Laughing with the gurus

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Management gurus are among the most influential public orators of the day. But mastery of age–old rhetorical devices, including the use of humour, is central to their effectiveness.

As perhaps the highest-profile group of management speakers in the world, management gurus use their lectures to build their personal fame. Many have reputations as powerful orators and sell recordings of their talks as part of video-based management training packages.

Their public performances are critical to their popularity and success. Yet how gurus disseminate their ideas on the international lecture circuit is largely unexamined. For example, what presentational techniques do they use to communicate their messages and why? What forms of speaker/audience interaction occur during the gurus' lectures? What impact do audience reactions have on the gurus' modes of presentation?

In studying these issues, we found that humour and audience laughter are critical to understanding the live performances of management gurus. The gurus and their audiences engage in important social interactions through humour and laughter, especially in relation to the communication of messages that imply criticism of either audience members or, less commonly, the gurus themselves.

Research on humour and laughter

Theories of humour argue that the components of humorous remarks and incidents are, as one commentator puts it, "in mutual clash, conflict or contradiction".

However, theories differ in explaining the functions and impact of humour. So-called disparagement and superiority theories link humour to hostility and malice, viewing it as a means through which people enhance their self-esteem and feelings of superiority by disparaging and laughing at others. In contrast, relief theories explain humour and laughter in terms of the diffusion of tension that has been either intentionally or unintentionally built up in a situation.

Humour and laughter express relief following the removal of a potential source of pain or stress and/or provide socially acceptable outlets for the release of repressed emotion, including aggression. Finally, incongruity theories contend that laughter is related to surprise following the resolution of perceived incongruities and that it may express affection as well as malice or relief.

Drawing on these theories, empirical studies of humour indicate that it serves four primary functions: to create and maintain social cohesion and group solidarity; to attack others in socially acceptable ways and/or to enhance self-esteem at the expense of others; to gain the approval of others; and to manage embarrassment, fear or stress in threatening situations.

However, such theories neglect one crucial aspect of humour and laughter – the way that humour-related actions such as jokes, quips and laughter are actually produced in social interaction. The significance of this is revealed by the findings of "conversation analytic" (CA) studies of the interactional organisation of humorous talk and laughter. These studies, based on detailed analysis of audio and video recordings of naturally occurring interactions, reveal that people rely upon a range of tacit – that is, seen but unnoticed – practices and procedures in order to produce, recognize and manage humour-related actions.

For example, although laughter is often depicted as a spontaneous response to "humorous" talk, in practice it is routinely invited in advance by speakers through the use of a range of techniques that enable them to indicate that it is, and when it is, appropriate for others to laugh. Moreover, people have at their disposal an array of practices through which they can produce, or decline to produce, laughter and other responses.

CA has been successfully used in previous studies of public speaking in political contexts. It describes the practices and reasoning that speakers use in generating their own behaviour and in interpreting and dealing with the behaviour of others by analysing the moment by moment features of interaction.

Our analysis focuses on video recordings of public lectures given by Tom Peters, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Peter Senge, Gary Hamel and Daniel Goleman. These gurus are renowned for their public performances and represent a range of popular management ideas that have had a major impact on organisational life in the last 15 years.

Inviting laughter

The management gurus' lectures do not involve any examples of audience members booing, heckling or laughing derisively at their messages.

However, audience members do produce displays of affinity by, among other things, clapping, laughing supportively, nodding their heads or smiling. In some cases, these responses are produced by one or two individuals; in others, they involve many members of an audience. It is these collective displays that are of interest.

When members of an audience collectively display their affinity with a guru, they do so predominantly by laughing. Applause is confined to the beginning and end of the guru's presentations and to three recorded incidents during Peters' lectures where laughter leads to applause, one of which involves only a handful of people clapping. In this respect, the gurus' lectures are akin to various forms of public speaking, including university lectures and training seminars, in which applause is usually not treated as a relevant activity either on its own or in conjunction with laughter.

Collective audience laughter is manifestly supportive because it is, without exception, evoked by messages that are recognisably "humorous". Thus audience members laugh with the gurus, not at them. This is not to say that the audience members' laughter represents an unequivocal expression of support for the messages the gurus convey through their humorous remarks. As in other settings, people may laugh because they appreciate a good joke and not because they support the speaker.

Studies of political oratory demonstrate that audience responses such as applause are not simply spontaneous reactions to the messages that evoke them. As collective actions, their production is underpinned by the basic sociological principle that people prefer to act like those around them so as to avoid social isolation. Audience members usually clap in situations in which public speakers indicate clearly to them when these responses will be relevant activities. In most cases, speakers then confirm the relevance of applause by ceding the floor until the audience's response ends or begins to subside.

