

Leadership and Humor

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Abstract

Cross-cultural leadership requires the ability to communicate concepts effectively across cultures. This paper seeks to explore the role humor plays in communications, how it applies to cross-cultural leadership, and if it is a skill that can be learned.....

Laughter

As noted by Provine (2000), the importance of the topic is demonstrated by those who have explored it including Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer, Darwin, Freud, and Bergson:

- Plato - laughter has a malicious element associates with the derision of inferiors.
- Aristotle - some tasteful laughter is desirable, but should not be used to discredit or control: *“what causes laughter is something ugly, but painful or destructive.”*
- Hobbes - laughter as victorious crowing of eminence over others: *“by comparison with the infirmity of others or with our own formerly.”*
- Kant - Provine quotes Kant *“laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of strained expectation into nothing.”*
- Schopenhauer - his Incongruity Theory that laughter arises for our ability to see the mismatches.
- Freud - enables people to tap the unconscious mind, and to relieve built up energy. A way to save what Provine calls psychic energy.
- Bergson - laughter is social, and loses its meaning outside the context of the group. It is a way of forcing compliance to group norms.

Provine looked at the empirical examination of laughter, and to the work of Lefcourt, Sordani et al (1974) who investigated the relationship between humor and locus of control. They found that *internalizers*, persons who feel in control of their destiny, used all types of humor. Whereas *externalizers*, persons who feel they are the victim of circumstance, tended to use superiority or tension relief forms of humor. Provine also reviewed the work done by others into the reasons people laugh:

- People of higher status make those of lower status the target of humor without reciprocation in a sociological study (Cosser 1960). This study also confirmed that 96% of the humor was initiated by the males.
- Ethnological studies show how people use laughter in a self humbling or effacing way. In southern India men of low casts giggle when addressing those of higher caste. As is the case with the Harijan in Tamil who may giggle, speak in incomplete sentences, mumble, and shuffle when walking.

Self-effacing behavior, and buffoonery, is practiced by the Bahutu in central Africa in the presence of caste superiors. Men and women of Tzeltal in Mexico and the Tamil use high-pitched voices to show deference because it is used by women and children and is thus viewed as less threatening (Brown and Levinson 1978).

In Provine's own work he measured the laugh episodes in social gatherings to determine differences in gender patterns and in speaker patterns. What he found is illustrated in Table 1 which we have modified. As the table shows speakers laugh more than audiences, and female speakers and audiences laugh more than their male counterparts. In general females are the leading laughers and males are the best laugh getters. Provine also found that most laughter is not a response to humor but sociality. He found that people laughed 30 times more often when in a group than when alone.

Table 1 - Laughter

Dyad	Episodes	Speaker % Laughing	Audience % Laughing
Speaker Male Audience Male	275	76%	60%
Speaker Male Audience Female	238	66%	71%
Speaker Female Audience Female	502	86%	50%
Speaker Female Audience Male	185	88%	39%
Total	1,200	80%	55%

Ziv (1984) organizes his book on humor on the following five functions of humor:

- It deals with the social taboos of aggression providing a socially acceptable outlet. Some believe all humor is aggressive. Higeit (1954) describes how Arabs in the Middle Ages would use satirists to compose *Hidja* (humorous poetry) before a battle. The satirist would be placed at the front line to ridicule the enemy. Rapp (1949) proposes the theory of humor as aggressive expression emerging from warfare where at the end of a battle the victor laughed, and the loser cried.

One example of aggressive humor to show intellectual dominance comes from Yiddish folk tales where Ostropotiev (the fool) provides the humor: *Mother sends Herschel Ostropotiev to buy matches. When he returns, she tries to light them, but to no avail. "What's this?" she says angrily, "All of the matches are duds." "How can that be?" answers Herschel. "I tested every one of them."*

Another example of superiority is reflected in the following humor: Bernard Shaw sent Churchill a ticket to the premiere of one of his plays with a note: *"I'd be glad to see you among the audience."* Churchill returned the ticket with a note saying *"I apologize for not being able to attend the premiere. I will gladly come to a later night, if there is one."* Shaw then sent him two

tickets for another evening and wrote, "I'll be glad if you come to the show accompanied by a friend, if you have one."

Cantor and William (1973) found that cartoons that showed the victims of humor were funnier if they held positions of authority. Or as Hobbes said "our need to feel superior is stronger when a person who possesses high authority and a higher position than our own is in question."

