

“Lighten Up Francis!:" A Serious Look at Humor and Leadership

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Abstract

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“Lighten Up Francis!” A Serious Look at Humor and Leadership

Gentlemen, why don't you laugh? With the strain that is upon me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do.

—President Abraham Lincoln¹

Before you read any further—particularly if *you* happen to be either a professional academic or a stoic—you have to promise *not* to stop reading after the next sentence.² This paper is about humor as an element of leadership—*Army* leadership. Easy-now...just take a knee, drink some water, and free your mind just a bit to take a brief journey that seriously examines humor as a leadership tool. That uniquely human activity that increases resilience, creativity, and trust while decreasing stress, fear, and power distance—qualities that are arguably the very antithesis of toxic leadership, a well-documented concern among senior Army leaders.³ Is it not curious then that despite these benefits, the word humor is mentioned a whopping zero times in more than 300 pages of current Army leadership doctrine?⁴ That beyond anecdotal discussions and the ubiquitous senior leader advice that having “fun” or a “sense of humor” ranks among the most important aspects of leading and serving in the Army, there is no thoughtful deliberation on the topic?⁵ Some dismiss any serious consideration of humor as a leadership or management tool as incompatible with organizational culture, a distraction from organizational purpose and productivity, and even downright irresponsible.⁶ Others dismiss the idea on the grounds that good leaders have an innate understanding of the value of positive humor and intuitively incorporate into their leadership style and day-to-day activities—*this isn't something that can or should be taught.*⁷ One is quick to realize that this is an area where contradictions run amok. Fortunately, given the ever-increasing and -convincing body of

research regarding the value of humor within the context of the workplace and leadership, the aforementioned and prevailing dismissive attitudes are slowly being eroded and replaced by a much more optimistic, curious, and practical approach to the subject.

To be clear, this paper is not suggesting that the artful use of humor will usher in a revolution in leadership affairs, but one cannot help wonder—is the Army missing a small but incredibly powerful element in leader development? Would leaders, both young and old, benefit from a deeper understanding of humor and how it might be deliberately used as just one leadership tool among many. And that gets to the primary purpose of this essay: to demonstrate that a leader’s deliberate use of positive forms of humor (i.e., *adaptive humor*—yes, that’s really a thing—and how could the Army not embrace that moniker?) result in tangible physical, social, emotional, and cognitive benefits that positively impact organizational climate, culture, and overall performance.⁸ In order to achieve this purpose, this paper begins by further establishing the contemporary relevance of studying humor in leadership, followed by a look at both the science of humor (review and cursory assessment of research), the art of humor (its practical application), and an examination of humor in the Army. This paper concludes with a modest recommendation concerning the re-introduction of the idea of humor as a leadership tool back into Army leadership doctrine.

Contemporary Relevance

When used appropriately, humor is a leadership tool that can affect both positive (amplifies) and negative (neutralizes) emotions associated with individual, team, and organizational performance.⁹ Using this basic idea, a brief examination of humor as an element of leadership clearly demonstrates the concept’s relevance and direct

relationship to two areas that continually receive much of the Army's attention: the concepts of mission command and organizational learning.¹⁰

Research indicates that humor is an important element in building and maintaining cohesive teams and mutual trust, both key components of mission command and, frankly, elements that make up the very bedrock of the Army.¹¹ This is accomplished through the use of positive forms of humor that enhance organizational performance by making group interactions less intense, ultimately facilitating the increase and maintenance of team cohesion. Further, activities associated with shared laughter serve to promote higher levels of group identification and, ultimately, increased levels of trust. Dan Goleman shares a story in his book *Primal Leadership* that illuminates this particular idea and effectively demonstrates the impact that even a modest application of humor can generate. As Goleman relates it—during a meeting of top management at a large retailer, a review of the market research data clearly indicated that the vice president for marketing had made a poor decision about a very large advertising buy. As the executives closely examined the data, it became evident to all involved that the marketing chief had made a mistake that cost the company dearly. “After a long, tense moment, the silence was broken by another executive in the room, who quipped, ‘Maybe you just didn’t have your glasses on.’ Everyone laughed.”¹² While there are certainly events that require a leader to respond negatively, directly, and sometimes harshly to a failure or misstep, in this circumstance, a positive response to a negative situation served to both acknowledge the error of the individual and facilitate a seamless transition to fixing the problem. No time or energy was wasted on

disagreement or arguing, the marketing chief's error was implicitly affirmed, and the team moved on with trust and cohesion intact.¹³

The second area involves the cultivation of a climate that encourages organizational learning, and more importantly, the characteristics of the leaders needed to establish such a climate. The Army aspires to be a learning organization and the Army Doctrinal Publication on Leadership explicitly states that Strategic leaders are at the forefront of this effort.¹⁴ Peter Senge, in his renowned book, *The Fifth Discipline*, describes learning organizations as having an environment where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.¹⁵ Such an environment demands an organizational climate that is characterized by openness to new ideas, a spirit of collaboration, and an output orientation. What does any of this have to do with humor and leadership? These same descriptive words were used by interviewees for a *Parameters* article entitled *Growing Strategic Leaders for Future Conflict* to describe what they considered to be successful senior leaders. And there was one other word used to describe these same successful senior leaders—humor. “Interviewees noted humor as a defining characteristic of their successful seniors, with one combatant commander seeing humor as helping leaders to embrace an ‘output orientation...through a spirit of collaboration’ driven by ‘social energy.’”¹⁶

