

# HUMOR AS STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION IN SERIOUS BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Novrita Widiyastuti <sup>1\*</sup>, Florita Sari <sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1</sup> LSPR Institute of Communication and Business  
<sup>2</sup> Auckland University, Telkom University  
Email: <sup>1</sup> novrita.w@lspr.edu\*; <sup>2</sup> fsar521@aucklanduni.ac.nz;

\* corresponding author

## ABSTRACT

In creative industries like entertainment, advertising, marketing, and media, humor is commonly embraced as it aligns with creativity and brings surprise by breaking some norms. However, in more serious or non-creative industries—such as taxation or information technology—humor is often seen as rare, unnecessary, or even censured. Nevertheless, studies show suggest that humor, when applied strategically, can improve leaders communication effectiveness, enhance trust and build resilience in high-pressure workplaces, even in serious workplaces. Leaders are advised to actively engage in the daily affairs of the company to effectively navigate their serious environments. This research aims to explore how leaders in serious business environments utilize humor as a leadership communication strategy. Using semi-structured interviews with two executives from serious sectors, the researchers examining how humor in four situational leadership styles and the way humor shapes leader-employee interactions. Findings reveals that the leaders demonstrated various styles of situational leadership, each with their own weight and approach to utilizing humor in their communication. Humor, although rarely used in serious business setting, can enhance leadership effectiveness, team cohesion, and workplace climate when tailored to context and style. Challenges would be faced by the leaders using humor in the workplace: interactions between diverse background, concerns and generation gaps. Findings suggest humor is a valuable tool for situational leadership, though cultural and generational barriers persist.

This is an open access article under the [CC-BY-SA](#) license.



## Article history

Received 26 Jun 2025  
Revised 21 August 2025  
Accepted 25 September 2025

## Keywords:

**Humor**  
**Leadership**  
**Serious Business**  
**Communication Strategy**  
**Leaders**

## 1. Introduction

Communication is a leader's most powerful tool for inspiring positive change and empowering their team toward common goals (Landry, 2020). As social architects of the organization, leaders construct the vision of the social structure through effective communication strategies. To be effective, communication must reduce ambiguity among organizational members, as ambiguity can lead to miscommunication and poor performance. A report from The Economist Intelligence Unit revealed that miscommunication has caused delays, project failures, increased stress, missed performance goals, and even failure to close

sales in US companies (2018). Causes of poor communication include different communication styles (42%) and lack of strong leadership (29%). Leaders must, therefore, adapt their communication styles to ensure their subordinates have a clear understanding of objectives and expectations (Communication Barriers in the Modern Workplace, 2018).

Harvard Business School emphasizes that effective communication enables leaders to share their vision, empower employees, build trust, and successfully navigate organizational change (Landry, 2020). Humor—as noted by Ullian—is one of the strategies that leaders can employ, as it helps organizations remain stable in the face of change (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Humor as one of the communication strategy for leaders has been received by many parties and raise scholars' attention, but remains underexplored in formal and 'serious' industries. Among the communicative strategies, humor holds great promise but being least understood. Understanding the specifics of humor's impact on communication, including message types and relational components, is crucial for the leaders of the future to better utilize this strategy in their leadership.

While creative industries naturally develop humor, it is often considered rare or even taboo in more serious and non-creative business environments. However, in serious workplaces, daily communication with humor can offer significant benefits. Leaders must actively engage with their company affairs, utilizing humor as a vital part of their leadership communication strategy (Johnson & Hackman, 2018). The research focuses on how leaders in serious business environments utilize humor as a communication strategy and how they interact with their serious environment using humor and its challenges. This study addresses the lack of research on humor as a strategic tool in leadership communication within formal or non-creative business environments in Indonesia.

The study delves into the aspect of leaders' use of humor within the context of four situational leadership styles, proposed by Blanchard and Hershey in 1969 (Thompson & Glasø, 2018)(Burke & Barron, 2014). Each leadership style caters to different types of subordinates and demands unique communication strategies to effectively lead and guide them.

The first leadership style explored is the Directing or telling style, which is particularly suitable for subordinates who display enthusiasm but lack competence in their work. In such cases, these subordinates require clear direction and close supervision to initiate their efforts and progress. Communication in this style mostly into one-way, less of interaction from the leader to the staff to ensure the guidance is clear and concise.

The second leadership style is Coaching or selling leadership, it is for employees who are good at what they do but might not be fully committed to their tasks. In this style, the leader gives guidance, supervision and encouragement to help the subordinates to remain committed to do the best of their tasks. The two-way interactions are occurred where the leader give instructions as well as support to the subordinates.

The third leadership style, Supporting leadership, is for subordinates who already can demonstrate their competences but lack of confidence or motivation. In this case, the subordinates don't need as much guidance, because they are already skilled, but they still need support and encouragement from the leader to increase their confidence level. In this style, communication also occur two-way, and the subordinate may expressing their needs and help or support from the leader, if needed.