- It deals with the social taboo of sex providing a socially acceptable outlet for what Freud called sexual drive.
- It can serve to improve society through social criticism. It can be used to achieve social acceptance, to gain status, and to reinforce group cohesiveness. Lorenz (1963) claims that laughter denotes a situation of security in a group, and that danger is past. To illustrate consider the following joke: *"a man sees a group of long-term convicts who seem to be communicating very oddly. One of them says, "7," and they all burst into laughter. Another says "23," and they all explode into laughter. The observer notices that one convict does not laugh at every number as the others do. "What are they doing?" he asks. "They're telling jokes. But because they all know the jokes by heart, they have given each one a number." "So why don't you laugh like everyone else?" "I'm pretty new here and I only know the jokes from 15 to 23."*

Hyghet (1959) tells of an Eskimo tribe in which there are no written laws or courts. Justice is meted out on the basis of humor. In the center of the group, the defendant attacks his enemy in every possible humorous way. The plaintiff then responds, and whichever gains the greatest laughter wins.

Bergson's (1975) humor is educational, *"laughter is a social reaction which punishes and puts down deviant elements in man's behavior and in various events."* Educational in that it will presumably discourage similar behavior in the future to avoid punishment.

- To deal with anxieties as a defense mechanism. To illustrate this concept Freud (1905) described a circus clown who runs rapidly toward a shelf that is six feet tall in an effort to jump over it. Tension builds in the audience. When the clown reaches the wall he slows down and walks around the self. The resulting laughter releases the tension. Over 100 years ago, McDougall (1903) wrote that humor is not an expression of pleasure, but rather an immunization against situations that are unpleasant. It is a way to cope, and gives rise to so called black humor. One example of black humor: *"Before the battle a French soldier tells his comrade "there's nothing to worry about; we're sure to win. I heard the priest ask God to be on our side." "But the German priest did the same thing," his friend replies. "Really now! Since when does God understand German."*

In this same category is self disparaging humor. Humor that can deter aggressiveness, achieve appreciation, or to grapple with fear. Aggressiveness can be deterred or avoided by emphasizing a personal weakness and remove the motive for attack. Appreciation when the humor points out a personal frailty that is known by everyone to be present in other people as well. In dealing with fear, a person could show the ability to laugh about a weakness, and thereby minimize the feelings of fear about discussing it.

- To intellectually escape from rationality, and to experience enjoyment. As Ziv notes, children at the age of 4 months will laugh when tickled, and at the age of 8 months will laugh at a game of peek-a-boo. At the age of one year children will laugh when mother mimics drinking from a child’s bottle, or walks on all fours - the amusement that springs from incongruity. Ziv says that humor has a logic all its own, but to be appreciated one must be able to see the congruity in things, and must have what he calls *local logic* where absurdity can be accepted: A passenger asks the bus driver, “What time is it?” “Thursday,” replies the driver. “Oh, I should have gotten off at the last stop.” Ziv posits that one of the main motives for communicating a humorous message is to enjoy the enjoyment of others. By *local logic* he means the humor brings an explanation of the incongruity. We expect one thing but get something completely unexpected. However the unexpected must not be frightening.

Eysenck and Eysenck proposed a framework to consider the relationship between emotion and social appetite. A version of their work is shown in Figure 1. In fact the four basic personality types correspond to the types delineated by Hippocrates: yellow bile (choleric), blood (sanguine), black bile (melancholy), and phlegm (phlegmatic).