The Science of Humor

In order to engage a meaningful discussion regarding the practical application of humor as an element of leadership, it is first important to establish a reasonable level of knowledge regarding humor (a reasonable level of knowledge of leadership is

presupposed and outside of the scope of this paper). To achieve this end, inclusive in the next few pages is a targeted review of the academic and scientific literature relevant to both the study of humor in general and the study of humor as an element leadership specifically. It is worth noting that the “shape” of the body of literature of humor research is very similar to that of leadership research: ever-evolving definitions and inherent difficulties in establishing a common definition; several broad, generalized, and overlapping theories; from theory, the distillation of individualized styles of employment; and mountains of analysis regarding the appropriate or inappropriate application and the associated benefit or harm. Accordingly, this literature review focuses on the following areas of research: (a) the definition of humor, (b) humor theories, (c) styles of humor, (d) benefits of humor, (e) humor in the workplace, and (f) criticisms of humor in the workplace. By the end of this section, you should have a general understanding of the scholarly approach to humor and, armed with that knowledge, should be able to begin forming an opinion about the theories and styles that could most benefit you and your organization. If not, you can break the promise you made on page one and stop reading.

Towards a Definition of Humor

Due to its enigmatic nature, there is very little agreement on an academic definition of humor. To begin with, lets consider what humor is not. Humor is not an emotion. If used correctly it certainly elicits emotion—the positive emotion of mirth.¹⁷ The scholarly dictionary definitions are not of much use for our purposes as they are very generalized and inclusive and ultimately convey that “humor is a broad term that refers to anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh.”¹⁸ John Morreall, a leader in the filed of humor research, argues that humor is

more than something that just makes us laugh. "Simply put, humor is liking the mental jolt we get when something surprises us. Or more simply, humor is enjoying incongruity."¹⁹ Here, the words 'like' and 'enjoy' are important qualifiers as there are, of course, surprises that we don't like or enjoy. Unenjoyable surprises are not to be confused with humor.

Humor Theories

In the study of humor, context is king.²⁰ The definition of humor cannot be fully understood until the circumstances of its use are established. Theory provides the necessary context. The study of humor has generated three broad and generally accepted theoretical perspectives: superiority theories, relief theories, and incongruity theories.²¹ Each of these perspectives are briefly discussed below.

Superiority theory is the oldest of the three. It can be traced back to the ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle but it was the writings of seventeenth century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes that advanced the theory and it is he who is generally credited with its modern development.²² Hobbes professed that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly...it is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over."²³ As Hobbes writings and the very name implies, within the context of this theory, humor is something one experiences at another's expense and is the gratification and enjoyment felt as a result of somebody else's misfortune. Needless to say, this is not considered a positive form of humor and superiority theories are considered negative in nature.

While superiority theory focuses on laughing at somebody else's expense, relief theory is based on the premise of laughing in relief of some sudden change in one's own circumstances, focusing on humor, and specifically laughter, as simply a release of nervous or repressed energy.²⁴ Famed neurologist Sigmund Freud and the popular English philosopher Herbert Spencer have been the most influential thinkers in this particular niche of humor study.²⁵ In simple terms, this theory purposes that individuals mentally prepare for an event to occur and fully invest for that specific set of circumstances. However, when a surprise stimulus enters and significantly alters the expected outcome of an event, laughter ensues to relieve the energy that was already invested for an outcome that never came to fruition. The change is a welcome relief and the humor enables one to quickly diffuse excess or nervous energy that is no longer needed. Relief theories are generally viewed as a neutral in nature.

That brings us to the final, most recent, and most popular theoretical perspective of humor—incongruity.²⁶ Similar to relief theory and unlike superiority theory, this notion of humor is not predicated on feeling better than someone else. “Incongruity theory, as relative to the concept of humor, is based on the idea that a laughter response associated with a humorous exchange requires the individual perception of difference in a situation or event that in turn provokes a pleasant and sudden psychological shift of emotions.”²⁷ Essentially, this is humor generated as an enjoyable or pleasant response to an unexpected circumstance. Incongruity theories are generally viewed as positive in nature.

Humor Styles

It wasn't until 2003 that researchers developed a peer-reviewed and accepted method for categorizing and measuring humor effects and distinguishing those effects

as positive (adaptive) or negative (maladaptive)²⁸. Humor was divided into a “2X2 approach to include two vectors; ‘to oneself or to others’ and ‘beneficial or detrimental.’”²⁹ This eventually led to the development of four humor styles: self-enhancing, affiliative, aggressive, and self-defeating.³⁰

Both self-enhancing humor and affiliative humor styles are considered positive in nature and, as such, are commonly referred to as adaptive forms of humor. The self-enhancing humor style, as the name implies, is focused inward and is concerned with strengthening one’s self-confidence. Individuals that use this style are characterized as having a humorous attitude toward life. “When they deal with stress or difficulty, they inspire themselves through humor and maintain their positive awareness.”³¹ While hosting the *The Daily Show*, John Stewart frequently employed self enhancing humor through making statements such as “maybe I just don’t understand...” or “I’m not the brightest guy....”³² The affiliative humor style is focused on others and is typified by positive social interaction. “It is like a lubricant that can easily ease out interpersonal strangeness and nervousness and instill enthusiasm.”³³ The boardroom vignette from Dan Goleman’s book cited earlier in this paper is illustrative of the affiliative humor style. Simply put, these two styles that make up the adaptive form of humor focus on maintaining one’s sense of humor and using humor to create a positive experience for others.

At the other end of the spectrum is the maladaptive form of humor, consisting of the aggressive and self-defeating humor styles. Aggressive humor finds its roots in the superiority theory and is characterized as negative and detrimental to others. Ridicule, sarcasm, and teasing to put other people down are common techniques used in this

style.³⁴ This is also the style of humor that is most often associated with the promotion and promulgation of discrimination and sexual harassment. Popular culture is wrought with examples of aggressive humor—think Andrew Dice Clay at Madison Square Garden in the early 1990s—and, frankly, this is likely the reason for much of the apprehension related to using humor as a leadership tool.