The fourth leadership style is Delegating leadership, which the subordinates already competence and have commitment to their tasks. They are self-motivated and can work independently, do not need much supervision or support from the leader. In this style, the leader may let the subordinates to make a decision, take care of their own tasks and responsibilities. The leader only communicate the tasks and give the subordinates their trust.

In addition, this study also look at how the leaders communicate, which include four different types: verbal, non-verbal, written, and visual. **Verbal** communication of a leader is the use of sounds, words, language, and speech to communicate humor to the subordinates.

There are four main types of verbal communication. First, intrapersonal communication, as when we talk to ourselves. Second, interpersonal communication is when we have one-to-one conversations. Third, small-group communication is when we have interactions with more than two people. Last, public communication is when we talk to a big group of people.

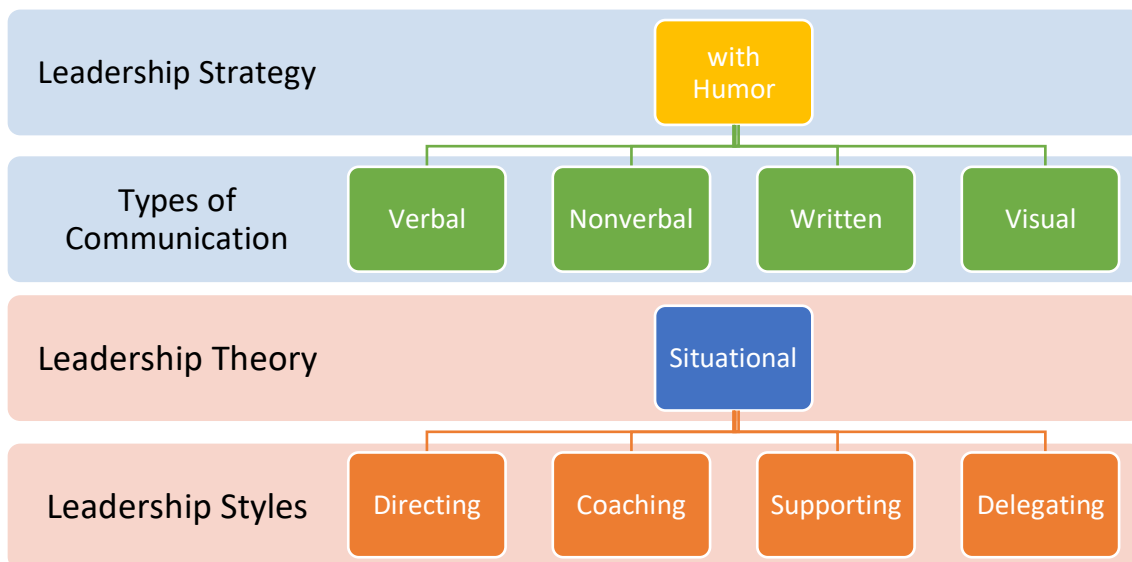
The second type of communication explored is **non-verbal** communication, where the sender conveys the message without using words or sound. Non-verbal communication means we use our body language, tone of voice, touch, sign language, hand gestures, symbols, body gestures and facial expressions to convey messages without words. The third type is **written** communication, using words to express ideas, like orders, standard operating procedures (SOP), schedules, journals, emails, reports, and memos. The final type is **visual** communication, using visual elements to give information. This includes badges, logos, patches, photographs, signs, symbols, posters, banners, movies, plays, television shows, video clips, icons, and emoticons (Flood & Avillo, 2017). In this study, it will explore how humor can be used to improve leadership communication, create work environments that are more positive and strengthen team bonding.

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design, focusing on how leaders in serious business environments incorporate humor into their leadership communication. The data were collected by interviewing (semi-structured) two leaders who use humor in their leadership communication. The first leader is Donny Suhodo, the founder of a well-known Indonesian tax consulting firm, focused on settlement of tax disputes and tax reports. Leader 2 is Yolla Charisma, the Human Resource and General Affairs (HR & GA) General Manager at a multinational information technology (IT) services and consulting company, focused on hardware and system integrator. Both of these leaders were selected purposefully as information-rich cases (Tajik et al., 2024), given their leadership roles in industries where humor is not commonly associated with professional practice.

The interviews were conducted by online video conferencing between June and July 2023, each session lasted between 60-90 minutes with participants' consent and the recording was transcribed verbatim for analysis. To encourage openness, questions began with general experiences of leadership communication and gradually moved toward humor-related practices. Questions for the interview derived from the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1, which later served as structural coding for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen as the most suitable method for this qualitative exploratory research. This method facilitates systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of textual data, such as interview transcripts. Through coding, additional themes—such as challenges of cross-generations' humor and cultural formality—were identified. The researchers coded the transcripts independently and compared results to ensure consistency and reliability.

