The use of humour in an organisational setting.

Photo credit: Gratisography / pexels.com

By David Lowe

Introduction

> "*Question*: What do you believe to be my greatest strength?
>
> *Answer*: I think your ability to lighten situations with humour is a great strength. I've seen a lot of people bought over by that, and I've seen a lot of people who seem to be good at that retreat away from it at times of stress. For you though, humour is in everything, which I think is a good thing, and it's infectious.
>
> *Question*: What one thing could I change for my own benefit?
>
> *Answer*: Sometimes people who are very serious might think you're being flippant / mis-interpret you. However, I think that's the DLowe charm."
>
> Received from J. C. (personal communication, January 27, 2017)

J.C. had only been working with me for a few months, but his response to my request for feedback was consistent with feedback from others I had known for years. I was pleased with the first part of what he said as I have always enjoyed entertaining people through humour and I consider it a central part of my character.

But J.C.'s response also triggered many questions. Is my use of humour in an organisational environment always relevant? Why do I use humour when coaching teams? What are the risks that I face in using humour in my coaching engagements? How does it affect the outcomes of the teams? Should I change how I use humour in organisations going forwards? Should I change how I use humour depending on the situation? And what is humour anyway?

What is humour?

Philosophers have been discussing what humour is for centuries without reaching consensus, but I now have a clearer idea of what I mean by humour, at least with regard to coaching teams in an organisational setting.

Most distinctively, when coaching teams, I am not delivering structured comedy (the kind you see in stand-up routines that are designed for maximum enjoyment of an audience); in coaching within an organisation, humour relies on short, spontaneous, situation-specific, 'witticisms' — although some of the tools used by comedians may be employed (such as repetition of a theme).

Drawing on a variety of theories[1], I now consider humour in an organisational setting to be made up of various elements:

Humour = incongruity + benign threat + play + not annoying + not problem solving

The foundation of this definition is Incongruity Theory which proposes that humour occurs "when concepts or rules are violated or transgressed" (Carroll, 2014, p.22). In other words, humour occurs when people are surprised because the normal has been adjusted. This theory declares that there is no threat to the recipient, but I disagree with this for organisational team coaching; much of my coaching (and some approaches used in therapy and coaching, such as Farrelly's Provocative Therapy (Farrelly & Brandsma, 1974)) relies on threatening the status quo.

[1] See appendix A for fuller descriptions of theories.

Therefore, my definition of humour includes the option of a *benign* threat (based on Benign Violation Theory). That is, there is often a threat to morals or viewpoints, but not too much of a threat to alienate people, trigger a defence mechanism or create anxiety. This can be a difficult balance, but I feel it is important when using humour in an organisational setting.

Although I do not agree with Release Theory (i.e. that humour is a release of pent-up emotions or a way of saving emotional energy), I do think that humour in an organisational setting can benefit from a playful element to give relief and relaxation from weighty topics and situations. St. Thomas Aquinas is attributed as encouraging, “play as a remedy for the weariness of the active life, especially the active mental life” (Carroll, 2014, p.42).

Another element is that the humour is not annoying; if something is genuinely amusing, then it cannot be annoying.

Finally, for something to be humorous in an organisational setting, it should not be received as a genuine puzzle to solve: viewers of the film Rain Man (Guber, Johnson, McGiffert, Molen, Mutrux, Peters & Levinson, 1988) will remember how Raymond Babbitt’s determination to solve the Abbott and Costello’s *Who’s on First?* sketch immediately transformed it into something unfunny.

One theory that I initially rejected as not having relevance to any coaching environment was Superiority Theory, promoted by Plato and Aristotle. I believe point scoring over another person is foreign in coaching environments and does not fit with witticisms either. I like to think that I do not vie for superiority in my coaching engagements, but do I? My recent clients have mostly been highly skilled specialists (e.g. in hospitals, government, global companies) so they are certainly more skilled in their field than I am. But do I show

off when coaching in order to make myself feel superior? And would I still lack a sense of superiority in my humour if my clients were less skilled? I have decided that these questions need further consideration and monitoring to ensure that I am not using humour in such a negative way.

Why do I use humour?

Having monitored my application of humour with teams in organisations, I believe I can group my use of humour into five main areas.

1) Evaluation

> **“**The teams had been called together to review their combined ways of working. Although they were reliant upon one another in this project, they each had their preferred way of working and were resisting compromise. Everyone knew this was slowing down the project. It wasn’t going to be easy to instil trust throughout the room, but they were failing to produce a working prototype and this was a crucial moment in salvaging a multi-million dollar experiment. ‘This should only take about five minutes, because you all agree how you work, right?’, I opened. Most of the teams chuckled but one person in particular remained stoney-faced. Within seconds I’d identified a likely candidate for resisting change.”
>
> (Based on personal notes, January 24, 2017)

As well as being a useful tool to put people at ease, and set a positive tone for a team coaching session, I have found that humour can be a useful diagnostic tool. Observing people’s responses to humour reveals a lot about their attitude to new ideas, outsiders and their teammates. For example, when a team is unreceptive to humour it can identify

distress (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997), reflect that the team is less open to change (Moran & Massam, 1997), and less likely to take chances or challenge established policies and practices (Barsoux, 1996); when a team can laugh at itself, there is often more maturity and humility. It is particularly useful because it is often done unconsciously and can reveal information that “might not otherwise be volunteered.” (Barsoux,1996, p.502).

