Humour at the workplace: Leader's humour and employee's trust in the leader

Robinson, J[a]

[a]*Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka*

[a]robinson435@gmail.com

Abstract

Humour at the workplace has become an exciting area of research in organizational behavior and management. There is a lack of studies on the influence of the leader's humour on employee trust, particularly in the Sri Lankan context. This study aims to examine the impact of leaders' styles of humour (affiliate, self-enhancing, aggressive self-defeating) and its impact on employees' trust in their leader. The researcher adopted a quantitative approach to conduct this study. This study was conducted with 202 employees from public sector organizations. A convenience sampling method was adopted to recruit respondents. The proposed model was assessed by hierarchical multiple regression. Four personal and demographic variables were controlled in this study. This study indicated that the control variable has no significant influence on employee trust in their leader. Affiliate and self-defeating style of humour had a positive and negative influence on trust, respectively, as proposed. Nevertheless, unexpectedly self-enhancing and aggressive styles of humour had no significant influence on trust in the leader. This study contributes to the literature by investigating the influence of leaders' four humour styles on subordinate's trust in their leaders in a new, Sri Lankan cultural context. This study contributes to the management practice by identifying humour style that positively and negatively influences subordinates' trust in the Sri Lankan context. This study suggests that leaders can use more affiliate humour to create a positive work environment and enhance their subordinates' trust. Leaders are advised to avoid aggressive self-defeating humour in the workplace. Further studies need to be conducted with Moderator (e.g. gender) and mediator variable (e.g. emotions) to deepen the understanding of humor's influence on employees' work behaviour in Sri Lankan cultural context.
Keywords: culture, humor, leadership, Sri Lanka and trust

Introduction

Leaders' workplace behavior influence their subordinates' behavior and actions. Leaders' use of humour is an interpersonal activity of leadership. Leaders' use of humor can make the subordinates experience positive or negative emotions that may influence the subordinates' work behaviour. There are mainly four types of humour; affiliate (to enhance the relationship with others in a benign fashion), self-enhancing, (to enhance the self in a benevolent fashion) aggressive (to enhance the self detrimentally to others), and self-defeating (to enhance the relationship with others at the expense of

oneself) (Martin et al., 2003). Affiliate and self-enhancing humour are more positive. Aggressive and self-defeating humour is too pessimistic. Leaders engage in humour in particular ways. The influence of humour on employee's workplace behavior has been well documented (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015; Pundt & Venz, 2017). Leader' humour enhances the quality of the leader-member, affective organizational commitment, innovative behavior and performance.

Trust is a significant keystone in the workplace and social relationships. Trust can be defined as "the willingness to put oneself in a position of vulnerability to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will behave with one's interests in mind". Employees observe the nature, actions, and practices of their leaders to draw inferences about the nature of their relationship positively or negatively influence trust in leadership (Neves & Karagonlar 2020). Trustworthiness is an indication of the character of the trustee. According to Neves and Karagonlar (2020), trustworthiness is built around three characteristics (ability, benevolence and integrity). Karakowsky et al., (2020) found that leaders' affiliate humor influences trust in the leader.

Further, they highlighted that affiliate humor indicates benevolence because it reflects humility and reduces status differences between leaders and their teams. Like affiliative humour, self-enhancing humour reflects leaders' ability. Though it has an intrapersonal focus, it is a healthy defence mechanism (Martin et al., 2003). Self-enhancing humor also shows benevolence as it emphasizes the maintenance of a positive outlook. Aggressive and self-defeating humor make employees feel that the leader is not trustworthy (Karakowsky et al., 2020). Through aggressive humor leaders attempt to enhance the self at the expense of others. As leaders making jokes at the expense of others, it can be interpreted as a strategy to pass the blame to others). Self-defeating humor tells to subordinates that the leader may not have the capability and resources to look after their interests.

Though there are a few studies, focus on the relationship between leaders' humour and employee trust, there is no study in a Sri Lankan cultural context. Like many Asian countries, collectivism and high-power distance are the two significant cultural values in Sri Lanka. As humour and trust are related to cultural values, it is necessary to examine the influence of humour on trust in the leader in the Sri Lankan context separately. Also, examining the influence of humour on employee trust in the Sri Lankan cultural context is essential because it has practical implications for the leaders in the Sri Lankan context and extends the existing literature. Therefore, this study aims to identify the leaders' humour styles and its impact on employees' trust in the leader.