By combining purposeful sampling, in-depth interviews and systematic coding, this methodology enables us to capture both the breadth of humor strategies employed by participants and the depth of their experiences within serious business contexts. Our focus was on discovering patterns and ideas related to how leaders incorporate humor in their leadership communication.



**Figure 1. Conceptual framework of Humor in Leadership Communication**

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### *Context of the Serious Business*

In his memoir, Watson Jr, the former CEO of IBM and leader of a hardware company, shared his regrets about consistently approaching the workplace too seriously and failing to foster a more light-hearted atmosphere within his company. He contemplated the possibility of incorporating humor more frequently (Kowalski, 2015). The research participants in this study also come from serious business environments, making it essential to consider the context of their serious businesses before delving into how these leaders were able to cultivate a more relaxed climate in their organizations.

Yolla, one of the participants, described her initial experience in a serious business environment at an IT service company. When she first joined the company, the situation was formal and, until today, it was expected to use formal terms of address 'Pak' (Sir) to the leaders and humor was only used in limited circles. Yolla felt uncomfortable with the formality and greetings. In her prior company, which was a media company, she used to be called 'Mbak' (Sis), a term of address that is more informal and familiar. Particularly, the human resources (HR) department, which was the department she was assigned to, was considered as the "rules carrier", or strict enforcers of rules. Unsurprisingly, employees originally thought HR would bring punishment to whoever broke the rules. This unfavorable perspective toward HR happened because the company did not have an HR department previously, so there was a presumed image about HR in employees' minds. To address this situation, Yolla, however, emphasized that HR personnel are just human beings and should not be perceived differently.

Donny, the second respondent in this study, elaborated on his profession as a tax consultant specializing in tax dispute resolution and providing consulting services on tax reports. In the context of Indonesia, there is a strict policy of zero tolerance towards mistakes or miscalculations in taxes, as such errors could lead to fines and even criminal sanctions. Being successful in this profession requires utmost accuracy, leaving no room for miscalculations. The government enforces penalties on tax objects found in violation, regardless of whether the errors were intentional or accidental, and these sanctions can take the form of monetary fines or other financial penalties due to incorrect tax reporting.

With over 25 years of experience in this field, Donny shared that even though has a lot of knowledge, sometimes he still makes mistakes in tax calculations. The complexity of Indonesia's tax regulations, makes this profession particularly challenging, as described by Donny:

*“There are these terms ‘honest mistake’ in other countries, and these are treated differently. However, our government will not bother if the mistakes were on purpose or not, the sanctions could be monetary or jail time, because it was considered tax fraud. Secondly, a taxpayer should not miss the deadline to report their taxes, or they will be fined because they disobey the formal rules. Third, when it comes to law interpretation and facing a tax inspector, then dispute potential would be high. The taxpayer tends to maximize and utilize current rules to minimize pay taxes or at least in accordance with tax regulations. On the other side, the Directorate General of Taxation tries to maximize the tax revenue. The taxpayers have been distressed, they also still have to pay taxes. As well as the Directorate General of Taxation is stressed out, because they have a target set by the Government to be achieved. If the target revenue was not achieved then the country could be in debt. In this situation, conflict definitely would occur.”* (Donny, interview)

Another leader within the company is Darun, who serves as Donny's partner. Darun has implemented a systematic approach in the company that involves directing, closely monitoring, reviewing, and ensuring the accuracy of all documents before submission. Darun's system aims to prevent such shortcomings. After directing the staff to perform a task, he ensures that it has been carried out diligently. He reviews and confirms that everything is correct and complete before submitting the documents.

Occasionally, following his partner's system and to avoid mishappenings, Donny often found himself having to go to the tax court personally just to ensure that the documents are accepted. He did this because there had been instances of cheating or dishonesty on the part of the tax court. For instance, he once handled a client's case involving 12 billion Rupiah (about 800 thousand US dollar). Donny and staff they faced opposition from the tax court, claiming that the documents were not signed, which Donny knew was impossible. In such situations, each document needs to be meticulously checked one by one, as the authority scrutinizes the documents rigorously and may find minor flaws to reject them.

Yolla and Donny's experiences provide compelling evidence that in the early years of their employment at their respective companies, not only was the industry a serious business, but the working environment itself was also marked by formality and seriousness. During this period, the atmosphere in their workplaces was characterized by a strict and formal approach to conducting business.

### ***Origin of the Leaders' Sense of Humor***

President Dwight Eisenhower once famously said, "a sense of humor is a part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done" (Huston, 2017). This statement highlights the importance of a good sense of humor for effective leadership and successful interactions with others.