It’s not always accurate, but it is a useful rule of thumb.[2]

2) Challenging the status quo

“*Team*: ‘We can’t release [feature] because we’re waiting for Bob.’

Coach: ‘Is that a big problem?’

Team: ‘Well, yes, it’s slowing us down.’

Coach: ‘Don’t you have other work to do while you wait?’

Team: ‘Yes, but we like to get feedback on features as soon as we complete them.’

Coach: ‘Does it matter if you wait a bit?

Team: ‘It means that we’re not getting feedback on whether we’re heading in the right direction. So, yes, it’s a big thing.’

Coach: ‘So you’d like someone else to fix this problem for you?’ [smiles] ‘Well, imagine that I’m fairy godmother — albeit a particularly hairy one — and I’m here to grant your wishes with my wand’ [holds up a pen] ‘It’s my travel wand as it’s much lighter. So, what was your wish again?’

Team: [Suspiciously] ‘We want Bob to work with us when we need him to.’

Coach: ‘Okay. Abracadabra!’ [flicks his pen like a wand and waits … looks quizzically at *wand* and tries again] ‘Okay, looks like I’m a pretty crap fairy

[2] In addition, how individual team members behave in one-to-one coaching is also a useful reflection of how others in the team are likely to perceive them.

godmother and we're going to have to find a solution ourselves. Let's imagine that *you* were responsible for getting your code out, rather than Bob, how might you go about gaining that skill?'

[The team goes on to suggest various options and finally settles on one of the team shadowing Bob so they gain the ability to release their own code]."

(Based on personal notes, January 30, 2017)

Modern psychologists (Durant & Miller, 1988; Kahneman, 2015) agree that our brains often take the easiest route to conserve energy: "In all procedures of life there are rules of thumb which enable us to go on to 'automatic pilot'" (Durant & Miller, 1988, p.16). But this isn't about being lazy; we need these labour-saving devices to go about our daily existence. Unfortunately, this auto-pilot is not always the best way of appraising the situation and often results in us working in the same ways we always have. This results in what Marvin Minsky (cited in Carroll, 2014) calls "cognitive bugs" (p.70).

I have found humour to be a great way to challenge and disrupt these auto-pilot cognitive bugs as people are much more receptive to change when using humour; they will often resist change if questioned dryly. It is usually a three-stage process, similar to Lewin's (1947) three change phases of unfreezing, moving and freezing. First the coach acts as a mirror to the situation in order to help the team take ownership of the problem. Secondly, the coach provides a sudden disruptive surprise and/or rebellious kick to question it. Adapting a concept from Herni Bergson (2009) — who says humour "demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (chapter 1) because it requires intelligence to take authority over emotion — I like to call this a momentary anaesthesia of the team's status quo; appealing to intelligent logic rather than historical actions (which often have emotional ties and a sense of security). Momentarily freeing the mind from historical

practices encourages innovation, creativity and plurality of vision. Finally, step three sees the team adjust their actions and discover that deviating from their standard way of working, and even failing, does not cause catastrophic results. Enabling the team to shake off failure is essential for innovation and for the team's evolution (such as enhancing organisational learning and innovation (Vetter & Gockel, 2016)); being afraid of failure discourages teams to experiment with new ideas.

For me, this can mean playing a role similar to that of the court jester. The court jester's job was to provide the monarch with a reality check that fawning courtiers would never provide. The jester challenged the dominant view and offered an alternative perspective, from a safe position and with the best of intentions. Barsoux (1996) agrees that there is a need for a latter-day corporate jester "to curb the excesses of power and to provide an anchor on reality" (p.506). He continues that, like the jester, this is best provided by someone who is not involved in corporate politics and is trusted by all. In my opinion, that role falls to the coach.

3) Defence

> "The team was focusing on bullying in [school's name]. They had spent months researching the situation but were over-whelmed by the number of options they had for improving the situation.
>
> *Coach*: 'Imagine that I am being bullied in [school's name]. A new chief had been put in charge but, unfortunately, he is inept and everything he does makes the situation worse: he's the Mr Bean of [school's name]. What would the chief do to make my situation worse?'
>
> *Team member*: 'Put you in a neon uniform that has 'Bully me' printed on the back?'
>
> [The team goes on to prioritise options]"

(Based on personal notes, April 27, 2017)

People may use humour to deal with a change in their circumstances. “By joking about it, one may feel in control of the situation” (Vetter & Gockel, 2016, p.314). Although this defence mechanism may be used in a toxic way[3], having coached teams dealing with medical care for babies, end-of-life care, self-inflicted deaths in prisons, etc., I know that humour can be an essential tool just to get through the day. Similarly, for the armed forces, police, fire brigade, medical teams, etc., gallows humour (see next section) is a way to prevent the weight of your work crushing you psychologically.

Humour can enable teams to obtain a psychological distance which promotes a balanced perspective to otherwise overwhelming feelings. In essence, “Laughter gives us a distance on everyday life” (Critchley, 2010 p.87).

Where the humour is inserted is critical in this instance. Considering this in relation to Ellis’ Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (Ross, 2006), we can identify various potential entry points for using humour when coaching a team in a stressful situation. For example, how they perceive the event (especially if the team has a culture of humour), their emotional response (such as questioning their beliefs using methods discussed in the challenging status quo section), and their physiological response (where laughter will reduce the tension).