Research has identified seven rhetorical devices (contrasts, lists, puzzle-solution, headline-punchline, combinations, position taking and pursuits) through which speakers seek and receive applause from their audiences. These devices facilitate applause by emphasising messages and by providing clear message "completion points" around which individual audience members can co-ordinate their actions.

Although the same principles apply in the gurus' lectures, the generation of collective laughter is not as strongly associated with the use of these seven rhetorical formats as is applause (and possibly laughter) at political meetings. Only 37.5 per cent of the messages that precipitate laughter in the lectures we studied are packaged in one of these formats. In the other cases, the gurus use different procedures to provide messages that produce clear completion points.

The gurus do not rely on audience members to recognise that collective laughter is a relevant activity based on the content of their messages alone. Rather, they also establish the relevance of audience laughter through the use of a range of verbal and non-verbal actions during the delivery, and/or following the completion, of their messages. Occasionally, they announce that they are about to say something humorous. More generally, however, they invite audience laughter by smiling, laughing and using humorous facial expressions, gestures and verbal devices.

Look at the following extract from a Peters lecture in which he quotes Ross Perot. The quotation involves Perot praising Electronic Data Systems (EDS) for adopting a "flat and fluid" structure and disparaging another company, General Motors (GM), for retaining a cumbersome bureaucratic structure. Peters twice evokes collective audience laughter.

> Peters: My favourite Perotism of all was his description, right before leaving GM, of what he saw as the difference between Electronic Data Systems and GM. He said: "At EDS when you see a snake you kill it". [Audience laughter]
>
> "At GM when you see a snake, you search the world for the top consultant on snakes. [Audience laughter]
>
> "Then you appoint a committee on snakes and you study snakes for the next two years". Flat. Fluid. And get on with it. That's the creature.

Peters provides the messages that evoke laughter with both emphasis and clear completion points by, partly, using a puzzle-solution format. He begins by establishing a puzzle in the minds of the audience members: what did Perot see as the difference between EDS and GM? He then offers a two-part solution that is formed as a contrast. In this way, he highlights the contents of the messages against a background of surrounding material. He also provides the audience members with resources to anticipate the completion of the two messages, for they can match each part of the emerging solution to the puzzle in order to infer what it will take for it to be complete. In the case of the second part of the solution, they can also match it against the first part.

In establishing the relevance of audience laughter, Peters does not solely rely on the humorous content of his remarks. He also invites audience laughter through the use of a range of non-verbal techniques. In the

first case of laughter, which follows Peters' description of Perot's commendation of EDS, Peters uses comic gestures and facial expressions. As he quotes Perot on EDS, he suddenly leans forward, glares at a section of the audience and speaks louder as he adopts a mock angry tone. Then, as he completes the quotation ("you kill it"), he bares his teeth as he spits out the words.

Together with Perot's incongruous metaphorical imagery – seeing and killing snakes in a corporate context – Peters' non-verbal actions establish the relevance of audience laughter. In the second case of audience laughter, which follows Peters' dramatising of Perot's disparagement of GM, Peters, reverting to a low-key form of speech delivery, establishes the relevance of laughter by leaning forward and smiling at the audience as he completes the quotation. In both cases, Peters confirms the relevance of laughter by ceding the floor until the audience's laughter ends.

The examples of collective laughter in our data occur in response to messages that convey to the audience that laughter is appropriate – and when it is appropriate. They do not comprise spontaneous reactions to humorous remarks but rather are invited by the gurus.

The role of humour and laughter

With one exception, the remarks that precipitate laughter fall into five groups. Over half of the remarks precipitating laughter communicate management ideas by praising or criticising managers and organisations; nine per cent communicate management ideas without praising or criticising managers and organisations; 19 per cent communicate ideas without reference to managers or organisations; five per cent refer to potential shortcomings in the gurus' theories; and 10 per cent set up the delivery of key messages. (The exception involved Hamel disparaging the game of golf.)

Praising or criticising

Often, gurus extol the virtues of practices that the audience members are unlikely to be using and/or criticise practices that they may well be using. However, the gurus are careful to avoid directly criticising their audiences. When they praise organisational practices, they do not draw attention to the fact that the audience members may not be using them. And when they criticise management practices, with rare exceptions (which are heavily mitigated) they do not direct their criticism at the audience members who are using them. Instead, they direct their disparagement at third-party organisations and managers, who are often unnamed. By adopting this approach, they are able to question common management practices without directly confronting audience members who may be using them.