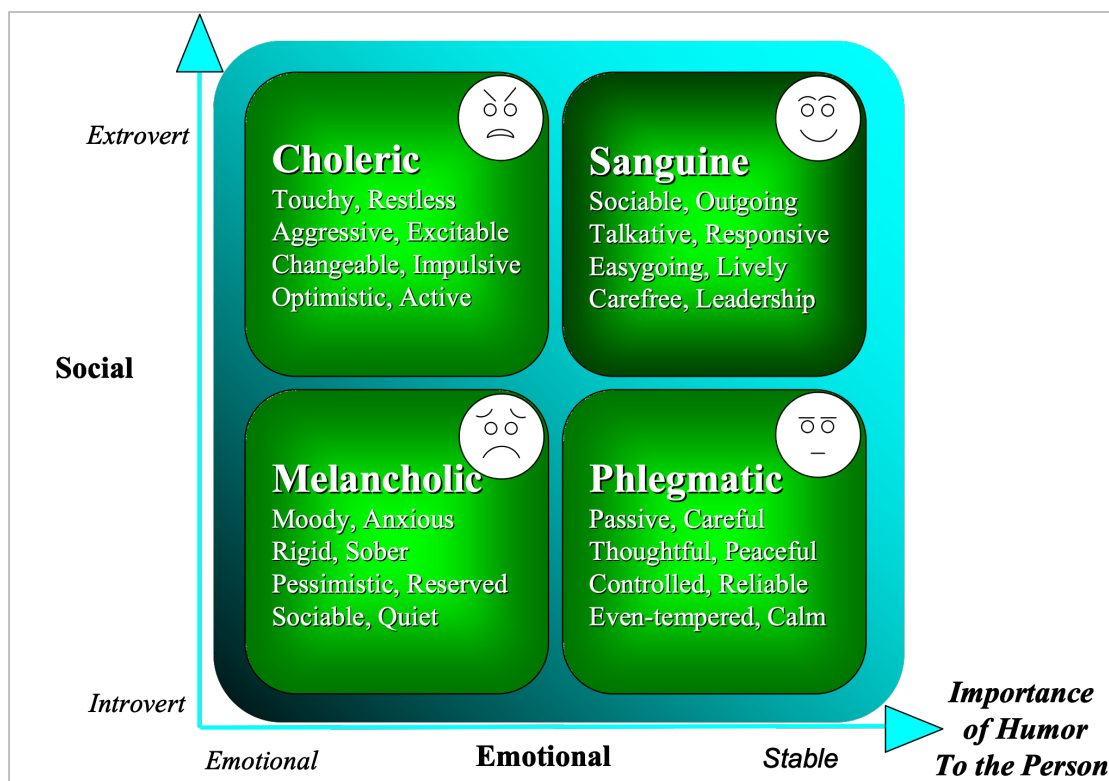


Figure 1 - Personality & Sociality

While on the issue of bile and blood, another view of the body as microcosm is provided from Chinese thinking by Yu (2003). He notes that the gallbladder plays an important role in Chinese customs:

- a. Wu-dan zhi ren shishi nan. (without-gall) “Everything appears difficult to people without gallbladder.”
- b. hun-shen shi-dan (whole-body is-gall) “be every inch a hero; be the embodiment of valor.”
- c. qige-tou bage-dan (seven-heads eight-galls) “extremely bold and not afraid of death.”
- d. gu-dan yingxiong (single-gall hero) “a lone fighter.”
- e. qun-wei qun-dan (crowd-might crowd-gall) “(display) mass heroism and daring.”

According to White (1987): “Proverbs are generally regarded as repositories of folk wisdom”

(p. 151). What folk wisdom does the example (a) display while literally it says that “people without gallbladder” should find it difficult to do anything they face? The idioms in (b-e) should provide some clues. In contrast to (a), (b) says that “the body of a hero is all gallbladder.” As in (c), those who are extremely bold and not afraid of death. While a lone fighter is called “a single-gall hero” (d), many people who together display mass heroism and daring are said to be “a crowd of might and a crowd of gallbladders” (e). So to be a leader you need gall.

Yu explains that the gallbladder is related to the liver which relies on the gallbladder for wisdom and judgment, and to the heart in making just decisions - the gallbladder as prime minister. He contends that the metaphor is in keeping with ancient Chinese philosophy, which advocates that man is an integral part of nature, and for Taoists that the body is a microcosm of the universe. This is not just a Chinese view either. Abraham Lincoln said “*It is an old and true maxim that “a drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall.”*”