“Laughter can help us cope with the bad parts of life.” (Hoover, 2013, p.2)

[3] Some people use humour to deflect (potential) pain at the expense of others. It normally takes the form of sarcasm, teasing or other aggressive humour to cope with a stressful situation and may result in interpersonal conflict and alienation of others (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997). Although not a coaching style, it can be evident in many team scenarios. I have found it to be especially dangerous in teams as it is passive-aggressive (so often defended as “just a joke”), the person is often unaware that they are doing it, and it is contagious if left unresolved.

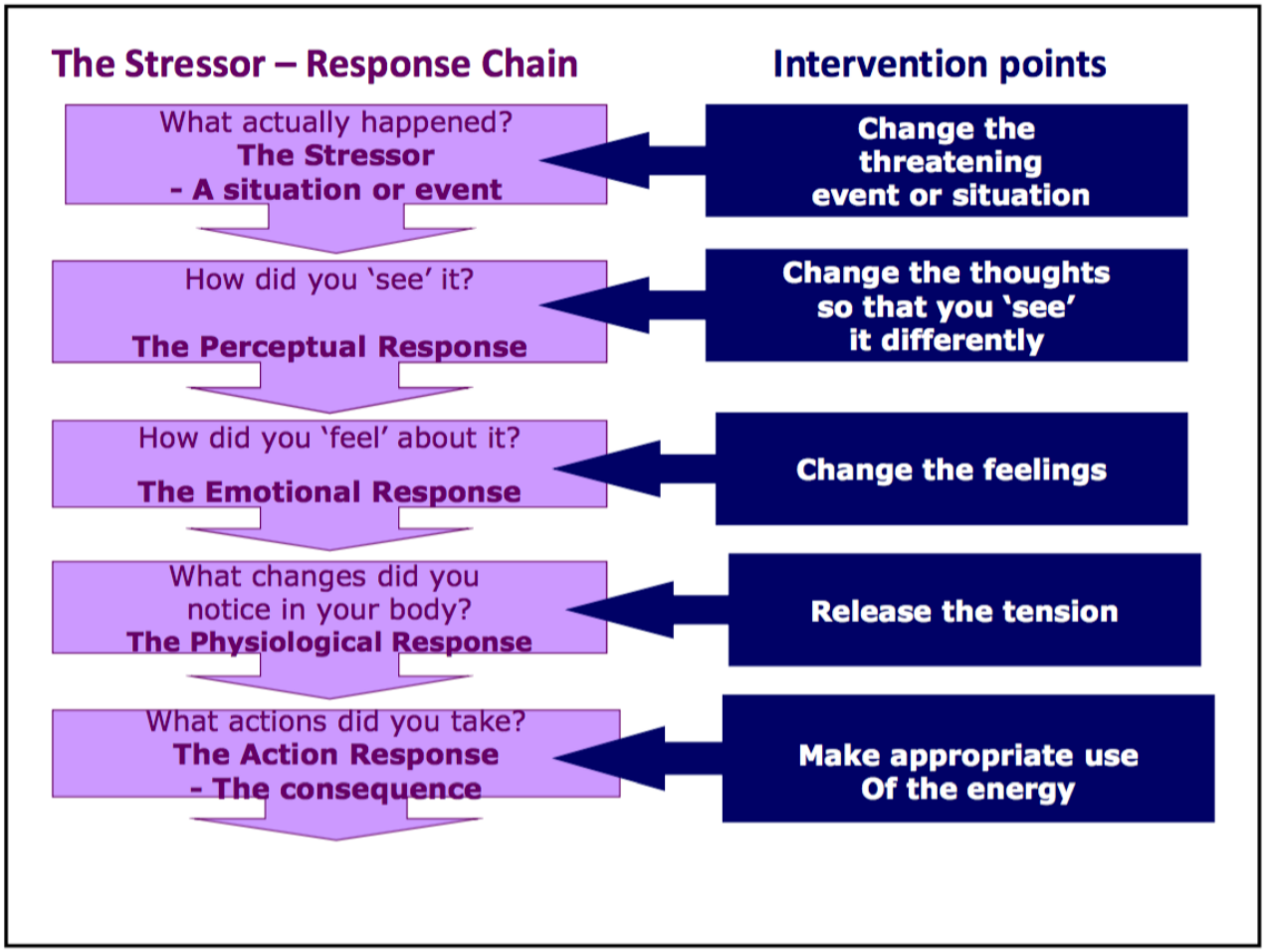

Figure 1. Intervention Points in Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy. (Barefoot Coaching, January 13, 2017).

4) Relief

> "After focusing on a particular problem for hours, it felt like the team was getting restless, frustrated and agitated. Keeping a deadpan expression I put my hand up and slowly asked, 'Why are we here again?' They looked perplexed for a moment as it was absurd that I didn't know what they'd just spent hours discussing. It broke their focus just long enough for me to ask, 'Is it just me who's losing their mind, or could we all do with a break?'"
>
> (Based on personal notes, February 3, 2017)

Humour is frequently employed by coaches working with top-flight athletes as respite from pressure, stress or boredom. Ronglan and Aggerholm (2014) say “Humour is an important counterbalance to the seriousness characterising our practice. In many ways it is an extremely repetitive and structured way of life we are living within elite sport. I believe that humour becomes even more important within such a setting. Otherwise, the whole thing becomes entirely serious, which is devastating for engagement and desire.” (p.6).