Yolla, one of the respondents, attributes her sense of humor and 'crazy' nature to her environment, both in her professional and family life. She admits that her family is exceptionally humorous, and she believes that this humorous trait was ingrained in her from a young age. Additionally, her previous experience working in a big media corporation further contributed to her sense of humor. In the creative industry, media companies typically foster a more relaxed working atmosphere, encouraging employees to express their creativity freely. In her previous workplace, Yolla enjoyed a unique relationship with her boss, where she could address them using informal appellations like "gue" and "elu." Eager to bring this sense of humor to her current company, Yolla treads carefully, not wanting to come across as the sole agent responsible for introducing humor into the workplace.

Donny's experience with humor, on the other hand, is from a different origin. Donny's passion for reading and his love for humor studies have been integral to his personal and professional growth. Since his youth, he has been an avid collector of books on humor, and he doesn't just collect them for display; he actively learns from them and applies the knowledge to his life. To him, books are a treasure of wisdom, but their true value lies in their implementation. Donny firmly believes that reading should lead to action. For him, knowledge is only meaningful when it is put into practice. Donny's motto, "today's reader is tomorrow's leader," reflects his belief in the transformative power of reading. He understands that the wisdom gained from books can shape one's leadership skills.

The origin of Donny's keen sense of humor can be traced back to the various chapters of his life's journey. Before assuming the mantle of a leader, he humbly served as a subordinate, commencing his career in the roles of an auditor, tax consultant, and corporate tax staff. It was during these formative years that Donny encountered different leadership styles, and he quickly discovered that he was not fond of having a hot-blooded boss. To him, being treated with respect and understanding was of paramount importance. He believed that he always gave his best to the company, and in return, he yearned for a more relaxed and supportive working environment.

### ***Opportunity for Humor as Strategy in the Serious Business***

In numerous books, successful CEOs emphasize the vital role of humor as a communication method, recognizing its potential to elevate the effectiveness of messages conveyed by leaders. Edward Gerstner, CEO of IBM, in his memoir "Elephants Can Dance," extols the virtues of well-timed and relevant humor, which can contribute to fostering a positive workplace climate. He underscores the significance of leaders possessing a good sense of humor to wield it effectively (Kowalski, 2015).

In light of this, the current section delves into Yolla's perspective as an HR leader in her company. Tasked with communicating essential rules that must be adhered to by all employees, she finds herself aware of her innate sense of humor. Considering the delicate balance between enforcing company rules and maintaining a positive atmosphere, Yolla decides to introduce an unwritten rule within the organization: during working hours, there is no particular time for joking around. In formal communication, she communicates the rule in serious manners to make employees follow and finally obey the rules. She creates a clear distinction between work hours and after 5 pm, allowing employees to embrace their individuality and unwind. During the latter hours, she encourages everyone, including herself, to shed their professional facades and embrace their humanity, fostering a relaxed atmosphere where employees can freely express themselves, engage in light-hearted banter, and partake in leisure activities like smoking or other relaxing pursuits. This approach emphasizes the importance of work-life balance and recognizes the need for employees to decompress after a day of hard work.

To further strengthen relationships with other departments, Yolla encourages her seven team members to be more approachable. By infusing humor into her interactions with other employees, she breaks down barriers and bridges the gap between hierarchical levels. Yolla's strategy aligns with the findings of Holmes & Marra in 2006, who observed that leaders with humor behavior foster cohesive relations among employees, strengthening solidarity and collegiality (Gockel & Vetter, 2017). She deliberately cultivates a workplace culture that values cohesion and camaraderie, ensuring that employees know when to be serious and when to enjoy moments of levity with each other.

To encourage the development of humor among employees, Yolla organizes various weekly, monthly, and annual sport activities, such as futsal, badminton, pingpong, and pound fit. These activities create opportunities for employees of all ranks, from office boy to Vice President, to come together, play, and share jokes, fostering a sense of unity and camaraderie. Furthermore, friendly basketball matches with other companies provide occasions for employees to build positive social relationships, effectively diminishing Yolla's positional authority and emphasizing a "common ground" with her team (Gockel & Vetter, 2017). Her approach reflects the affiliative humor style popularized by Rod Martin, which employs humor to facilitate positive social relationships and evoke laughter among all parties involved (Schermer et al., 2021). By utilizing this style of humor, Yolla skillfully facilitates interpersonal interactions and minimizes social distance, creating a more relaxed and cohesive work environment.

As featured earlier in the theoretical background, the situational leadership theory proposed by Hersey and Blanchard comprises four primary leadership styles: **directing**, **coaching**, **supporting**, and **delegating**. Among these styles, Yolla finds herself utilizing humor most frequently when engaging in coaching sessions with her team. This style is felt perfect for Yolla because it is two-way conversation that ideal to infuse humor that make people bonding. In coaching, possible for Yolla using humor also to creates a relaxed atmosphere. When an employee came to her for help, Yolla usually using humor to make them laugh and feel good. In her office, everyone feels comfortable to express their emotions, whether they are crying, laughing or anything in between.