Self-defeating humor is also negative in nature but is detrimental to oneself. In this style of humor, “The speaker appears to be over derogatory to himself/herself in order to impress others.”³⁵ The late comedian Rodney Dangerfield is an example of someone using self-defeating humor by frequently making himself the butt of his own jokes, frequently reminding his audience, “I don’t get no respect.” While maladaptive humor is generally considered ill-suited as a leadership tool, there are those that argue that used appropriately, self-defeating humor is effective at shortening the power distance in an organization, should this be a desired outcome.³⁶

Benefits of Humor

Moving from the abstract concepts of theory, form, and style, this portion of the literature review focuses on the tangible benefits of humor. While this is an area of relative recent study, there is an impressive amount of literature that suggests numerous and significant benefits of humor, particularly adaptive humor. This paper mirrors the majority of the scholarly work in this area and categorizes the benefits of humor into four areas: physical, emotional, cognitive, and social.

There are numerous claims that humor and laughter can have positive effects on one’s physical well-being, to include the immune system, blood pressure, heart disease, pain tolerance, illness symptoms, and longevity. However, these claims are generally supported with anecdotal evidence and lack rigorous empirical research in order to

demonstrate consistency and conclusiveness.³⁷ One notable exception is in the area of pain tolerance where evidence strongly suggest that positive emotion generated through humor does result in an increased tolerance of pain.³⁸ Pain tolerance aside, what is clear is that the physical benefits of humor are just beginning to be understood. This is an area that will certainly benefit from continued interest and study across several disciplines in the medical field.

Contrastingly, the relationship between emotional well-being and humor has been demonstrated in numerous experiments and is undeniable.³⁹ Specific emotional benefits include increasing positive moods; reducing stress, anxiety, and tension; countering depression; and generally enhancing resilience. This was clearly demonstrated in study including over 300 repatriated Vietnam prisoners of war. Researchers were puzzled that thirty years after the war, these men displayed very few medical, social, and psychological problems—

How can this be when other groups in history who have experienced captivity have often shown extreme aftereffects? The answers are varied and complex, but one thing seems clear. The Vietnam prisoners of war had a system that worked, a system for human connection based on control and grounded in the effective use of humor.⁴⁰

Cognitive function and humor is another area where the literature strongly suggests a positive relationship.⁴¹ One prominent researcher argues that humor facilitates mental flexibility—as opposed to mental rigidity—that manifests in a laundry list of abilities that could be re-tooled into an Army Operating Concept word search puzzle: the ability to quickly shift perspectives; a higher tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty; novel approaches to complex problems; increased ability to adapt to change; a higher tolerance for risk-taking; the ability to freely move between practical and non-practical thinking; and improved ability to learn from mistakes.⁴² Furthermore,

“There is considerable evidence that exposure to humor affects other cognitive processes, particularly memory and creativity.”⁴³ People remember more when the message includes some degree of adaptive humor.⁴⁴ And there is a strong connection between humor and creative thought processes of divergent thinking, reframing, and the ability to drop restrictive assumptions.⁴⁵ Who wouldn’t want some of that?

Finally, we come to the social benefits of humor of which the literature identifies three major areas: individual and team bonding, increased interpersonal competencies, and improved communication. Several studies indicate the value of humor in establishing and maintaining relationships (i.e., bonding) citing that “humor is a social activity that bonds individuals and groups together and unites them”⁴⁶ and that humor is essential in forging and strengthening interpersonal relationships.⁴⁷ Concerning increased interpersonal competencies, studies suggest that appropriately using humor positively effects one’s perceived gregariousness, fosters healthy relationships, and “generates and increases trust and respect among individuals and between leaders and followers.”⁴⁸

To summarize, there is strong evidence that the use of adaptive forms of humor result in benefits in the emotional, cognitive, and social contexts. The most questionable and unclear area of study involves the physical benefits resulting from humor. What is clear is that all of these areas are ripe for additional research to advance understanding and potential applications. Next, we’ll explore what the literature says about how a leader might put this knowledge to work! (pun intended).

Humor in the Workplace

The traditional American view of work—heavily influenced by her founders’ Puritan work ethic and, later, Fredrick Taylor’s scientific management principles—is that

work is serious business and requires “discipline, unquestionable obedience to authority, and full concentration on one task at a time.”⁴⁹ The associated logic trail goes something like this: humor is a form of play, and play is the opposite of work, therefore humor has no place at work. It is only within the past two decades that “there has been considerable interest in the potential benefits of increasing the amount of humor that occurs in the workplace.”⁵⁰ Very visible examples of this attitudinal shift include the explosion of corporate “humor consultants” and the prolific publication of business advice books and articles concerning humor in the workplace.⁵¹

Less visible, but much more relevant to gaining a true understanding of the topic, is the extensive work that is being done by serious researchers and academics. Research strongly suggest that humor in the workplace can have many positive effects. Among these are increased employee morale, improved communication, relief of tension, stress management, increased team cohesiveness, and improved working relationships. Unsurprisingly, these positive effects of humor in the workplace mirror what other studies have indicated as benefits from the use of humor in general, as already discussed earlier in the literature review. It is, however, important to note, that in the context of the workplace, these findings are based largely on qualitative studies conducted by sociologists and anthropologists. Humor researcher and Psychologist Dr. Rod Martin notes that, “Indeed, very little psychological research of any kind has been conducted on the general topic of humor in the workplace” and that “this is a potentially fruitful domain for industrial-organizational psychologists to explore.