I believe that high-performing teams within organisations are equally at risk from these same factors. If you replace the words “elite sport” with “business” in the above quote, it still holds true. For example, Taylor and Bain (2003) found a similar need for relief from boredom and routine caused by “the frustration of task performance” (p.1495) in call centres.

When I see a team struggling to come to terms with an issue, find a solution to a problem, or from being shut in a room too long, I know I can effectively use humour to give them a chance for some relief mentally and/or physically.

5) Social

> “The team proposed using MailChimp[4] to automate emails for a project. Inadvertently, another party in the project referred to the system as ChimpMonkey in a discussion about it. The team joked about this misuse in the following weeks and I encouraged it. It was early days in the project and the camaraderie helped the team bond. Unfortunately, it also chipped away at the respect the team had for the other party.”
>
> (Based on personal notes, January 19, 2017)

[4] A popular marketing automation system.

As a team matures, it builds a library of insider knowledge, culture and identity (Collinson, 1998; Taylor & Bain, 2003) based on shared experiences. As Morreall (1987) points out, this is “an irreversible flow of experience” (p.117) which can neither be forgotten by existing members, nor learned by new members joining the group.

Using humour to refer to events from this communal history reinforces membership of the group, which usually strengthens team cohesion, trust and solidarity (Noon, Blyton & Morrell, 2013) which, in turn, increases productivity (Cooper, 2008; Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008; Scogin & Pollio, 1980; Terrion & Ashforth, 2002). Making fun of their own shared practices reinforces this shared common identity even further.[5]

In addition to identifying who is in the group and who is not, humour can also reveal internal hierarchies within a team. Although unspoken and often subtle, I have found that a team’s hierarchy can be betrayed by observing who is *allowed* to be funny within the team. This *permission* is reflected by the other team members’ acceptance or rejection of the attempt at humour. Using this to identify who the team considers dominant helps me ensure that everyone’s voice is heard, not just the alpha members. It also helps in combatting anchoring[6] which these dominant members might project onto the team.

Unfortunately, having this sense of *us* for a team means there is also a *them*. There is a fine line between using humour to foster a sense of team community and excluding others

[5] Similar to how the sketches of comedian Eddie Izzard question our shared, everyday practices by turning situations on their head and showing them in a new light.

[6] Anchoring is a cognitive bias where, once we have an idea in our head, our subsequent response will gravitate toward it — even when the subsequent question is unrelated to the first. For example, “simply thinking of one number affects the value of a subsequent estimate *even on a completely unrelated issue.*” (Hubbard, 2014, p.308)

in “a kind of secret freemasonry” (Bergson, 2009, ch.1). As a coach, I am often working with multiple teams within an organisation, and even across different organisations, so this is a consideration that I have to be aware of. Successfully using humour across two or more groups has huge potential. Firstly, my use of self-deprecating humour can show fallibility and encourage the group’s openness to negotiation. Secondly, it enables the collective group to test the water with new ideas and judge how they might be received by others, without exposing themselves too much. Thirdly, although teams will often have different cultures and beliefs from one another, using humour can allow me to break down such barriers (e.g. by finding common ground on which to base my humour and start building a wider group identity).

What are the different types of humour?

There are many different types of humour. Hoover (2013) suggests that there are 11 types of humour. As Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir (2003) highlight, different types of humour can be used simultaneously.

Figure 2. The 11 different types of humour.

When coaching in organisations, these types of humour are not all equally useful. For example, although not impossible, it is rare that farce, blue or sarcasm have a positive role to play.

Having inspected my use of humour when coaching teams in organisations, I have identified which types I use more frequently than others. The table below lists the 11 types of humour — ordered according to how much I use them in organisational coaching, with the most frequently used at the top — and includes examples of how each type of humour might be used in an organisational setting.

Title	Definition	Example
Improv	Without prior preparation	Nearly every instance of humour is unplanned.
Parody	Absurd or comically exaggerated imitation of something; burlesque	e.g. Mimicking actions of a team / the organisation at a magnified level in order to get them to question behaviour.
Satire	Exposing, denouncing, ridiculing, deriding as folly or vice	e.g. Mimicking unhelpful or contentious actions of the team / another team / the organisation in order to get them to question the behaviour.
Deadpan	Showing no emotional or personal involvement; straight-faced	e.g. Playing dumb in order to make the team explain their actions. Although the team will be directing the explanation at me (as I asked the question), I am really getting them to justify their actions to themselves.

Title	Definition	Example
Anecdotal	Based on personal observation, case study reports, or random investigations rather than systematic scientific evaluation	e.g. Providing a possible outcome from the team's proposed solution / approach (sometimes loosely based on a real past experience, but super-charged with humour).
Slapstick	Boisterous action; horseplay	e.g. *Accidentally* moving a work item into the "completed" column of their work tracking tool in order to challenge whether they have done enough to move on to the next item.
Surreal	Disorientating, hallucinatory quality of a dream; unreal; fantastical	e.g. Asking the team to imagine that I am their fairy godmother (albeit a deep-voiced, bearded fairy).
Gallows	Treats serious, frightening or painful subject matter in a light or satirical way; dark; black	Rarely used even when I'm involved in serious topics; gallows humour is usually reserved for use by those suffering and personally involved in the topic being satired. There may be occasions where I tread lightly into the gallows humour arena: e.g. Suggesting that we'll solve a serious topic (e.g. deaths within prisons) within a few minutes.