One of the most challenging situations arises when employees receive negative feedback about their job performance. But, Yolla using humor to decrease the tension and create a safe space to talk about it. She remembers one employee who came to her for an advice about a difficult breakup. Sensing the emotional distress, Yolla waited patiently for the employee to express their feelings. She understand that it is important to let out all the emotions before trying to find a solution. With empathy and a little bit of wit, Yolla offered a tissue to wipe away their tears and playfully suggesting a Kanebo, a car wipe, for wiping the tears. If the employee needed more comfort situation, she escalated the humor by offering a bucket to hold the tears. In these situations, Yolla's use of humor helps employees relax and even find some joy in laughing.

In the **supporting** aspect of her leadership, Yolla also employs humor as a powerful tool to help her team members shine and learn from their mistakes, instead of blame them. Recently, she had experience with Wildan, one of her staff members. Wildan supposed to give a presentation on e-waste (Environmental Social and Governance) to reduce carbon footprint and raise the awareness. He works hard on a detailed deck with 12 slides to make sure he covered everything. But Yolla thought the deck is too long and not interesting. She wants to tell him the truth, but it would hurt him and making him demotivated. Yolla had a better idea to help Wildan become more self-aware. She invited him to give 15-minutes practice session before his presentation on Friday. They made a rehearsal, like Wildan was actually giving the presentation to the management. Acting as audience, Yolla carefully listening to Wildan's presentation as he read his deck and email blast announcement. Within just 5 minutes of the rehearsal, Wildan smiles because he realised that his presentation was a bit boring and less engagement. Instead of mocking him, Yolla used humor to make the session more fun. She gently guides Wildan towards understanding that he needed to improve his approach. After the practice, Yolla gave him some helpful feedback on how to make his presentation better.

In summary, Yolla is a master of using humor as a leadership tool. She is like a supportive cheerleader who helps her team members see their strengths and weakness. By using humor and sharing funny stories, she encourages the subordinates to embrace a growth mindset and keep improving. Her positive attitude and sense of humor nurturing a great workplace culture where people feels motivated and to be the best of them.

Donny's use of humor spans across all four situational leadership styles - directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. He knows how to switch gears from directing to coaching, supporting to delegating, to keep the mood of the people more light and fun. He believes in the power of humor to boost a relaxed and engaging work environment, where employees see him not just as a boss, but as an approachable leader.

When the company starts new projects, Donny takes charge on a **directing** and **delegating** approach initially. He uses humor to make sure everyone feels comfortable and excited about the new challenges. He wants his subordinates perceive him as a leader as well as a friend, not a scary guy. Through directing and delegating, Donny and his partner, Darun, really know what they are doing and are involved in every part of the project. Unlike some other bosses who just tell the team what to do and hope for the best. Donny knows the importance of providing clear instructions and expectations to avoid misunderstandings and potential setbacks.

When Donny writes a special letter or appeal letter, he takes his time and thinks carefully about what to say. He starts by telling his team what is the most important to include in the document. Once the team grasps the essential elements, he transitions into a **coaching** and **supporting** role. In this phase, Donny offers guidance, encouragement, and constructive feedback, ensuring that the team feels supported throughout the process. This comprehensive leadership approach ensures that his team members not only understand the project's requirements but also feel empowered to excel in their tasks.

Donny relies on the self-enhancing style of humor to bolster his own resilience and ability to cope with challenges. As Sampietro suggests, self-enhancing humor serves as a coping mechanism to maintain a positive outlook in stressful situations (Sampietro, 2017), which Donny finds invaluable in his demanding role. By adopting a witty attitude towards life, Donny bridges the gap between leaders and subordinates, making interactions more approachable. Another style of humor Donny effectively employs is self-deprecating humor, where he humorously makes himself the target of the joke. Hopton reveals that leaders using this humor style often demonstrate attentiveness and sensitivity to their subordinates (Hopton et al., 2013).

Despite his use of humor, Donny is cautious of aggressive humor when interacting with his subordinates. Aggressive humor tends to target others, often at their expense, leading to inequality and the reinforcement of a superior-subordinate dynamic. This type of humor tends to “laughing at” rather than “laughing with” because involving other’s expense as the ‘butt’ of the joke (Martin, 2007). This inequality brings up superiority of the leaders, as in superiority theory stated by Hobbes (1588-1679): “considered an aggressive form of humor which takes pleasure in others’ failings or discomfort” (Scheel, 2017). Aggressive humor can be perceived as making fun of others to assert dominance. To maintain a positive and respectful work environment, Donny refrains from using this humor.