(When gurus make use of anonymous targets they may be adhering to the common consultancy practice of respecting the confidentiality of clients. But such an approach also enables them to manage potential criticism in the audience, which is not presented with a target for which it can have positive or negative feelings. Furthermore, without knowing the identity of the manager or organisation being discussed there is no way in which audience members can independently assess – and so challenge – what the guru is saying.)

By using humour, the gurus underline the remarkable qualities of the actions, achievements, products or services that they describe. By inviting laughter, they encourage audience members to produce collective displays of affinity in response to their messages. In the following example, Hamel praises the

achievements of the coffee shop chain Starbucks that has adopted the practices he is recommending by elevating coffee into a highly desired product.

> Hamel: Now this is not only in…high-tech products and it's not only things about the Internet. Let me give you some very mundane examples for a moment. Take something that, certainly in the United States, we all know as a company –Starbucks. Now beginning to go international. Who would have predicted here that you could get construction workers to line up three deep to pay two-and-a-half bucks for a latte after all? [Audience laughter]

> Right. And if I'm sitting there inside Nestlé, running, the world's largest coffee brand – Nescafé – how do I feel when in less than 10 years somebody can build a coffee brand that in the largest…coffee-drinking market in the world is a demonstrably more valuable brand than my decades-old coffee brand? Does it matter that Nestlé grabs a little bit of market share from P&G in the aisles of your local supermarket if most of the new wealth in the coffee business is being created here?

Hamel's rhetorical question illustrates the success of Starbucks by describing how construction workers queue to buy lattes from its outlets and depicting this as an extraordinary achievement. Having evoked a collective display of empathy, Hamel reverts to a serious stance as he refers to the implications of Starbucks' success for its competitor, Nestlé.

Twenty-five per cent of all laughter episodes occur in response to messages that criticise managers and/or organisations for employing practices that the gurus reject. In these cases, the gurus' use of humour underlines the inappropriateness of commonplace management practices. In the following example, Kanter derides the purportedly slow bureaucratic reactions of a number of US corporations to a new packaging technology.

> Kanter: In the early 1980s the European manufacturers came over to make presentations to all the food companies to see if they could interest them in the packaging. So they make presentations to all of the giants, Coca Cola, Proctor and Gamble, etc. And one of the giants was sufficiently interested...that they immediately set up a committee to study it. [Audience laughter]

> Right. Ocean Spray heard the same presentation; committed the next day; signed a deal by the end of the week; and got an 18-month exclusive licence.

By using humour and inviting audience members to laugh, Kanter highlights the supposed absurdity of the reactions of the giant corporations to the presentations made by the European manufacturers. By laughing, audience members display their appreciation of Kanter's humour. Following the audience's laughter, Kanter reverts to a serious stance as she praises the actions of a smaller company, Ocean Spray.

However, as noted above, audience laughter embodies a degree of ambiguity. While it displays audience members' appreciation of the guru's humorous remarks, it does not unequivocally signal their support for the messages that the guru conveys. The ambiguous character of laughter is significant because it enables the gurus and their audiences to engage in exchanges even though the gurus may be criticising practices that audience members are using or commending practices that they are not using and even though some audience members may disagree with the guru's views.

Gary Hamel tells an unattributed story about Nikita Khruschev's maiden speech as president of the Soviet Union during which he denounced the crimes of his predecessor, Joseph Stalin. Hamel uses the story to illustrate his point that it is difficult to promote change in organisations.

Hamel: You know, being an activist is not an easy thing. There's a wonderful story [about] when Khruschev took over the Supreme Soviet, [he used] his maiden speech…to denounce the crimes of Stalin. And he went through this litany of horrors that Stalin had perpetrated on the Soviet Union. And half way through this long speech somebody sitting at the back of this huge auditorium shouted out a question. He said: "Comrade Khruschev, you were there with Stalin, why didn't you stop him?" Khruschev looked at him and said: "Who said that?" No hand went up. "Right," he said. "Now you know why." [Audience laughter]

Think about it. So it does take some courage. Non-management contexts are also a source of humour for the gurus. In these cases gurus produce humorous remarks that substantiate their management ideas without explicitly praising or disparaging managers or organisations. Although the gurus may imply that audience members, and managers in general, have failed to recognise the importance of the phenomena they describe, the gurus do not directly criticize them. In this way, the gurus minimise the risk that audience members will react negatively to their messages. Apart from bolstering the guru's ideas, these humorous remarks, like those discussed in the previous section, allow audience members to publicly empathise with the gurus without having to unequivocally align themselves with their propositions.