While the literature reveals many proponents and favorable research for the use of humor in the workplace, it reveals just as many critics, also armed with strong

arguments and research data. The primary criticism is rooted in the paradoxical nature of humor and the associated largely destructive and subversive aspects of maladaptive humor. In a very practical sense, for every benefit and advantage of the positive use of humor noted in the literature, there is a corresponding destructive effect that can be elicited through its negative use. As noted previously, maladaptive humor—negative humor that is detrimental to others or oneself—is generally viewed as unproductive in the workplace and often manifests as disrespect, sexual harassment, bullying, and discrimination.⁵² It is no coincidence that this likely conjures up visions of toxicity. And just as good leaders must guard against actions that may result in organizational toxicity, they must also guard against the use of maladaptive forms of humor.

Humor and Leadership

Despite broad agreement that the study of humor “has the potential of providing significant insights into management and organizational behavior” there is still surprisingly little research in this area.⁵³ Based on the work that has been done, it seems clear that when it comes to humor and leadership, there are two primary areas the leaders should be aware of in order to facilitate organizational realization of at least some of the benefits of humor previously outlined. First, given both the aforementioned paradoxical nature of humor coupled with the certain presence of humor in the workplace, leaders must work to intentionally establish a climate that encourages the adaptive form of humor and discourages maladaptive forms. As Martin eloquently states:

Since humor is already ubiquitous in the workplace, serving many different functions and reflecting the social structures and power dynamics of the organization, the task for managers seems to be not so much to increase the level of fun and laughter, but to understand the meaning of the humor that already exists and to attempt to channel it in productive directions.⁵⁴

Second, leaders must at least be aware that using the adaptive form of humor—displaying a positive sense of humor—is a powerful communication tool that can unleash many of the benefits of humor. Additionally, studies suggest “that supervisors who are perceived as by their subordinates to have a positive sense of humor also tend to be viewed as effective leaders” and that subordinates who “rated their supervisors as being high in sense of humor also reported greater job satisfaction and rated these supervisors as having generally more positive leadership characteristics compared to participants who rated their supervisors as low in sense of humor.”⁵⁵

The Art of Humor

Taken in its entirety, the body of literature offers compelling evidence that humor can be an effective element of leadership. Perhaps even more compelling are the countless practical examples of incredibly prominent and greatly admired leaders who effectively and frequently wielded humor as a leadership tool. While largely difficult to discern whether or not these leaders appreciated the science of humor, they nonetheless appreciated and understood the value of its artful application.

This paper began with an epigraph quoting our 16th President as he finished reading aloud a humorous story and, at its conclusion, laughing heartedly in front of his assembled cabinet.⁵⁶ In doing so, Lincoln was demonstrating and reminding all present of the importance of maintaining a sense of humor. This particular meeting occurred on September 22, 1862, less than a week after the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest one-day battle of the American Civil War. Furthermore, this was no ordinary cabinet meeting. After making the aforementioned remarks, the President somberly presented his Proclamation of Emancipation, which it approved and Lincoln would issue later that day. The context of Lincoln’s actions and statements make this vignette even more

powerful and illustrative. “The incongruity of the comic with the solemn on this historic occasion epitomized the action of humor in Lincoln’s character and politics.”⁵⁷

George Washington, perhaps our most famous President and widely celebrated Army leader, frequently yet unassumingly, demonstrated a mastery of the art of humor in leadership. Despite his largely stoic and formal public image, multiple sources—including close friends, associates, and direct reports—saw a much lighter and more human side. Washington “not only relished wit and humor in others, but displayed no inconsiderable share of them himself”⁵⁸ and was further described as having “a pleasant smile and sparkling vivacity of wit and humor.”⁵⁹ While there are numerous examples of Washington’s use and appreciation of humor, his actions to resolve the Newburgh conspiracy clearly stand out.

In March 1783, near the end of the Revolutionary War, discontent over a lack of pay and allowances spread among officers of the Continental Army in their winter quarters in Newburgh, New York.⁶⁰ Their displeasure grew to the point that they petitioned Congress and threatened disobedience if their grievances were not satisfactorily addressed. Washington, alarmed at the situation and recognizing the need to quickly quell the unhappiness, called a meeting to address the officers. He went on to give a very eloquent and moving speech, but it was a modest use of humor—a casual, light-hearted comment—that completely changed the mood of the gathering and facilitated resolution:

In explaining the country’s dire financial difficulties, he read aloud a letter written by Joseph Jones, a congressional delegate from Virginia. Washington struggled to read this densely written text, which did not make for scintillating specifying. He pulled his spectacles out from his pocket to read more easily. As he did so, he casually commented to the crowd, “Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service and

now find myself growing blind.” The aside profoundly moved his audience and dissipated the tension. After Washington left the room, the officers reasserted their loyalty to Congress and entrusted the general to negotiate with that body on their behalf. The so-called Newburgh conspiracy was over.⁶¹

The Newburgh conspiracy, similar Goleman’s story about the retail executive meeting that was shared earlier in this paper, provides an illustrative example of how even a modest use of humor can generate an incredibly powerful effect. In both instances, the artful use humor generated a positive response to a negative situation. Furthermore, it served to both acknowledge the gravity of the situation, facilitate a seamless transition to a solution, and most importantly, do so while keeping the team and trust intact.

These are just two simple examples of the power of humor in leadership and how its artful use can unleash significant benefit. Even a perfunctory research effort reveals numerous germane examples of prominent leaders that artfully employed humor to great effect throughout their professional lives. Some notables include heads of state (Winston Churchill,⁶² John F. Kennedy,⁶³ Ronald Reagan⁶⁴), business leaders (Thomas Edison⁶⁵ and Herb Kelleher⁶⁶), and legendary Army leaders (Eisenhower,⁶⁷ Patton,⁶⁸ Powell⁶⁹). It is this last category, Army leadership—and its relationship with humor—that is further examined in the next section.