However, Donny occasionally uses superior humor when engaging with his taxpayer clients. In these settings, he employs humor to create a shared experience with his clients, often joking and laughing at the tax inspector together with the taxpayers. This tactic aims to make his clients feel superior and more at ease. Conversely, when with the tax inspector, Donny may humorously highlight certain taxpayer behaviors, providing a lighthearted perspective that fosters camaraderie. Donny adapting the humor, changing the style to fit in different situation, clients and subordinates. This highlights Donny's strategically adapting his humor style based on different situations, clients, and subordinates.

Another interesting humor strategy was used by Donny when he found himself face-to-face with the tax inspector. His tactics are not showing off his degree in tax or his expertise as tax lecturer, but he pretends to be just a guy-next-door who knows a bit about taxes. He already figured that being too smart might make the inspector feel defeated, so he wanted to come across as friendly and approachable. To start the conversation away from tax-related issues initially, Donny introduced topics unrelated to taxes. He wants to make the interaction lighter and create a relaxed environment. Since trying to show off his tax knowledge could make the tax inspectors feel uncomfortable or resistance, he politely acknowledge their power and expertise, make them feel respected and valued. Instead of bragging about his academic achievements or professional accomplishments in tax, Donny playfully mentioned his title as a certified humor professional (CHP). Using his humor skills, he entertained the tax inspectors with funny stories and won them over. By taking this approach, Donny shows how humor can bring people together and overcome differences. He understood that humor could create a sense of connection and understanding. The way of Donny downplaying his tax expertise and relying on humor to build rapport with tax inspectors is a great example of his leadership and communication skills.

### ***Preferred Delivery Channels in Using Humor***

Donny prefer verbal humor to make people laugh, whether with jokes, stories or witty remarks. He believes that humor can make a personal touch to his interactions with subordinates, clients, and tax inspectors. He engages others through witty remarks, anecdotes, and jokes, believing that verbal humor adds a personal touch. When he is in the meeting with his team, chatting with clients or speaking on the phone, Donny always brings a smile to everyone's face. Sometimes he use text or sticker on WhatsApp, but it is not his main way to communicate his humor. Verbal skills are his superpower when it comes to making people laugh and creating a positive atmosphere.

On the other hand, Yolla embraces humor in both verbal and digital communication. She is not just funny, but regularly create a hilarious atmosphere on WhatsApp for her team. As a leader, she knows that a positive and fun team culture is a key. To achieve this, she also encourages her team to use any tool they have to add humor to their chats. From sending silly sticking tongue out picture to other funny stickers, Yolla and her team have made a habit of exchanging humorous greetings every morning in WhatsApp creating a lighthearted and enthusiastic start to their workdays. And as payday approaches, the greetings get even more exciting, like "keep the spirit, payday is almost near, 3 more days!" or "but my wallet is already bleeding!" or "keep the spirit, the money's fragrance has already passed my nose". This approach to humor on WhatsApp has created a great team dynamic and strengthened the bonds between her team members. She truly understands how humor can boost morale and productivity.

Donny and Yolla both get importance of humor in communication and leadership. Donny likes to use verbal humor with face-to-face interactions, while Yolla embrace humor in both verbal and digital communication to create a vibrant and cohesive team culture. They both show how funny can be a tool to build good relationships and create a harmonious work environment. Whether in face-to-face conversations or on WhatsApp, humor is a big part of their leadership styles, and it helps their teams overall success and happiness.

### ***Desired Outcomes from Using Humor: For Self, Stakeholders and Working Environment***

Donny using humor based on his needs of resilience in his life and his working environment. His job is very demanding, where precision and tight deadline is his daily routine. To cope with it, he uses humor as a stress relief and coping mechanism. By infusing humor to his interactions with others, he creates light-hearted and enjoyable atmosphere, to people as well to himself. He doesn't look at who you are, where are you come from, or how important are you. All what he wants are everybody is happy, knowing or connecting each other, regardless their position, and avoid acting like he is superior than others.

In his interactions with lower-authority employees, such as office boys, drivers, or interns, Donny trying to connect with them equally and have mutual respect. He uses humor to bridge the gap between different levels and make everyone feel valued and appreciated. Donny actively encourages and facilitates humor blooming in the workplace. He understands that humor can enhance team bonding, reduce stress, and improve overall job satisfaction. Although some employees may use humor only within their circle, Donny remains committed to promoting a broader culture of humor throughout the entire workplace.

In addition to employing humor as a means of managing stress for himself, Donny also realises that humor is important for leading and managing his team during tough times. When things get really stressful, laughter can be a powerful tool. Instead of being angry or frustrated with his team, he uses humor to lowering tense situations. He knows that if he makes his employees feel scared or nervous, they will not be as productive and will not be able to ask for help or share their ideas freely. Donny is also aware of the limitations of compensation when it comes to managing stress. While offering higher compensation might seem like a good idea to get people to work harder, he knows that people always want more money and its is not fix the root of the problem. Donny prefers to make sure his team is happy and comfortable while they are working on their tasks.