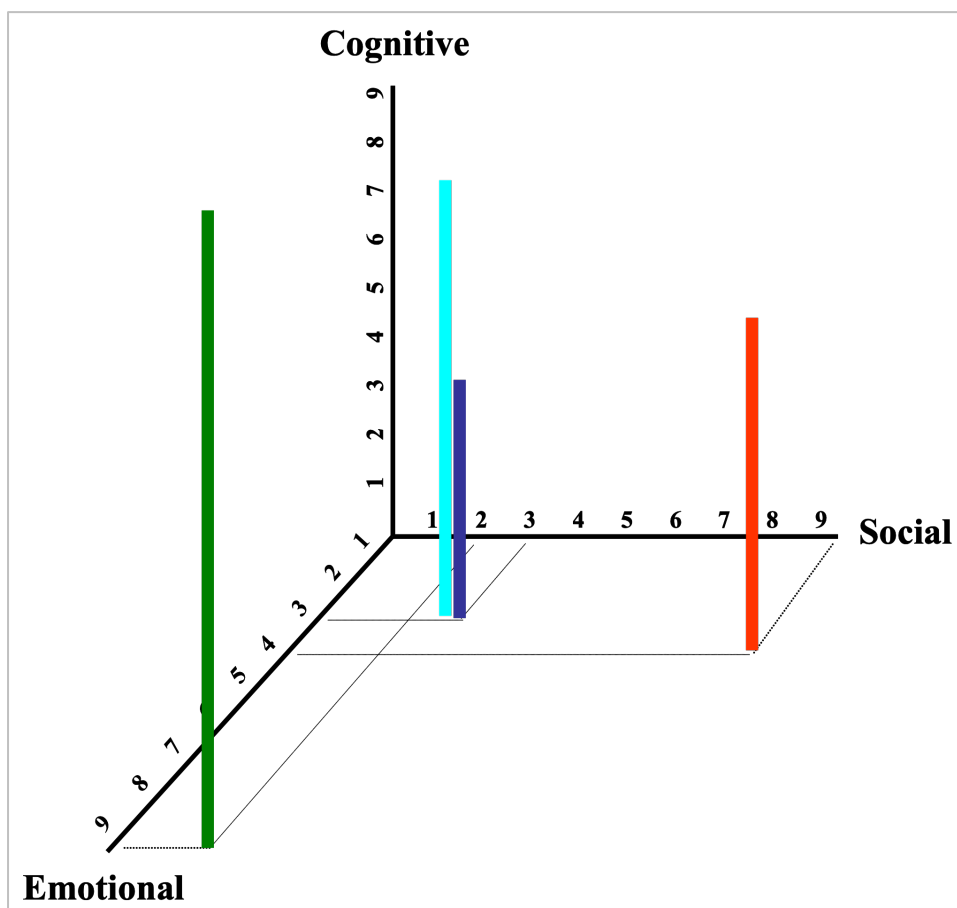
Ziv added the dimension of cognitive ability, or IQ to that proposed by Eysenck and Eysenck. He argues for example that a highly intelligent extrovert can easily become a leader, whereas with a low level of intelligence chances are that person will become a follower. Of course both depend upon their emotional condition as well, or their emotional intelligence (Goleman 1996) Goleman describes the concept of EQ to address issues that relate to the non-IQ aspects of personalities such as:

- Being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustration.
- Being able to control impulse and delay gratification.
- Be able to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think.
- Being able to empathize and to hope.

Ziv points out that no model of personalities can capture the diversity in the human population, and that people can have tendencies for all four quadrants shown in Figure 2. He observes that since humor flourishes in social groups, people that are extroverts will tend to enjoy humor more than introverts, and will consider it important to satisfy social needs. He also suggests that extroverts who are emotional will likely enjoy humor less because they may have more barriers. As shown in Figure 1, the importance of humor increases as the personality moves toward extroversion and stability. He notes however that there is also a hierarchy to humor with the social being the largest, followed by the emotional, and then the intellectual a long way behind.

Ziv codifies his ideas about the roots of humor and their relationship to humor by using the four personality types that we have discussed:

- Emotional Extrovert - humor permits this person to express aggression in an acceptable way, and to be accepted by the group. The intellectual function matters less. Rarely a person who would turn humor on themselves, and cannot understand why others would. A person that would find Charlie Chaplin more amusing than Woody Allen.
- Stable Extrovert - the social function of humor is central. Aggression is important in the enjoyment of humor, and the person likes practical jokes. Does not like black humor, but is self confident so can laugh at himself, and can approve of others who can do the same. This person also enjoys the playfulness of intellectual humor. A person that avoids laughing in inappropriate circumstances such as at an ethnic joke.
- Emotional Extrovert - does not enjoy humor as a rule, but aggressive humor appeals most often. This person would also enjoy social humor and black humor
- Stable Extrovert - enjoys intellectual humor and incongruity. This person enjoys aggressive or sexual humor if it is camouflaged and sophisticated.



Holland (1982) begins his work by quoting Horace Walpole who said *the world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel*. Holland, like Ziv, devotes a chapter to the humor in incongruity. He says that people laugh when they *are confronted with a cognitive incongruity*, like a statement that both confirms and denies the same proposition simultaneously. Ethical incongruity exists when people witness the contrasts

between the noble and contemptible or the sacred and the profane. Formal incongruity occurs when something harmful is presented harmlessly.