No managers or organisations

Nineteen per cent of all laughter occurs in response to gurus' jokes, quips or stories that communicate general theories without referring to managers or organisations. Goleman, for example, generally says little, if anything, about organisational practice and discusses the actions of individuals (including himself) in non-management settings. Senge, similarly, devotes long passages in his lectures to outlining the epistemological theory that underpins his views concerning organisational learning.

In one example, Goleman illustrates a pattern of interaction, which apparently leads to divorce, by depicting an exchange between an imaginary married couple.

Goleman: It goes like this. One of the partners has a grievance. Let's say it's the wife. And she doesn't express the grievance in an effective form of feedback…"You know, dear, sometimes when you leave your dirty clothes on the bedroom floor for me to pick up it makes me feel like you don't respect me, that you feel like I'm your maid or something and you know it doesn't make me feel so good. So I'd feel better if you picked up your laundry and put it in the laundry room yourself".

She doesn't do that. What she does do is wait till she's really steamed up…And she says: "You are the biggest slob I've ever seen in my life". [Audience laughter]

Now that's not feedback, that's a character attack. And if you're attacked, what's your natural response? You defend yourself. So he says something lame like "well I did it last Tuesday". Or he counterattacks, he gets defensive: "Well you left the dirty dishes in the sink".

Goleman uses humour to emphasise aspects of his theory. In the following extract, for example, he stresses the importance of humour as a means of relating positively to others by quoting an unnamed friend's humorous saying.

Goleman: So social skill is absolutely essential to dialogue, to being able to do this well. Humour, of course, is one of the great positives. As my friend says: "If you can't laugh about it it's just not funny any more". [Audience laughter]

In these contexts, humour and laughter operate in the same ways they do in relation to messages that are explicitly linked to organisational issues. The gurus' use of humour not only allows audience members to collectively empathise with a guru in the context of potentially unpalatable messages, it also enables them to do so without having to express agreement with the guru's ideas.

Gurus' shortcomings

Understandably, the gurus rarely risk undermining their own credibility by considering possible shortcomings in their own work. Even so, five per cent of the instances of audience laughter occur in situations in which the gurus refer to potential problems in their theories. In the following example, Senge accepts that a concept (infrastructure), which has been central to his theory about organisational learning, is inappropriate.

> Senge: So what infrastructure meant to us was how do you design an enterprise so learning isn't left to chance, so that people have the time for learning, people have the resources for learning, people have the occasion, that learning is part of working…I should have done this obviously about three years ago [but] I looked up the definition of the word infrastructure this morning. [Isolated audience laughter]

> Because many people have been telling me…for the last couple of years [that] this infrastructure doesn't quite kind of capture what you're talking about. My Webster's dictionary said "the permanent installations required for military purposes". [Audience laughter]

> We have organised a few conferences around this subject of learning infrastructures. I don't think we've ever included a dictionary definition, which was probably a bit of a shortcoming on our part. So you may have to suspend this word. We may have to find a better word. I do not mean the permanent installations required for military operations.

After summarising "what infrastructure meant to us", Senge indicates that there is a problem with his use of this concept. He says that he has looked up a dictionary definition of the term because people have been telling him for some time that the term doesn't "quite capture what [he's] talking about". He then reads out a dictionary definition that is clearly absurd in relation to his use of the term. This evokes collective laughter by audience members. Having treated the issue as humorous, Senge then addresses it in serious terms. The importance that Senge attaches to this issue is demonstrated by the fact that he returns to it when concluding his lecture and again treats it as a serious matter.

By treating shortcomings in their work as humorous, the gurus imply that they are in a position to take them lightly. By doing so, they propose that they do not regard the shortcomings to be of critical importance. And, by inviting laughter, they encourage the audience members to publicly ratify their treatment of the shortcomings in humorous terms.

By inviting audience laughter, they encourage audience members to ratify the guru's own humorous treatment of the issues in question. Again, this allows the gurus to deliver potentially problematic messages (in this case for them rather than audience members) in sympathetic contexts.

Setting up key messages

Ten per cent of cases of audience laughter are evoked by remarks gurus make while preparing to deliver key messages. In the following extract, Peters sets up a story about the poor service he received at a hotel by announcing that he is going to reveal to his audience "two personal habits" and in doing so evokes audience laughter.