From the beginning of his company, he has a partner who also the co-founder that has a serious manner. Recently, his partner, Darun has realised the benefit of humor within their company. Darun already thinks that humor can make a big difference in the workplace. Together with Donny, they made a library that dedicated to humor studies beside their tax studies library. To further cultivate a humor-rich environment, Donny and Darun collaborate with humor institutions and academicians to conduct specialised humor training and events within the corporation.

Darun, the one who was an intimidating managing partner based on story from Donny, has become a different person because of humor. Because he knew humor is good for everyone, he even took humor trainings to improve his humor abilities. Now, he is more comfortable using humor in meetings and conversations. He also influencing this initiative to other people as an effort to make a collaborative environment where humor is celebrated and appreciated.

Back to Donny, as a lecturer and trainer, he needs to connect to his students or the training participants. Before diving into sharing knowledge, he takes the time to search information about the audience, their backgrounds, experiences and where they come from. This approaches are with purpose to tailor his humor to fit with the characteristi of the audience and make his presentation more engaging. He knows that humor works best when audience is more receptive. By investing time and effort in understanding of the audience, Donny shows that he cares about effective communication and engagement.

In Yolla's case, she got the power of humor in leadership when she was at her old job. There, she saw firsthand how a funny workplace can make a workplace more egaliterian and equal. Now, at her current company, Yolla has successfully implements humor as a strategic tool to break down communication barriers and foster a more cohesive environment. Each departments, from pre-sales to post-sales, has their own set of funny inside jokes that make their daily work more fun. When these departments get together, their different humor mix up and create a new relax and enjoyable atmospheres. With so much humor to be shared, they can easily have playful banter and even give each other friendly nicknames like "Nyuk" (Monkey) or "Su" (Dog) in a warm and professional manner.

In her coaching sessions, Yolla uses of humor as powerful tools to comfort employees who might be feeling down. Instead of aiming to make them laugh, she employs humor to ease their feelings of sadness or frustration. For example, when an employee cried during a coaching session, Yolla offered a doodle book to be colored. Usually this way helps lightening the mood. In doing so, they were able to laugh at their own "stupidity" in a fun manner, turning a sad situation into one filled with shared laughter and understanding. By helping them realise things through humor, Yolla empowers her team to be more self-aware and proactive in addressing their areas of improvement.

As Yolla loves to use humor as a core component of her leadership style, she emphasizes that humor can be used at any time and with anyone. Beneath the surface of their serious IT solutions company, her team members consist of serious and playful individuals. They are serious when needed but are also unafraid to show their playfulness and occasionally "crazy" sides. This makes their work environment a vibrant and harmonious workplace.

### ***Challenges Using Humor in Serious Business***

Donny today has found that using humor in the workplace poses no significant challenges. Sharing humor with his staff has become an integral part of his personality, and he enjoys the positive atmosphere it creates. However, during the early stages of building the company, Donny faced disapproval from his partner, Darun, who for example scolded him for staff's loud laughter. Despite this initial misunderstanding, over time, Darun came to realize that everything Donny did was solely for the betterment of the company. Donny, with his wit, even made jokes about working hard to expand the office space so they could all laugh even louder. He playfully teased that he might just achieve that goal through his exemplary performance, proving that humor and dedication can go hand in hand.

On the other hand, Donny encounters a cultural challenge in the Indonesian workplace, where people tend to be bashful in the presence of their superiors, that make limiting their humor interaction. Sometimes staff limit their jokes only between them. They have to be pushed by others to throw humor at informal event of the company. Even though Donny has detected people with a good sense of humor and used to joke around, they are still too shy to do it.

For Yolla, one particular challenge she faced when using humor in the workplace is cross-generation humor. The oldest out of her 6 members of the team is 31 years old, which is almost half her age. Somehow they did not understand the context of her jokes, and the other was around. They do not get the context of the humor because it was much talked about when they had not been born yet. Yolla also does not get the context of the jokes because it is lost or the meaning has changed, or she has not been updated yet. Sometimes the context was too absurd for her. She laughs because both parties are lost in translation. For her, it is not challenging but an opportunity to gain more insight and excitement.

## **4. Conclusion\***

Effective communication strategies play a pivotal role in enabling leaders to effectively and successfully lead their companies. Two leaders who also the respondents of this study evidence that humor has been proven to be an integral part of their communication strategy. Even though they are in serious business environment. these leaders understand the significance of incorporating humor into the workplace. They recognize that humor fosters a relaxed working environment, promoting a positive atmosphere that enhances productivity and employee satisfaction. Moreover, these leaders realise that the cultivation of a humorous working atmosphere starts from themselves. They understand the importance of setting the tone and leading by example when it comes to using humor in the workplace. Additionally, they actively facilitate time and space for humor to develop and thrive in the office.