Title	Definition	Example
Farce	Light humour where plot of a story depends upon skilful exploitation of a situation (rather than of a character)	I rarely use this when coaching teams because it requires skilful planning of a *joke*, which takes my focus away from helping the team reach a successful position (in effect turning the focus onto 'how clever I am'). In addition, it is also likely that, to deliver a farce successfully, it would require me to have some knowledge of the field in which the team is working (which I often do not have) and results in me positioning myself as an expert, thus suggesting that I am a consultant or mentor to the team rather than a coach. e.g. Allowing the team to consider a specific item of work that then reveals itself to be ludicrous as the conversation progresses.
Blue	Rude or risque	Rarely used in an organisational setting.
Sarcasm	Harsh or bitter derision; sneering or cutting remark	Rarely used in an organisational setting (although maybe in self-deprecation). Has more of a place in therapy styles such as Provocative Therapy (Farrelly & Brandsma, 1974).

Table 1: The 11 different types of humour (including definitions and examples of how they might be used) ordered according to how much I use them in organisational coaching — most used at the top.

The use of these types of humour differs considerably from the types of humour I would use with individuals — even with individuals who are also in a team I coach. For example, I

believe that I use parody a lot in a team setting because I am not mocking any one individual, but the situation they are in; doing this with an individual could easily be perceived as a direct attack on them. This is similar to how Farrelly (Farrelly & Brandsma, 1974) says that one should “ridicule the patient’s crazy, idiotic ideas and self-defeating, behaviour, but not the person himself” (p.107). However, I believe there to be significant differences in how I use humour compared to how humour would be used with Provocative Therapy[7].

The problems of using humour in an organisational setting

> “If you do not laugh at my joke, then something has gone wrong either with my joke or with my telling of it. Either way, it is a mistake.” (Critchley, 2010, p. 86)

Although Jones, Armour and Potrac (2004) were quoting a football coach when they wrote that the art of coaching is about “recognising the situation, recognising the people and responding to the people you are working with” (p.18), I believe this is also true for coaching in an organisational setting. I have identified four areas where I think this is particularly relevant in my coaching of teams within organisations.

1) Self-deprecation

> “Because I wasn’t a specialist like them, I was able to ask *stupid questions* about their approach. The more I played dumb, the more they questioned themselves. They’d never have been able to ask such questions without feeling self-conscious.” (Based on personal notes, January 19, 2017)

[7] Appendix B considers how Provocative Therapy might use the typology of humour differently.

Self-deprecation is a great tool for getting teams to question themselves: almost like saying “I’m a poor idiot who doesn’t understand your wonderful minds, could you please explain …”. The resultant explanations and justifications obviously are not for me to gain knowledge, but to encourage the team to introspect.

However, there are risks in this approach, particularly around reducing a coach’s credibility and self-deprecation being seen as a sign of weakness. A coach needs to be aware of the situation (i.e. the people, culture, environment) and act accordingly. For example, I would usually refrain from this approach in an organisation where status plays an important role in getting teams engaged.

2) Weapon

> **“**In an attempt to bond with an alpha male in the organisation, I slightly adjusted Jon’s surname to refer to a cuddly animal. He seemed to respond positively and our bond has grown over time. But today, after months, he told me that he doesn’t like this nickname as it was one he was given at school and reminds him of dark times in his childhood. I’m mortified! He said there's no way I could have known this, but I made an error in judgement.”
>
> (Based on personal notes, March 5, 2017)

There is a thin line between laughing *with* and laughing *at* someone. As stated earlier, I never deliberately use humour as a camouflaged weapon[8], but sometimes the target I aim for is not hit; the message I hope to send is not what is received. In the above example, although my attempt at humour was not with malicious intent, it was misguided. A negative use of humour can have an unhelpful effect on individuals and teams, closing them down

[8] Which the Superiority Theorists (see Appendix A) would suggest we always do.

rather than opening them up. The best techniques I find are to slowly introduce humour after gauging how it will be received, contracting that I use humour as a way of gaining alternative perspectives, and regularly checking that people are happy during coaching.

3) Losing flow

> "I thought the team was getting frustrated so, as to bring about a bit of relief, I broke their discussion using a witticism. I'm not sure that was the right choice as, although it might have cooled down the growing hostility, it broke their flow and they didn't seem to get back into the discussion in the same depth."
>
> (Based on personal notes, April 11, 2017)

Although we acknowledge that humour has a benefit of bringing relief to certain situations, there are also risks that it puts people off their game. For example, coaches working with elite athletes disagree whether the benefits of the relief outweigh the risk of reducing the team's focus on the task in hand (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004).

I think the key is to assess whether the team is *in flow* as described by Csikszentmihalyi. Kahneman (2015) describes Csikszentmihalyi's flow as "a state of effortless concentration so deep that [people who experience flow] lose their sense of time, of themselves, of their problems" (p.40). If the team is in flow, then I tend to leave them to perform, unless I think they are going to damage their sense of community as a result.

4) Ethical

> *Coach*: "What's stopping you just rolling out the product now?"
>
> *Team*: "It's not been tested as much as we'd like."