Holland proposes three archetype theories for comic rituals. The first is death and rebirth where a scapegoat is loaded with the sins of the community and then sacrificed, with tragedy is the death part. This form being used extensively from Shakespeare's use of the buffoon to the Honeymooners series for TV. The second is the feast which makes use of creating a topsy-turvy world for a short period of time. The third is the marriage of two dissimilar entities. Holland correlates the rich tapestry of literature that he analyzes into a defense, expectation, fantasy, and transformation (DEFT) matrix.

Davies (2005) explored the transferability of humor, or scripts. She believes that cultural context is not essential in understanding some humor. One example she provides is the stereotype the French uses to tell jokes about the Swiss being slow as follows:

- Un Suisse rencontre un ami. Soudain il se retourne et écrase du pied un escargot: - Pourquoi fais-tu ça? lui demande son interlocuteur
- J'en avais assez répond-il, cela fait trois heures qu'il me suit!
- A Swiss met one of his friends. While they were speaking he suddenly turned round and stamped on a snail.
- "Why did you do that?", asked his friend.
- "I'd had enough!", he replied, "he'd been following me for three hours."

Her point being that the joke is funny regardless of culture, but in some cultures, like Finland where slowness jokes are already told about the people of Tampere, there may be a greater level of instantaneous humor.

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Many European jokes depend on local ethnic scripts that by convention pin a comic characteristic on a particular ethnic group such as the canny Cardi in Wales, the slow Swiss in France, the stupid Belgian incessantly eating freedom fries in the Netherlands. How are such jokes to be translated into the language of another country with a different culture and comic conventions? Sometimes it is straightforward because similar jokes about the same group exist throughout Europe as with, say, jokes about cowardly Italians. In other cases there exists a similar set of jokes told about a local group so that, say, British jokes about the stupid Irish can easily be turned into jokes about Belgians, Ostfrieslanders, Gallegos, Pontians in the appropriate country. Problems arise only if a script is unique to one group or country, in which case the device of indirect explanation by internal conversation is used. One of the people in the joke reveals to another the nature of the script on which the joke depends, and thus the joke teller conveys the information to his audience without appearing didactic or giving too much away. It is fairly easy to convey implicit cultural assumptions in this way, far easier than it is translate a complex play on words. Language is far more idiosyncratic and arbitrary than culture. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

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The article discusses a study which attempt to assay one means by which persons might become better able to cope with evaluative experiences. Common sense would suggest that a person who customarily attributes cause for his misfortunes to external sources would be less defensive with regard to failure experience than a person who holds himself responsible for his fate. With but rare exception, persons who hold an external locus of control were found to alter their explanations for task performances on the basis of their outcomes more than

persons who held an internal locus of control. The most prominent finding in this study was the rather obvious readiness of internals to become mirthful in a provocative situation. Externals displayed less humor throughout the word association procedure. In contrast, field dependence failed to generate a single main effect or interaction and was therefore omitted from further discussion. Generally, the results suggest that internals are more apt to be amused by the discovery that they have been the object of a jest than are externals. These results may help to explain how internals can assimilate negative information without suffering increases in anxiety and/or depression.

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Yu, N. (2003). "Metaphor, Body, and Culture: The Chinese Understanding of Gallbladder and Courage." Metaphor & Symbol **18**(1): 13-31.

Studies an abstract concept (courage) which is understood through conceptual metaphor grounded in the body, but shaped by the culture-specific metaphorical understanding of an internal organ (gallbladder) inside the body. Belief of the Chinese in the function of the gallbladder in mental processes; Role of the gallbladder as cultural model for the concept of courage. ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR

According to the theory of internal organs in traditional Chinese medicine, the gallbladder has the function of making judgments and decisions in mental processes and activities, and it also determines one's degree of courage. This culturally constructed medical characterization of the gallbladder forms the base of the cultural model for the concept of courage. In the core of this cultural model is a pair of conceptual metaphors: (a) "GALLBLADDER IS CONTAINER OF COURAGE," and (b) "COURAGE IS QI (GASEOUS VITAL ENERGY) IN GALLBLADDER," which partly constitutive of the understanding of the gallbladder and courage in Chinese culture. A description and analysis of the data from the Chinese language show that numerous conventional expressions are systematically tied to each other and contributive to the underlying conceptual metaphors. The study presents a case in which an abstract concept (courage) is understood in part via a conceptual metaphor grounded in the body, but shaped by a culture-specific metaphorical understanding of an internal organ (gallbladder) inside the body. Although the human body is a potentially universal source domain for metaphors structuring abstract concepts, cultural models set up specific perspectives from which certain aspects of bodily experience or certain parts of the body are viewed as especially salient and meaningful in the understanding of those abstract concepts. ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR

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