Humor and the Army

Humor and the Army have a long-standing and complex relationship. Even American popular culture reveals many examples. Among them are familiar titles: *Kelly’s Hero’s*, *M.A.S.H.*, *Beatle Baily*, *Catch 22*, *Hogan’s Hero’s*, *1941*, *The Pentagon Wars*, *The Men Who Stare at Goats*, and—of course—the quintessential military comedy *Stripes*, from which a borrowed line serves as the title of this paper. But beyond

these romanticized fictional examples, there lies a real and distinct historical record of humor in the Army that is worth deeper study.

While certainly not without critics regarding his research methods, it is indisputable that S. L. A. Marshall observed many noteworthy Army leaders first hand—both as a soldier and later as an official Army historian—over the course of five decades and four wars (both World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam).⁷⁰ A prolific writer, he published over thirty books on warfare and leadership. Among Marshall's observations:

To speak of the importance of a sense of humor would be futile, if it were not that what cramps so many men isn't that they are by nature humorless as that they are hesitant to exercise what humor they possess. Within the military profession, this is as unwise as to let the muscles go soft or to spare the mind the strain of original thinking. Great humor has always been in the military tradition.⁷¹

This tradition is further highlighted in the work of Army Major General Aubrey “Red” Newman. Newman, a recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross and immortalized in a popular historical U.S. Army print *Follow me* that depicts the amphibious assault of Leyte island during World War II, authored a series of books on leadership after he retired.⁷² The book series—Follow Me I, II, and III, sharing the title of the famous print—recounts timeless leadership lessons gleaned largely, but not exclusively, from Newman's personal experiences in the Army. On just the second page of the first chapter of the first book, Newman relays the following story, demonstrating a leader's use of humor to diffuse an otherwise awkward situation:

Like the time that a colonel was walking his dog on one of the Army's posts. As he passed a major general's house, the general invited the colonel in for a drink, saying, 'Bring your dog in too.' In the house the colonel found another guest, a lieutenant general. As the colonel took a sip from his drink, his dog lifted a leg and wet the trouser leg of the host major general. In the resulting embarrassed silence the colonel said, 'I'm very sorry, but Bowzer has never done that before. Maybe all these stars around make him nervous.' Whereupon Bowzer waddled over, lifted a leg,

and gave the lieutenant general's trouser leg a couple squirts too. Before the mortified colonel could think of what to say the lieutenant general said: 'Colonel, your pooch needs instruction in military courtesy because he treats me just like he does major generals. Tie him outside, and we'll have one for the road when you get back.' That was a special situation, which was met with easy courtesy by the lieutenant general. It illustrates the fact that an element of human understanding and consideration for others is an all-pervading factor in military life.⁷³

Commensurately, the themes of humor and humility pervade Newman's work, and he astutely recognizes that "humor is an effective but tricky technique in command and leadership, beneficial when used wisely and with skill, but it can backfire into a dangerous booby trap if overworked or crudely employed."⁷⁴ He further states that "in life and in love, as in war and in apple-polishing, there is no detailed book of instructions on how to use humor in all situations."⁷⁵

Pete Blaber, a former operations officer and squadron commander in the Army's storied Delta Force, provides a more contemporary perspective. In his book, *The Mission, the Men, and Me*, Blaber offers several guiding leadership principles that he internalized while leading elite special operations forces in Afghanistan. Among these lessons: "Make no mistake about the importance of humor and imagination in combat."⁷⁶ Blaber argues that humor is an incredibly effective leadership tool—facilitating imaginative and creative approaches to problem solving—in even the most elite unit in the Army.

Keeping these illustrative historical references, anecdotes, vignettes in mind, it is fascinating to review the Army's official position on humor in leadership. While current Army doctrine doesn't even mention humor, it is interesting to note that this has not always been the case. Department of the Army Pamphlet 22-1, *Leadership*, published in December 1948, under then Chief of Staff of the Army General Omar Bradley's

signature block, explicitly addresses both the negative and positive aspects of humor in leadership. While it cautions heavily against the use of sarcasm, irony, profanity (providing an exception, however, for “men whose use of profanity is so habitual that it is recognized as entirely impersonal”), and excessive “wisecracking”—inferably, negative humor—it encourages the use of positive humor:

Any wise leader will know that in some circumstances a certain amount of joking and wisecracking is what the situation calls for. When there is discouragement in the air, when exhausted troops must be called upon for another effort, a flash of humor helps greatly. It tends to give confidence in times of stress, even in the midst of the most confused and strenuous combat. Indeed it is often the American way of implying sympathy and understanding and even cooperation in the midst of difficulty.⁷⁷

The idea of humor as an element of leadership also found its way into the *Army Leadership* manual published in 1999, Field Manual (FM) 22-100. The importance of a sense of humor is addressed in two separate areas dealing with direct leadership actions. Army leaders are reminded “that optimism, a positive outlook, and a sense of humor are infectious” and invaluable in dealing with adversity and unpopular decisions. The manual goes on to assert that “despite the pressure of too much to do in too little time,” effective leaders “keep their sense of humor and help those around them do the same.”⁷⁸

Recommendation

Given the history of humor in Army leadership doctrine, the long standing traditions of humor in the military, the demonstrated effectiveness of the artful application of humor in leadership, and the increased understanding of the benefits associated with the adaptive form of humor, it is clearly time to bring the idea of humor as an element of leadership back into the pages of Army leadership doctrine. The

purpose of which can and should be relatively simple with the following limited and achievable objectives:

