

Use of Humour as a Coping Strategy in the Workplace during a Pandemic: A Malaysian Context

WONG SEOW CHEE^{1*}, DEWI A. SAPUAN^{2*}

^{1,2} School of Business Administration, Wawasan Open University, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: anniewongrea@gmail.com, dewisapuan@wou.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This research explores the use of humour by leaders and employees in their everyday work experience during a pandemic in Malaysia. To achieve this end, the study shall explore the nature of humour as a social phenomenon at the workplace. In times like these, organisations fighting to stay afloat oftentimes succumb to drastic measures such as pay cuts and worker retrenchment. By creating an inclusive environment through the use of humour to lighten the working atmosphere, both leaders and followers can maintain employee engagement especially when a business' going concern is at risk. Even with employees now gradually returning to work in offices, the working dynamics have certainly changed along with the shift in communication mode, from physical interactions to digital via online mode. Aside from the need to get accustomed to using technology for communication, interpersonal communication skills and other soft skills should also need to be relooked into how these might change. Employees who experience stress and anxiety especially during the current times of uncertainty needs to learn a more effective coping skill. Coping is a basic process integral to adaptation and survival, depicts how people detect, appraise, deal with, and learn from stressful encounters when working in the new "normal". Work colleagues can therefore also infuse some humour into their daily routine amongst themselves to liven up a tense work atmosphere as there is a high need for social support and a sense of security for work-life post-pandemic. The main research question in this qualitative research aims to solicit insights into the sense of humour being a newly essential leadership trait required to maintain workplace camaraderie and working dynamics. Using humour as a functional skill is not something new as psychological theorists such as Sigmund Freud, and Gordon Allport has studied relationships between humour and health, and well-being. In this qualitative study, phenomenology is used to examine participants' hidden meanings about their experiences. It shall also dig into how workplace context, culture and languages, and leadership style influence the functionality of humour in fostering a positive atmosphere. The use of memes and digital media which are in line with our growing dependency on technology and digital communication devices will also be examined. This study is delimited to the Klang Valley. Data will be collected using five focus group interviews. Each group consists of five inter-generational employees representing a specific organisation selected based on their differences in scale, origin, and sector. This selection design is made in anticipation of the differences in influences these factors may bring. In-depth interviews will subsequently be carried out with five leaders who hold strategic level positions to understand their position and perception of applying a sense of humour at work, and their own reality pertaining to work communication during the grim post-pandemic times. This research hopes to provide an emerging framework that illustrates how a sense of humour needs to be the new skill leaders must master to apply as workplace stress coping strategy.

Keywords: humour, leadership trait, post-pandemic, coping strategy