styles, to be different. For example, anecdotal evidence indicates that universities in the Eastern United States tend to have a more formal atmosphere: in attire, in camaraderie, and perhaps in humor as well.

Further Study or Recommendations

Further study of humor among senior leaders in higher education settings would be useful. To date there has been a very limited consideration of this population in relation to leadership style and humor use.
Additional studies of humor in senior leadership might include a replication of this study in other locales, or perhaps a comparative analysis of male senior leaders and female senior leaders in humor and leadership styles. Studies that include both self-reporting and assessment by peers or subordinates (via interviews) might also provide an intriguing viewpoint of leadership style and humor use.

Another study would help determine if senior leaders use a specific style of humor as their preferred one, or whether they might be more far-ranging in their styles than this particular group of participants. Additionally, it would be interesting to determine if senior leaders in higher education institutions tend to have the same mixed leadership styles, or if they are more fixed in one milieu or another.

Several outcomes from the present study provide, if nothing else, information for aspiring junior leaders to consider in their efforts to become senior leaders. Given the value placed by senior leaders on humor and training, consideration should be given to leadership development training for those seeking higher positions within institutions of higher learning. Within that training, it is suggested, a component on humor use or at least upon humor appreciation should be included.

Conclusions

Based upon the findings of this research project, the possibility of not only having leadership development courses, but including a humor component within the course would likely prove to be valuable. Target audiences would be lower level administrators and faculty who desire to become deans, provosts, or other administrative leaders. Such programs are in their infancy. However, learning how to use a range of skills, and finding out what skills are most effective,
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

could be very advantageous for new senior leaders in many settings, even beyond the standard meeting style settings in which they are normally involved.

Senior leaders in academic institutions clearly find that humor enhances their ability to do their jobs more effectively by improving interaction with colleagues, peers and subordinates. Such humor is seldom planned; rather, it appears that when the moment seems right, humor is injected. Additionally, senior leaders do not use only one style of leadership, but instead move back and forth between transformational and transactional leadership styles. So leaders who lead primarily with a transformational leadership style often use a transactional leadership style when needed, and use several different types of humor, dependent upon the situation, and the overall sense of humor appropriateness.

One of the interesting considerations in senior leaders using humor actually hearkens back to the philosophical concept of the following three sentences: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? The conclusion on whether or not this valid connection exists follows.

Is it true? Given the quantity and quality of stories, it might be seen that this is the case. Senior leaders use self-deprecating humor, according to them. In most instances, there is truth to those statements. When one is making comments about their own group stereotypes (it is likely there is some truth in it. At least, this is what participants in this study indicated. When one uses relief humor, and says “at least such-and-such didn’t happen” that is likely a truism. So, although there could be a question of full accuracy, the likelihood that the humor rings true is correct.

Is it kind? In instances where one self-deprecated, especially humorously, there is always an edge of being less kind to oneself than may be true, but often the goal is to ensure a connection with others. In using self-deprecating humor to bring about alliance or connection (e.g., I am really not that different than you) it seems that being kind is one of the reasons self-deprecating humor is
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

used. As mentioned earlier, senior leaders tend to be people who have a realistic view of their self image and self worth, and those are usually quite positive.

Is it necessary? As senior leaders in higher education demonstrate in this study, humor is more limited in use than some would likely prefer. However, consideration is given to the group or person, time, place, and topic or issues of the moment in determining whether the use of humor is appropriate or not. So, it is likely that when humor is used, it is needed at that time and place with that group or person.

Comments made by many in academic circles would lead to the belief that humor among senior leaders is non-existent, but that belief is incorrect. Rather, senior leaders are judicious in when, where, and how much humor should be used.

Studies on leadership abound. Studies on humor use are plentiful. Additionally, studies on higher education are common. However, studies viewing senior leadership in higher education and their use of humor have been nonexistent. The concept that humor may aid senior leaders in leading their organizations is an area that has been lax in consideration. It is hoped this study will begin some discussion into the role humor may play in the arena of higher education.
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

References

the bottom line: Humor as a moderator of leadership style effects. *The Academy of

Doctoral dissertation. OCLC 752597286.

leaders. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 1*(3), 53-68. doi:
10.1177/107179199400100406


Gallos, J. V. (2002). The dean’s squeeze: The myths and realities of academic leadership in the


Hoff, K. S. (1999). Leaders and managers: Essential skills required within higher education.
*Higher Education, 38*, 311-331.

10.1515/HUMOR.2006.006

Hughes, L. W. (2009). Leader levity: The effects of a leader’s humor delivery on followers’
positive emotions and creative performance. *Institute of Behavioral and Applied
Management, 415*-432.

LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS


LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS


LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS


Hi ___,

As you know I am in the process of completing my Masters’ thesis at Gonzaga University. My proposed study is about the relationship between humor and leadership styles and how senior administrative leaders in higher education use humor to lead their organizations.

I ask if you would be willing to participate in an interview to discuss your use of humor in your role at the university. The interview would last approximately 30 – 45 minutes. The time and location would be arranged at your convenience and for your privacy as you wish. We will have a short discussion about how I will use the data collected and how your confidentiality and anonymity will be protected. My goal is to collect data no later than November 4, as there are time limitation requirements for completing this project.

If you would be willing to participate, please let me know. I will be happy to answer any questions I can about the study. I can be reached at pcollins3@zagmail.gonzaga.edu Thank you for giving this request your consideration.

Warm regards,
-peggy collins
LEADING HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Appendix B

Questions

1. What does the word “humor” mean to you?

2. Do you use humor? If so, to what purpose?

3. Can you give an example of a time when you used humor in a leadership context?

4. How would you describe your leadership style?

5. Can you tell me what that style means for you?

6. What helps you determine when humor is appropriate?

7. Is there a difference in whom you are willing to use humor with (e.g., superiors, peers, subordinates, trustees)?

8. As you have moved up in academia has your style of humor changed?

9. Should humor use or humor appreciation be taught/focused on in leadership development?