Coach: [With exaggerated carefree flippancy] “What’s the worst that could happen? Will anyone die?”

Team: “No, but we could lose loads of customers if [the feature] doesn’t work properly.”

Coach: “But you could gain loads of new ones if it works well enough. Right?”

I don’t endorse slapdash testing. I don’t encourage companies to risk losing customers. I don’t believe that ex-prisoners should be forever unemployed. I don’t believe that people at the end of their life are unimportant. But should not all these topics be *fair game* in my use of humour when I’m coaching a team working in such fields?

My approach to using humour in coaching from an ethical standpoint is based on three fundamental principles:[9]

- *Anti*-Attitude Endorsement Theory
- Light Comic Immoralism
- Amoralism

Anti-Attitude Endorsement Theory

I do not agree with the Attitude Endorsement Theory (see Appendix C) as I do not believe that laughing at something necessarily reflects my personal beliefs. For example, I often claim that only one part of a team “actually does the work” (meaning physically produce the output), thus implying other parts are lazy, when I don’t really believe them to be lazy

[9] See Appendix C for more information on the various ethical theories.

at all. Carroll (2014) gives an example of an atheist who laughs at a Far Side cartoon about hell, but whose laughter does not affirm a belief in the existence of heaven and hell.

In coaching, when I deliberately use humour that contradicts my true beliefs, I will often clarify this with the team soon afterwards, so as not to damage the coaching relationship.

Light Comic Immoralism

Comic Immoralism takes the stand that ethical flaws may be used in order to enhance humour (Carroll, 2014). I believe that, for humour to be used effectively in an organisation, one has to over-step the mark on occasion in order to challenge the status quo. However, there is a limit to how far I will go and I certainly do not believe that every topic is legitimate — a light use is usually sufficient to get the benefit without the risk of causing offence.

Amoralism

The difference between appropriate and inappropriate humour is defined by intent (Carroll, 2014). It matters who is telling the joke and for what reason. In coaching, humour should always be used because you believe it will benefit the client.

There is a fine line between using humour for good (e.g. shocking to challenge the status quo) and over-stepping the mark. Unfortunately there is no universal moral code regarding humour, so every use of humour is very subjective, with all parties making their own moral judgement on whether something is funny and within the bounds of acceptability. Getting it wrong can kill a coaching session and even the whole relationship.

As with all the risks discussed above, the key is in the delivery of the humour.

Conclusion: how best to use humour in an organisational setting

> "… in joking we may be undertaking the most serious thing we do in our lives!" (Durant & Miller, 1988, p.16)

Organisations should think of humour as a necessary resource, not as a luxury or a threat. But using humour effectively within an organisational setting is complex: no two teams have the same needs, history or moral codes. Every performance by the coach has to consider a number of factors (including the delivery, context, environment) and they should adapt their approach as they learn more about the engagement.

The research and reflection that this essay required has helped clarify many aspects of how I use humour in an organisational setting. I am now aware of what I consider humour to be, am more conscious of why I use humour in different circumstances, have an improved judgement on which types of humour are more effective — and appropriate — than others in certain circumstances, as well as having an increased recognition around potential risks and boundaries.

It has also helped me recognise where humour fits into coaching engagements (e.g. how it complements the GROW model[10]) and I now have a set of explicit guidelines[11] for how I use humour in an organisational setting:

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[10] See Appendix D

[11] This is a living document so will evolve over time. For the latest version, please see http://scrumandkanban.co.uk/resources/humour-guidelines/

- Include that the use of humour is a major part of your approach in the contracting stage and at the beginning of sessions where you anticipate using it a lot and/or where you are unsure of how it will be received and/or where you think it might get a mixed reception but its use is vital
- Open coaching sessions with an easy-to-consume witticism (thus minimising the chance of offending anyone) as evaluation tool
- Encourage feedback on the level of use of humour
- Try to avoid witticisms that are directed at any individual (even if you think you have a bond with them). If you do intend to direct humour towards someone during coaching (e.g. you might be using them as a *straight man*), keep it to the minimum and check with the person beforehand that they are happy with this (agree the boundaries, confirm they can change their mind at any point, etc). Check in with them regularly if you intend to continue directing witticisms towards them
- If using humour to bring relief (e.g. a break from focus), question whether the team is currently *in flow.* If they are in flow, then hold back unless doing so will damage the team / relationships
- Match the humour type (see fig. 2 for the 11 different types of humour) to the situation. Note that the types used will differ depending on the size of the team, environment, maturity of the team/organisation, etc.
- Use humour to reinforce membership of a group (and to help you understand a team's hierarchy), but be aware that it might exclude those outside the group
- Use humour to find common ground when the team is diverse (e.g. culturally)
- Use humour to gauge a group's acceptance of new ideas
- If using humour to challenge the status quo, use three-step approach:
    1. Mirror the situation to highlight the problem
    2. Inject a momentary anaesthesia of the team's status quo

3. Help team agree how they will adjust their actions

- Ensure threat is benign
- Clarify (as soon after as is viable) when you have used humour in a way that goes against your true beliefs (to protect against being perceived as flippant)
- Use self-deprecating humour but be aware that this may be viewed negatively in some environments
- Be prepared for some teams to use gallows humour, but generally leave gallows humour to those on the front-line (unless you are with them)
- Avoid sarcastic humour type
- Avoid blue humour type
- Strive to foster a “humour-supportive climate” (Vetter & Gockel, 2016, p.318)

I used to be concerned about using any amount of humour in an organisational setting, but now believe that the potential benefits far outweigh the risks. Humour is a useful tool I have in my toolbox — and a serious one in that it can make an impact in many different ways. The most significant realisation this reflection has generated is that my use of humour is an essential part of my personality and that hiding it away would be incongruous. I should consider humour as an asset that differentiates me from other organisational coaches.