1. Define and discriminate between adaptive and maladaptive forms of humor—encouraging use of the former and discouraging use of the later.
2. Convey the potential benefits and risks of using humor as a leadership tool—linking applicable benefits to other important Army concepts such as the mission command philosophy (specifically the development and maintenance of trust and cohesive teams), resiliency, and critical and creative thinking.
3. Reinforce the enduring and demonstrated importance of maintaining a sense of humor as an Army leader through one or two meaningful vignettes. An example of one such vignette is this brief and descriptive account from the late Paul Malone III. Malone was a highly regarded Associate Professor and Assistant Dean of George Washington University, a retired Army Colonel, a decorated Vietnam War veteran, and a graduate of the Army's premiere leadership course—Ranger School.⁷⁹

I recall the incident vividly even today. The setting was the U.S. Army Ranger course—an experience designed to simulate the rigors of combat. Our class of Ranger trainees had just completed a 60-hour patrol. The patrol had gone poorly. Critiques by the Ranger School instructors had been extremely harsh. We were all utterly exhausted and miserable, without sleep for almost three days and caked with mud of waist-deep swamps. Our only desire was for rest. To our collective disbelief and anguish, we received the order: “Prepare immediately for another patrol.” Our sullen group moved slowly into the briefing area. The briefer, a Ranger School instructor, appeared at the map-board. To us, he was the enemy. His every word described further demands on our exhausted minds and bodies. But then, something happened. Skillfully integrated into his briefing came a joke—slightly off-color, not particularly funny, but appropriate to the situation. Something almost magical occurred. Slowly at first, the bedraggled group of trainees responded into what developed into a full minute of hilarious laughter. Suddenly, the environment changed: the Ranger instructor became a fellow man, not a torturer; the men who had laughed together became a team with a revitalized common cause; for at least a while, the exhaustion and discomfort of the group were forgotten. The skillful use of humor produced a pronounced positive effect on the behavior of some 130 people. I have watched for additional similar examples in my professional life. Sadly, they have been few and far between.⁸⁰

In this simple and eloquently communicated example, Malone manages to simultaneously capture the essence—both the power and largely elusive nature—of humor as a leadership tool. Additionally, he conveys these messages in a timeless, easily understood, and highly-relatable fashion that likely resonate with Army leaders, regardless of age or station in career.

The modest objectives outlined above can be easily and clearly conveyed through the relatively modest investment of two or three pages of text in the Army's leadership doctrine publications. Again, these recommendations are not intended to revolutionize Army leadership. They are simply offered as an effort to increase awareness, spark discussion, and foster a deeper understanding of humor as an effective and accessible leadership tool and establish the concept as an additional element of consideration in the development of leaders.

Conclusion

A leader's deliberate use of adaptive humor is a very powerful leadership tool. The science of humor (collective body of research) strongly suggests that humor can produce tangible benefits in the emotional, cognitive, and social contexts. It also suggests that the positive use of humor in the workplace can increase employee morale, improve communication, relieve tension, reduce stress, and increase team cohesiveness. Beyond the science is the art—the practical application of humor in leadership—its utility powerfully demonstrated by two of America's greatest leaders, Presidents Washington and Lincoln.

While there is still much about the relationship between humor and leadership that is not fully understood, it is clearly a concept that merits deeper thought and deliberation among Army leaders. If nothing else, perhaps after reading this paper, the

next time a senior leader mentions the importance of having fun or maintaining a sense of humor, it will take on a slightly deeper meaning than it had in the past. And who knows, someday, he or she may even be able to reference Army leadership doctrine when giving that advice.

Endnotes

¹ Lincoln prefaced a discussion of an Emancipation Proclamation draft with a reading from one of his favorite humorists. He made this statement in response to some Cabinet members' disapproval. Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 97.

² This statement acknowledges the novel nature of the idea of humor as an effective leadership tool and provides generalized examples of groups most likely to dismiss the notion. For more information on the Stoic view of humor, see *Epictetus, Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, trans. Robin Hard (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 299. For an illustrative article on the prevailing attitude regarding humor in academia, see Adam Ruben, "Why I Don't Use Humor in Scientific Presentations," *Science Online*, October 2015, <http://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2015/10/why-i-dont-use-humor-scientific-presentations> (accessed December 29, 2015).

³ These impressive benefits derived from the use of humor were drawn from multiple sources. For more information on Humor and: increased resilience, see Linda D. Henman, "Humor and Resilience: Lessons from the Vietnam POWs," <http://www.henmanperformancegroup.com/articles/humor-resilience.pdf> (accessed December 15, 2015); increased creativity, see J.C. Lang and C.H. Lee, "Workplace Humor and Organizational Creativity," *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 2, no. 1 (2010): 46-60; increased trust, see J.R.P. French and B. Raven, "The Bases of Social Power," in *Studies in Social Power*, ed. D. Cartwright (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1954) 529; decreasing stress and fear, see Rod .A. Martin et al., "Humor, Coping with Stress, Self-concept, and Psychological Well-being," *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 6, no. 1 (1993): 89-104; decreasing power distance, see Li-Hsing Ho et al., "Influence of Humorous Leadership at Workplace on the Innovative Behavior of Leaders and Their Leadership Effectiveness," *African Journal of Business Management* 5, no. 16 (August, 2011): 6677; Greg Jaffe, "Army Worries About 'Toxic Leaders' in Ranks," *The Washington Post Online*, June 25, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-security/army-worries-about-toxic-leaders-in-ranks/2011/06/25/AGThw4kH_story.html (accessed March 10, 2016).