This study found that people in different situation use different leadership styles and each styles has its own way of using humor in their communication. The extent to which humor is employed in these situational interactions is influenced by their individual leadership styles and the specific requirements of the job at hand. Their use of humor is often shaped by their past experiences, whether in their working environment or within their family. However, it is important to note that humor can also be acquired and developed through reading books on humor studies or participating in humor-focused training and workshops.

In practical terms, leaders can have effective ways to employ humor both verbally and digitally. Verbal humor helps them avoid misunderstanding. Additionally, they may use digital platforms like WhatsApp or email to share jokes, anecdotes, stickers, and memes. Using humor in leadership communication has many benefits, not only for the leaders themselves but also for stakeholders and the overall working environment. Leaders who practice self-enhancing humor find themselves more resilient in facing stressful situations and develop a unique perspective on challenging circumstances. Affiliative humor may be used to strengthen relationships with stakeholders, while also creating a more relaxed atmosphere when interacting with subordinates. This approach ensures that nobody feels hurt or offended during discussions of tasks or instructions. Moreover, a little bit touch of self-deprecating humor could make leaders to appear to be more human, acknowledging that they too can make mistakes and are open to good-natured jokes. This kind of humor does not diminish the leaders' authority. Instead, it makes them seem more equal and approachable to their team.

Leaders may face challenges when interacting with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Each person has their own interests, concerns, and generational gaps. In such situations, the context in which humor being used can vary, and the intended message of the humor might not be achieved well. To fix this, the findings suggest that leaders should dedicate time to understanding their team members better, enabling them to gauge the appropriate humor to employ. This approach to humor ensures that the intended message is conveyed, fostering effective and successful communication between leaders and their teams. Training programs that teach leaders how to use appropriate humor become an essential part of leadership development in these sectors. By understand the preferences and sensibilities of their audience, leaders can create a positive and inclusive working environment where humor is a unifying force rather than a potential source of misunderstanding.

in sum, humor should not be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant in serious business environment. When used well, it can become a strategic and powerful tool for leadership communication, bridging the gap between power and approachability, and supporting both organizational performance and employee well-being.

*\*some parts of the sentences were refined by AI without changing the contexts*

### References

- Burke, R., & Barron, S. (2014). *Project Management Leadership: Building Creative Teams* (John Wiley & Sons, Ed.; 2nd ed.).
- Communication Barriers in the Modern Workplace.* (2018). [https://impact.economist.com/perspectives/sites/default/files/EIU\\_Lucidchart-Communication barriers in the modern workplace.pdf](https://impact.economist.com/perspectives/sites/default/files/EIU_Lucidchart-Communication%20barriers%20in%20the%20modern%20workplace.pdf)
- Flood, E., & Avillo, A. (2017). *Full-Contact Leadership*. PennWell Corporation.
- Gockel, C., & Vetter, L. (2017). Humor in Leadership: How to Lead People with Humor. In T. Scheel & C. Gockel (Eds.), *Humor at Work in Teams, Leadership, Negotiations, Learning and Health* (pp. 47–60). Springer.
- Grace-Odeleye, B. E., & Santiago, J. (2019). Utilizing Humor to Enhance Leadership Styles in Higher Education Administration. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management*, 7(2), 171–202. <https://doi.org/10.17583/ijelm.2019.3912>

- Hoption, C., Barling, J., & Turner, N. (2013). "It's not you, it's me": Transformational Leadership and Self-deprecating Humor. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 34(1), 4–19.
- Huston, C. J. (2017). *The Road to Leadership*. Sigma Theta Tau International.
- Johnson, C. E., & Hackman, M. Z. (2018). *Leadership: A Communication Perspective* (7th ed.). Waveland Press.
- Kowalski, T. (2015). *Effective Communication for District and School Administrators* (2nd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Landry, L. (2020). *8 Essential Leadership Communication*. Harvard Business School Online. <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/leadership-communication>
- Sampietro, M. (2017). *Humour at The Workplace*. Rupa Publications India.
- Scheel. (2017). Definitions, Theories, and Measurement of Humor. In T. Scheel & C. Gockel (Eds.), *Humor at Work in Teams, Leadership, Negotiations, Learning and Health* (pp. 9–25). Springer.
- Schermer, J., Papazova, E. B., & Kwiatkoska, M. M. (2021). Predicting Self-Esteem Using Humor Styles: A Cross-Cultural Study. In E. Vanderheiden & C.-H. Mayer (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour Research* (pp. 15–40). Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Tajik, O., Golzar, J., & Noor, S. (2024). Purposive Sampling. *IJELS*, 2, 1–9.
- Thompson, G., & Glasø, L. (2018). Situational leadership theory: a test from a leader-follower congruence approach. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 39(5), 574–591. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-01-2018-0050>