Appendix A

Theories of humour

Superiority Theory

Superiority Theory has roots going back as far as Plato and Aristotle who thought that "laughter is essentially derisive and that in being amused by someone we are finding that person inferior in some way." (Morreall, 1987, p.14)

Thomas Hobbes expanded Superiority Theory to state that humans are "in constant struggle with one another for power and what power can bring. … failure of our competitors is equivalent to our success. … we are all constantly watching for signs that we are better off than others, or … that others are worse off than we are. Laughter is nothing but an expression of our sudden glory when we realize that in some way we are superior to someone else." (Morreall, 1987, p.19)

It's quite an unpleasantly aggressive theory, focusing on jokes about perceived physical disabilities, cultural differences, age, gender, sexual orientation, as well as misfortunes of others.

Some people criticised pre-Hobbesian Superiority Theory as not addressing self-deprecating humour. Hobbes' extended Superiority Theory accepted that superiority over other people could also be "over our own former position." (Morreall, 1987, p.5)

Critics (e.g. Hoover, 2013) argue that it still fails to explain puns, laughter at oneself in the current moment (e.g. when we are in the process of doing something silly, rather than our former self), or self-deprecating humour.

Alexander Bain extended the Superiority Theory saying that laughter could be at non-human objects such as an idea or ideal. It is “possible for humans to *degrade anything* and to find humour in that degradation.” (Hoover, 2013, p.59)

The Mechanical Theory is an offshoot of the Superiority Theory: it laughs at the “rigidity and inflexibility of certain people, or even certain social conventions.” (Hoover, 2013 p.69)

Release Theory (aka Relief Theory)

Release Theory was promoted by the likes of Freud, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and Herbert Spencer (Morreall, 1987).

The theory believes that laughter is a way for the body to release pent-up, nervous energy by tricking the mind into letting it go. This includes “societal repressions, sexual repressions, pent-up emotions.” (Hoover, 2013, p.81)

Play theory

Great thinkers, including Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas, have reminded us over the centuries that humour is needed in a busy life as playful relaxation: humour can act as a “remedy for the weariness of the active life, especially the active mental life.” (St Thomas Aquinas as cited in Carroll, 2014 p.42)

Incongruity Theory

Although the first mention of Incongruity Theory can be traced back to Francis Hutcheson, it has been advanced by many, including Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Hazlitt (Morreall, 1987).

Its basic premise is that “people will laugh at things that surprise them or whenever something does not adhere to a specific pattern.” (Hoover, 2013, p.63)

This includes “deviations, disturbances or problematizations of our concepts, rules, laws of logic and reasoning, stereotypes, norms of morality, of prudence, and of etiquette, contradictory points of view presented in tandem, and, in general, subversions of our commonplace expectations, including our expectations concerning standard emotional scenarios and schemas, our norms of grace, taste, and even the very forms of comedy itself” (Carroll, 2014, p.27). It also works very well in explaining puns, which many other theories of humour do not.

Hoover (Hoover, 2013) suggests that it can take many forms:

- Physical incongruity: e.g. Laurel and Hardy
- Social incongruity: e.g. Eddie Murphy in Trading Places
- Character incongruity: e.g. character not behaving consistently with who they are
- Perspective incongruity: e.g. getting the wrong end of the stick
- Solution incongruity: e.g. suggesting a ridiculous action / solution to a problem

It should be noted that the object being perceived as incongruous does not actually need to *be* incongruous; it just needs to be *perceived* as incongruous by the recipient.

The Benign Violation Theory

An early version of The Benign Violation Theory was proposed by Veatch (1999), but has been reinvented and promoted heavily by Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren in the Humor Research Lab, Boulder, Colorado (TEDx Talks, 2010).

The Benign Violation Theory proposes that humour will only occur when three requirements are met (Hoover, 2013):

4. There is a threat of some sort (e.g. threat to a viewpoint or morals)
5. Threat must be benign (i.e. so no real danger)
6. The person sees 1 and 2 at the same time

Puns are included in this theory as “violations of linguistics” (Hoover, 2013, p.77).

The Benign Violation Theory helps explain why some attempts at humour fail, such as not having the correct balance of threat (it is either too tame or too risqué) or it is not benign at all (so is perceived as aggressive).

Appendix B

How Provocative Therapy uses the 11 types of humour differently

Farrelly and Brandsma (1974) highlighted that a variety of forms of humour are used with Provocative Therapy: exaggeration, mimicry, ridicule, distortion, sarcasm, irony and jokes.