⁴ This page count is derived from the Army's current leadership doctrine publications which have a combined total of 318 pages and include the following: U.S. Department of the Army, *Army Leadership*, Army Doctrinal Publication 6-22 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, August 1, 2012), 26 pages; U.S. Department of the Army, *Army Leadership*, Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 6-22 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, August 1,

2012), 104 pages; U.S. Department of the Army, *Leader Development*, Field Manual 6-22 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, June 30, 2015), 188 pages.

⁵ This comment is based on the author's personal experience and observations over the course of twenty-four years in the Army. This includes his experiences at the U.S. Army War College during academic year 2016 where comments about the importance of having fun and maintaining a sense of humor, as well as the actual use of humor during by senior leaders (three and four star general officers), were notably present during nearly every such lecture.

⁶ Paul B. Malone III, "Humor: A Double-Edged Tool for Today's Managers?" *Academy of Management Review* 5, no. 3 (July, 1980): 358-359.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 302.

⁹ John Morreall, *Humor Works* (Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 1997), 230.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World*, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, October 31, 2014), 20.

¹¹ Eric J. Romero and Kevin W. Cruthirds, "The Use of Humor in the Workplace," *Academy of Management Perspectives* 20, no. 2 (May, 2006): 60-61; U.S. Department of the Army, *Mission Command*, Army Doctrinal Publication 6-0 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, May 17, 2012), 2.

¹² Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 33.

¹³ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of the Army, *Army Leadership*, Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 6-22, 11-6.

¹⁵ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 5-13.

¹⁶ Barak A. Salmoni et al., "Growing Strategic Leaders for Future Conflict," *Parameters* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 74.

¹⁷ Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ Morreall, *Humor Works*, 26.

²⁰ Gordon P. Brooks, *Humor in Leadership: State of the Art in Theory and Practice*, Opinion Paper (Chicago, IL: Mid-Western Research Association, October, 1992), 8.

²¹ Adrian Bardon, "The Philosophy of Humor," in *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide, Volume 2*, ed. Maurice Charney (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 463.

²² Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 22.

²³ John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), 20.

²⁴ Camille Atkinson, "What's So Funny?—Or, Why Humor Should Matter to Philosophers," *Philosophy Today* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 437-438.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Morreall, *Humor Works*, 26.

²⁷ Charles Kibben, *Humor and Emotional Intelligence: A Correlational Study of Leadership*, PhD diss. (University of Phoenix, 2012), 29.

²⁸ Li-Hsing Ho et al., "Influence of Humorous Leadership at Workplace on the Innovative Behaviour of Leaders and Their Leadership Effectiveness," *African Journal of Business Management* 5, no. 16 (August, 2011): 6676.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ronald E. Riggio, "The 4 Styles of Humor: What Do You Find Funny? How Do You Use Humor?" *Psychology Today Online*, April 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201504/the-4-styles-humor> (accessed December 15, 2015).

³³ Li-Hsing Ho et al., "Influence of Humorous Leadership," 6676.

³⁴ Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 211.

³⁵ Li-Hsing Ho et al., "Influence of Humorous Leadership," 6677.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 312-323.

³⁸ Ibid., 326.

³⁹ Romero & Cruthirds, "The Use of Humor in the Workplace," 62.

⁴⁰ Linda D. Henman, "Humor and Resilience: Lessons from the Vietnam POWs," <http://www.henmanperformancegroup.com/articles/humor-resilience.pdf> (accessed December 15, 2015).

⁴¹ Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 101-105.

⁴² Morreall, *Humor Works*, 91.

⁴³ Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 111.

⁴⁴ Louis G. Lippman and Mara L. Dunn, "Contextual Connections within Puns: Effects on Perceived Humor and Memory," *The Journal of General Psychology* 127, no. 2 (April 2000): 196.

⁴⁵ Morreall, *Humor Works*, 118-122.

⁴⁶ Brian P. Treece, *Humor as a Desired Leadership Quality Compared Across Four Professional Fields in Findlay and Hancock County, Ohio*, PhD diss. (Northcentral University, 2010), 31.

⁴⁷ Cecily D. Cooper, "Just Joking Around? Employee Humor as an Ingratiation Behavior," *Academy of Management* 30, no. 4 (October 2005): 767-768.

⁴⁸ Treece, "Humor as a Desired Leadership Quality," 31.

⁴⁹ Morreall, *Humor Works*, 2-3.

⁵⁰ Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 360.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Katy W. Y. Liu, "Humor Styles, Self-Esteem and Subjective Happiness," *Discovery Social Sciences Student E-Journal Online* 1 (2012): 22, <http://ssweb.cityu.edu.hk/download/RS/E-Journal/journal2.pdf> (accessed December 15, 2015).

⁵³ Bruce J. Avolio, Jane M. Howell, and John J. Sosik, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Bottom Line: Humor as a Moderator of Leadership Style Effects," *Academy of Management Journal* 42, no. 2 (April 1999): 219.

⁵⁴ Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 364.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 367, 368.

⁵⁶ Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 97.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Joseph Manca, "George Washington's Use of Humor during the Revolutionary War," *Journal of the American Revolution Online*, February 2015, <http://allthingsliberty.com/2015/02/george-washingtons-use-of-humor-during-the-revolutionary-war> (accessed December 15, 2015).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Caroline Cox, "Integrity and Leadership," in *The Art of Command*, ed. Harry S. Laver and Jeffery J. Matthews (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 11.

⁶¹ Ibid., 14.

⁶² According to Humes, “Like Benjamin Franklin—another historic personality with multitudinous talents—Churchill was blessed with a robust sense of humor. He had an acute sense of the foibles of man—the ambitious, the craven, and the pompous. He could also laugh at himself.” For more information on Winston Churchill’s use of humor, see James C. Humes, *The Wit & Wisdom of Winston Churchill* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), 1-2.