> Peters: Now I will reveal to you two personal habits that are none of your damn business basically. [Audience laughter]
>
> One of them is that I do my writing by getting up about four o'clock in the morning and the second one is that if we had a physician at this conference he or she would probably be able to classify me as physiologically addicted to coffee.

Apart from the provision of entertainment and light relief, the use of humour in these contexts may both attract the audience's attention prior to the delivery of key messages and establish a relaxed context prior to the delivery of messages that could imply audience directed criticism. In addition, as the extract from the Peters' lecture shows, the humour may also address potentially problematic aspects of what follows. Thus the two personal habits to which Peters refers are that he gets up at four o'clock to write and that he is addicted to coffee. Having evoked laughter in response to his announcement that he is going to reveal these habits, Peters adopts a serious stance as he discusses them.

By eliciting laughter he has guarded against the possibility that he will be heard by audience members to be revealing habits that he regards as serious problems and encouraged the audience to publicly display, through collective laughter, that they are aware of this. In other words, Peters appears to use humour and laughter to nullify the potentially threatening aspects of revealing one's "personal habits".

The last laugh

Gurus invite laughter by indicating to audience members when laughter is appropriate and expected and, in most cases, then remain silent until the laughter either ends or begins to subside. The gurus largely evoke collective laughter in response to messages that convey their key ideas. These messages relate to audience-directed and, less commonly, guru-directed criticism that could alienate audience members and/ or undermine the guru's credibility. In addition to emphasising the unusual or absurd aspects of the state of affairs the gurus describe, their use of humour creates a sense of partnership as they convey or prepare to convey potentially controversial messages. In the context of guru-directed criticism, it also allows the gurus to propose that they regard potential flaws in their theories to be of little, if any, significance.

In contrast to applause, which usually represents a "purified expression of support", shared laughter allows audiences to empathise with speakers without having to unequivocally align with the positions they express. This may account, in part, for the fact that shared laughter occurs in a far greater range of public speaking settings than does applause. For, as in the case of the gurus, the ambiguous character of laughter allows speakers and their audiences to participate in positive interactions even when speakers are indirectly criticising audience members and some or all audience members disagree with the speaker's views.

Studies of humour and laughter in a variety of social contexts suggest that they may be used to mark the boundaries of social groups. It is unclear whether the gurus and their audiences can be classified or, more

importantly, would classify themselves as members of distinctive social groups. Indeed, part of the management gurus' mission is to recruit managers to such groups, whose boundaries are defined by reference to their members' affiliation with the gurus' theories. Nonetheless, our analysis suggests that humour and laughter may be associated with the generation of group solidarity and social cohesion during the gurus' lectures. By evoking and producing laughter, the gurus and audience members engage in public displays of consensus and "like-mindedness" and thereby constitute themselves as "in-groups" that share the same sense of humour in relation to the circumstances and events that the gurus describe.

Whether these publicly displayed group affiliations actually reflect audience members' commitment to the gurus' ideas and thus may extend beyond the life time of the gurus' lectures is, of course, open to question. Research on the relationship between humour and persuasion offers conflicting conclusions.

However, CA research on public speaking does suggest that the effective use of humour by gurus may have a positive impact on their ability to win and retain "converts". Certain rhetorical devices, when used effectively, attract and sustain audience attentiveness to what is being said and thereby contribute to the memorability of the speaker's messages. This is because the devices make messages stand out from surrounding speech and, in some cases, evoke audience responses that, in turn, heighten attentiveness and contribute to the prominence of the messages.

As we noted earlier, humorous messages stand out from their surroundings irrespective of whether or not other rhetorical devices are used. Moreover, just as applause enhances the prominence of preceding messages, so to do other forms of collective audience response, including laughter.

Given that speakers are unlikely to persuade audiences to empathise with their positions unless they sustain the attentiveness of their audience members, it seems likely that humour is one means through which gurus and other public speakers create the conditions necessary to win and retain converts.

Regardless of whether management gurus' use of humour makes them more persuasive, it is critical to understanding their success on the lecture circuit. It enables them not only to attract and sustain audience attentiveness but also to deliver potentially unpalatable messages in non-offensive ways. While managers may welcome exposure to ideas that question what they do, most will not wish to place themselves in situations in which they will be directly confronted.

By using humour and evoking laughter, the gurus reduce the likelihood of this happening and thereby enhance their reputations as highly effective and entertaining public speakers. This helps them to maintain their star status, even when the popularity of their ideas begins to wane.

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