We can map these to the 11 types of humour discussed earlier in 'What are the different types of humour?':

Farrelly's form of humour	Mapping to 11 types of humour wheel
Exaggeration	Satire (optionally along with: slapstick; farce; surreal)
Mimicry	Parody (often also using deadpan) (optionally along with: blue; slapstick; sarcasm; farce; gallows)
Ridicule	Parody + satire (optionally along with: gallows; blue; deadpan; sarcasm; farce)
Distortion	Parody + satire (often also using deadpan and/or surreal) (optionally along with gallows; blue; slapstick; sarcasm; farce)
Sarcasm	Sarcasm + satire + parody + deadpan (optionally along with gallows; blue)
Irony	Parody + satire + deadpan (optionally along with gallows; blue; sarcasm)
Jokes	Any

Table 2: Provocative Therapy's forms of humour mapped to my 11 types of humour.

However, Provocative Therapy is therapy and differs from coaching individuals or teams within an organisational setting. Unlike my application of humour, I believe that a therapist using this method is more likely to place importance on the different types of humour as per the table below:

Commonly used	Parody	e.g. replaying behaviour back to patient or using professional-sounding jargon
	Satire	e.g. challenging patient by ridiculing authority or religious morals
	Anecdotal	e.g. if referring to other patients or data/ statistics
	Improv	e.g. will decide on response depending on information given by patient
	Deadpan	e.g. responses usually delivered with serious face
	Sarcasm	e.g. referring to patient as an extreme (such as “so you think you’re the best mother in the world now do you?”)
Sometimes used with the above types	Blue	Farrelly seemed to like using this, but it depended on the type of patient
	Gallows	Seemed to depend on patient and what their situation was
	Slapstick	e.g. wiping dirty shoes on posh dress
	Surrealism	Some of Farrelly’s scenarios went into a dream-like realm
Rarely used	Farce	Farrelly rarely seemed to build up a story line because sessions were usually about an individual

Table 3: The 11 different types of humour (including definitions and examples of how they might be used) ordered according to how much Provocative Therapy uses them. Ordered with most used at the top.

Appendix C

Ethical theories

Comic Puritanism

This is one extreme end of the spectrum, as it proposes that humour should always be purely moral and not over-step any boundaries that might upset others.

Comic Ethicism

This approach admits that humour may contain moral and immoral elements, but warns that it should not be funny *because* of the immoral elements and expects the moral elements to outweigh the immoral. It also maintains that the immoral elements are “bad features” (Carroll, p.102-6).

Comic Immoralism

Comic Immoralism is the other extreme of the spectrum, arguing that *ethically dubious* content can enhance humour. Carroll (2014) proposes that this comes in “varying strengths” (pp.107-109): from a moderate version (which finds some topics appropriate some of the time) to a strong version (which finds every topic a possible source of humour).

Believers in strong Comic Immoralism (often referred to as the domain of dead baby jokes) challenges even the most open minds and risks compromising an audience’s enjoyment by repulsing them. This extreme end of the spectrum often opens the question of whether someone who laughs at an immoral joke or witticism actually agrees with the humour being used, and about good versus evil intent.

The Amoralist

This approach contends that humour is not about good versus evil, but about intent: *why* was the person making the humorous remark or joke? For example, was the person making the joke to build a sense of camaraderie within a group in order to complete a task, or was the person making the remark to belittle or hurt someone else in order to fulfil their own agenda? The subtleties can often be hard to pick up on.

Many of the approaches used in Provocative Therapy (Farrelly & Brandsma, 1974) are certainly shocking, but fall neatly within the Amoralist's domain: Farrelly would argue that he is using the seemingly harsh words for the good of his patients.[12]

Attitude Endorsement Theory

If you laugh at something, does that mean you agree with it and endorse its sentiments? Attitude Endorsement Theory believes so. Furthermore, it would argue that laughing at it "makes one complicit with and thereby guilty, to some degree, of the infraction as well." (Carroll, 2014, p.92)

I disagree with this theory and echo Carroll's (2014) objection that there are instances where you can find humour in a topic without believing the butt of the joke even exists. For example, you could laugh at a joke about a martian without believing they exist; an atheist can laugh at a joke about heaven and hell without believing in either; a vegetarian can laugh at a joke about cannibalism without supporting that to be an acceptable practice — people can imagine it hypothetically.

[12] When challenged that Provocative Therapy was "unprofessional" Farrelly replied that the word should only be used to refer to behaviour that is detrimental to the goals of a given profession and not as a substitute for words such as "naughty" and "something I don't like" (Farrelly & Brandsma, 1974,, p.127).

Appendix D

An example of how humour complements the GROW model

Early engagement / contracting	It is important for me to use humour at the start of the engagement as it: • Allows me to evaluate the team's maturity and gives me an insight into their relationships with one another • Helps me gauge the team's attitude for using humour
Goal	Agree focus for the session without creating or increasing confrontation Test various options through a light use of humour
Reality	Challenge status quo MIRROR & OWNERSHIP: the coach acts as a mirror to the situation to make the team take ownership that it is *their* problem.
Options	DISRUPTIVE / CHALLENGE: the coach provides a sudden disruptive and/or rebellious kick to question the situation. A momentary anaesthesia of the team's status quo. Create options.
Wrap-up	FIND ALTERNATIVE / AGREE CHANGE: the team adjusts its actions and discovers that deviating from the standard way of working, and even failing, does not cause catastrophic results. Enabling the team to shake off failure is essential for their evolution; being afraid of failure discourages teams from experimenting with new ideas. The team then adds this experience to its communal history which reinforces membership of the group and the team's identity.

Table 4: How I might use humour in combination with the GROW model.

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