⁶³ According to Glickman, President Kennedy “possessed a quality that great leaders use to cope with the crises of their era, which is a splendid natural wit and self-deprecating humor.” For more information on John F. Kennedy’s use of humor, see Dan Glickman, “Kennedy’s Wit and Humor: A Legacy for Political Leadership,” *The Hill: Congress Blog*, blog entry posted November 20, 2013, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/190791-kennedys-wit-and-humor-a-legacy-for-political-leadership> (accessed December 15, 2015).

⁶⁴ Ryan relates a popular story that is illustrative of President Reagan’s artful use of humor: “‘I hope you are all Republicans,’ he said as he lay in the emergency room of the George Washington University Hospital. With an assassin’s bullet just millimeters from his heart, President Ronald Reagan used his unique God-given skill to convey calm and assurance to those desperately working to save his life. This episode revealed not only Reagan’s incredible grace under pressure, but his unique ability to communicate warm humor in even the most dire circumstances.” For more information on Ronald Reagan’s use of humor, see Fredrick J. Ryan Jr., *Ronald Reagan: The Wisdom and Humor of the Great Communicator* (San Francisco, CA: Collins, 1995), 7.

⁶⁵ According to Gelb and Miller, Edison had a playful persona that “endeared him to the public and made him seem accessible, human, and real. This playful attitude also manifested itself in his sense of humor. As Edison’s contemporaneous biographers Frank Dyer and Thomas Martin describe it, ‘His sense of humor is intense, but not of the hothouse, overdeveloped variety.’” For more information on Thomas Edison’s use of humor, see Michael J. Gelb and Sarah Miller Caldicott, *Innovate Like Edison: The Success System of America’s Greatest Inventor* (New York: Dutton, 2007), 74.

⁶⁶ According to Morreall: “One CEO who has made a name for himself, and his company, with his sense of humor, is Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines. The cover story of the May 4, 1994 *Fortune* asks, ‘Is Herb Kelleher America’s Best CEO? He’s wild, he’s crazy, he’s in a tough business—and he has built the most successful airline in the U.S.’” For more information on Herb Kelleher’s use of humor, see John Morreall, *Humor Works* (Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 1997), 13.

⁶⁷ In a speech during the U.S. Naval Academy Commencement in June 1958, President Eisenhower shares the following views on importance of humor: “But finally, there is one other quality I would mention among these that I believe will fit you for difficult and important posts. This is a healthy and lively sense of humor. A casual pleasantry adds zest to the moment, but a genuine sense of humor is a deeper matter. It is this deeper sense that I refer to know.” He goes on to remark that humor is important in the capacity to accept one’s own mistakes and that “sense of humor goes hand in hand with independence of thought and an eternally questioning mind.” For more information on President Eisenhower’s appreciation for humor, see Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1958* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), 455-456.

⁶⁸ According to Williamson—who served with General Patton during World War II—he “destroyed the fear of death with his deep religious faith and his keen sense of humor.” He further remarks that “the men enjoyed his lectures, his humor, his laughing at himself and making them laugh with him.” For more information on General Patton’s use of humor, see Porter B. Williamson, *General Patton’s Principles for Life & Leadership* (Tucson, AZ: Management & Systems Consultants, 2009), 185-190.

⁶⁹ While Powell doesn’t specifically address humor, the leadership practices and lessons that he shares throughout the book are wrought full of examples that clearly convey the benefit of affiliative humor as a leadership tool. For more information on General Powell’s use of humor, see Colin Powell, *It Worked for Me: In Life and Leadership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

⁷⁰ F. D. G. Williams, *SLAM: The Influence of S.L.A. Marshall on the United States Army*, TRADOC Historical Monograph Series (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999), 1.

⁷¹ S. L. A. Marshall, “Leaders and Leadership,” in *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, 6th ed., ed. Robert L. Taylor, William E. Rosenbach, and Eric B. Rosenbach (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), 35.

⁷² U.S. Department of the Army, *Follow me!*, Department of the Army Poster no. 21-43 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1954). The print caption reads: “Leyte, Philippine Islands, 20 October 1944. The American Army returned to the Philippines over the beaches of Leyte Island. Red Beach was defended by the Japanese occupying a number of large, well-camouflaged pillboxes. Immediately after their landing, the leading elements of the 3d Battalion, 34th Infantry—one of the units of the of the U.S. Army’s 24th Division—were pinned down by heavy machine gun and rifle fire. The Regimental Commander, Colonel Aubrey S. Newman, arrived on the beach and, taking in the situation at a glance, shouted to his men: ‘Get up and get moving! Follow me!’ News of the success of the American Forces in establishing a beachhead on Leyte—the first foothold in the Philippine Islands—was joyfully received by the American nation. The President radioed congratulations to General MacArthur and added, ‘You have the nation’s gratitude and the nation’s prayers for success as you and your men fight your way back...’”

⁷³ Aubrey Newman, *Follow Me I: The Human Element in Leadership* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1997), 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Pete Blaber, *The Mission, the Men, and Me: Lessons From a Former Delta Force Commander* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 59.

⁷⁷ U.S. Department of the Army, *Leadership*, Department of the Army Pamphlet 22-1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, December 28, 1948), 18, 19.

⁷⁸ U.S. Department of the Army, *Army Leadership*, Field Manual 22-100 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, August 31, 1999), 5-1, 6-21.

⁷⁹ “Paul B. Malone III—Notice,” *The Washington Post Online*, January 5, 2014, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/washingtonpost/obituary.aspx?pid=168897260> (accessed March 2, 2016).

⁸⁰ Paul B. Malone III, “Humor: A Double-Edged Tool for Today’s Managers?” *Academy of Management Review* 5, no. 3 (July 1980): 357.