Methodology

This study relied on cross-sectional and self-reported data. 250 respondents who work in public-sector organizations in Sri Lanka have been invited to the survey. The researcher received surveys from 212 respondents. After the listwise deletion of the participants with missing questions, our final sample was composed of 202 (80 percent) responses. Male participants accounted for (58%) of the respondents. Hundred and three respondents, accounting for 50 percent, were married. Concerning age and working experience of respondents, their average age and working experience were 39.3 years and 10.7 years, respectively, with a standard deviation of 5.4 years and 4.4 years. The current study proposes the following four hypotheses:

H_1:   Affiliate humour positively influence employee trust
H_2:   Self-enhancing humour positively influence employee trust
H_3:   Aggressive humour negatively influence employee trust
H_4:   Self-defeating humour negatively influence employee trust

Before conducting the analysis, the data's accuracy was checked; no values outside the specified range were found, which means standard deviations and correlations appeared to be reasonable. Further, questionnaire non-responsive rate, item non-response rate, distribution of data and outliers were taken into account and appropriately treated. Partial least structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed for data analysis.

Indicator reliability was satisfactory; a loading of all variables with related factors was greater than 6.5. The CR and Cronbach's alpha for each construct were greater than the threshold value of 0.7, which indicates that the indicators together measure each construct sufficiently. Convergent was assessed through the average variance extracted (AVE). The AVE of each construct was larger than the threshold value of 0.5. All the scales were measured through Likert-type scales anchored in 1 totally disagree, and5 totally agree.

Measures

Researcher measured supervisor humor style with the Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin et al., 2003). The scale has 32 items, eight per dimension. Cronbach's alphas were 0.76 (Affiliative), 0.69 (Self-enhancing), 0.70 (Aggressive), and 0.72 (Self-defeating). Trust in the supervisor was measured with six items scale used by Neves and Caetano (2009). These are the highest loading items of the original interpersonal trust scale developed by McAllister in 1995. Cronbach's alpha of the current study was 0.78.

Results and Discussions

To test the four hypotheses (H_1–H_4), the researcher employed multiple regressions. Four personal and demographical variables were considered as the control variable of the study. In the first step, the four control variables (age, marital status, gender, and work experiences) were entered as a predictor of trust. In the second step, the four leaders' humour styles have been entered, and the results are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2 below:

Table 1. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.180a	.033	.009	1.44136
2	.665b	.442	.415	1.10766

The results indicated that control variables have no significant influence on trust. The four control variables together explain only a 3.3 % variance in trust. The humour styles explain 41.5% of the variance in trust in the leader.

Table 2. Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
Model 1	(Constant)	3.399	.962		3.532	.001
	Marital status	.346	.293	.092	1.180	.240
	age	-.015	.025	-.067	-.578	.564
	experience	-.020	.034	-.068	-.585	.559
	gender	.342	.221	.118	1.548	.123
Model 2	(Constant)	2.690	.881		3.053	.003
	Marital status	.182	.229	.049	.796	.427
	age	.001	.020	.004	.044	.965
	experience	-.023	.026	-.081	-.899	.370
	Your gender	.101	.175	.035	.576	.565
	Affiliate	.187	.062	.192	3.021	.003
	Self-enhancing	.161	.076	.154	2.121	.035
	Aggressive	.124	.079	.106	1.578	.117
	Self-defeating	-.420	.063	-.443	-6.705	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Trust

The results (model 2) indicated that only two styles of humour (affiliate and self-defeating) has significant influence on trust. Affiliate and self-defeating styles had a positive and negative influence in trust, respectively, as expected. Contrary to the expectation, self-enhancing and aggressive styles had no significant influence on trust.

Conclusions

The humour study in the workplace is still in an infant state, mainly if focused on leaders. The current study shows that different leader's humor styles carry
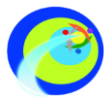
different consequences to employee behavior. This study empirically confirmed the positive and negative influence of affiliate and self-defeating humor styles on leaders' trust, respectively. These findings are consistent with the recent empirical findings (Neves & Karagonlar, 2020; Karakowsky et al. (2020). Previous studies (Neves & Karagonlar, 2020) found a positive and negative influence of self-enhancing and aggressive humor styles on trust, respectively. But the current study found that both of these two types of humour styles did not significantly influence trust. The unexpected results of this study could be because of differences in the cultural context. Like many Asian countries, collectivism and high-power distance are the two significant cultural values in Sri Lanka. Therefore, employees living in such a cultural context may perceive the leaders' self-enhancement humour and aggressive humor as part and partial of their day to day life.

This study extends the existing literature by investigating the influence of four humor styles on trust in a newSri Lankan cultural context. This study contributes to the practice by identifying culturally specific hummer styles that significantly influence trust, which is a significant predictor of many positive individual and organizational outcomes. Further studies need to be carried out to identify the influence of humour on employees' positive workplace behavior such as commitment, engagement, and citizenship behavior. Moderator (gender) and mediator variable (emotions) can be introduced to deepen the understanding of humor's influence on employees' work behavior.

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