

# **Humor, Laughter and Rhetoric in the Corporate Environment**

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## **Abstract**

Humor, as state of mind and way of expression, has been studied (Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Quintilian) and practiced (Aristophanes, Menander) since antiquity. Many Greek and Roman authors understood the importance of humor in life and wrote comedies, poems, as well as theory. In short, humor is a serious matter. In the early 20th century, Bergson wrote three seminal articles and Freud proposed a theory of humor when he considered laughter as a process analogous to dreaming. It is difficult, however, to conceptualize humor, since there are so many types and forms, like satirical, highbrow, burlesque, blue, ironic, mordant, self-deprecating and many others. Such general conceptualization is not attempted here – instead, the focus is to verify and exemplify the importance and utilization of humor in corporate environments and show that those philosophers did shape Western mentality. Qualitative research has been conducted in both colleges and large or midsize corporations, mostly by interviewing professors and mid-level managers. The results were analyzed according to two different lines: acceptance and efficiency in enhancing performance. The results showed that humor is a powerful stress reliever - it does improve overall performance, it is different according to hierarchical levels involved, but must be held within limits, which vary according to organization and context.

## **Introduction**

Spontaneous laughter is a motor reflex produced by the coordinated contraction of 15 facial muscles in a stereotyped pattern and accompanied by altered breathing. Electrical stimulation of the main lifting muscle of the upper lip, the zygomatic major, with currents of varying intensity produces facial expressions ranging from the faint smile through the broad grin to the contortions typical of explosive laughter (Koestler, 1999).

Somewhat paradoxically, humor and laughter can make for very serious study. Once a decision is made to look into the subject, an unexpected wealth of literature shows up. Galasso (2005) estimates that the number of papers and books on humor “surpasses one million.” Humor is referred here as the mind awareness and the capacity to appreciate and express whatever is humorous. This is only one of many definitions. Another way of expressing the meaning of humor considers it as the set of stimuli that causes laughter, which, according to Koestler (1999), is “a reflex that coordinately contracts 15 facial muscles [...] and simultaneously changes the breathing pattern”. This is a way of looking at laughter: consider it a reflex. However, the pupil that constricts itself when hit by strong light, the knee jerking when properly stimulated are reflexes that stem directly from the struggle of our ancestors to survive. Laughter, still according to Koestler, is in a unique category, since it not only does not relate to survival, but it also demands mental work.

Greek and Roman thinkers knew about the importance of humor and laughter. For one thing, only humankind is capable of laughter. Socrates, whose work we know from Plato (transl. 1993), mentioned laugh as a vice akin to illusion. This means that Socrates and Plato associated laughter to pleasure and to mixed passions caused by affections of the soul. No specific text written by Aristotle about laughter is known, but sporadically, both in *Poetic* and in *Rhetoric*, he wrote about it and again remarked that laughter is exclusive to humans. Almost two thousand years later, Rabelais (2012) repeated the idea: “le rire est propre de l’homme.” Cicero (transl. 1996) and Quintilian (transl. 1976), in an effort to theorize about humor and the laughable, placed them in two Rhetoric categories: *inventio* and *peroratio*.

In 1759, Joubert, in his *Treatise on Laughter*, wrote about the way the object of laughter moves the soul and speculated about that passion, which produces the known physiological effects. That theory was used by Bakhtin (1984), a philosopher of language who explored humor and laughter in some of his works. Earlier, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Hobbes, born prematurely when his mother heard distressing news about a foreign invasion (he once wrote “fear and I were born twins together”) developed a bitter vision of laughter. Hobbes (1650) considered laughing as “nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison the infirmities of others.” Wittgenstein (1953), well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote “humor is not a mood, but a way of looking at the world.” Such statement makes Wittgenstein’s thought peculiar, since he does not consider laughter.

Other philosophers also wrote about humor, but further analysis is beyond the scope of this text. Still, it is worth mentioning Bergson (1900), who wrote about the social function of laughter; Freud (transl. 1968), who stated that laughter develops in a way similar to dreams; and Foucault, who referred to the relation between laughter and the unthinkable (Miller, 1994).

After all that theory and after so much time, a few questions remain. What is humor, to begin with? Should humor and laughter always be studied as one phenomenon? What is the importance of humor and laughter in human society? This article tries to make progress towards an answer to one specific question: what is the importance of laughter in the corporate environment? The text has three sections: concepts on humor and laughter; their importance to rhetoric, here understood as the capacity to argue in order to convince and persuade; and the importance of humor and laughter in the corporate environment.

### **Humor, Laughter and the Laughable**

Humor and laughter appear in a number of genres and ways: romantic, ironic, sarcastic, light (comedy), slapstick, surreal, critic, amusing, sophisticated, acid, corrosive, constructive, and self-deprecating. According to Bremer and Roodenburg (1997), humor was so important in ancient Greece that Aristophanes’ comedies were only staged on specific days, selected for institutionalized mockery at friends and foes alike. Humor was at times even considered dangerous, since it could trigger unpleasant events.

Since laughter was associated to pleasure, Plato, in *Philebus*, sustained that humor was connected to mixed passions that stemmed from affections of the soul. Since man is the only animal with a soul, it can be inferred that already around 450 BC laughter as exclusive to humankind had already been proposed. Socrates also placed laughter as a passion of the soul. Also in *Philebus*, Plato wrote that Socrates exploited the laughable as a mixture of pleasure and agony, saying in that dialogue: “even at a comedy the soul experiences a mixed feeling of pain and pleasure”. As per Alberti (2012), Socratic grounds for such statement are that envy and malice are equally related to pain (the envious individual rejoices with somebody else’s suffering). Moreover, according to Socrates,

ignorance and stupidity, where the laughable mostly resides, are evil in pure state. The man who believes he is richer, more handsome, and wiser than what he really is becomes funny. Weakness is also a reason for laughs. To this day, many comedies exploit the pairs determined by extremes: poverty/wealth, ignorance/wisdom, superiority/inferiority, and friends/enemies. In the work environment, there is a tendency to use the boss as a character for jokes (pair superiority/inferiority). The text “the boss is someone who is early when you are late and late when you are early” demonstrates employee discomfort in the presence of the hierarchical superior.

Also in *Philebus*, Socrates elaborates on the attributes of the laughing individual and classifies people as friends or foes. When laughing (pleasure) at friends, the passion which is present is envy (pain) – that is how Plato, still in *Philebus*, exemplifies mixed passions. The philosopher therefore associates the pleasure of laughing to false friendship or false respect, inferior to truth and beauty. Plato, by associating humor to falsehood, loathed comedy as he loathed poetry and rhetoric itself, since rhetoric was the art of convincing, regardless of what truth might be. For Plato, only philosophy, as apprehension of truth (*logos*) deserved credit, as opposed to the realm of passion (*pathos*) where humor resides.

Though Aristotle’s treatise on comedy has been lost, his thoughts about humor can be appreciated both in *Poetic* and in *Rhetoric*. More than that, in *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle developed a short analysis of laughter and jest. When approaching virtue as a middle ground, the philosopher disdained buffoons, those who pursue laughter for its own sake. Virtue, according to Aristotle, resides in arguing convincingly through laughter, practicing what he called *eutrapelia*, the skill of being funny in a light, civilized way thus attaining equilibrium between boorishness and buffoonery. When an executive tells an employee who works for him, “Do not consider me your boss, just a colleague who is always right,” he puts the employee in his dutiful place without unpleasantness if the phrase is gracefully said in the proper context. This executive practices *eutrapelia*. In other words, jokes can be adequate or inadequate. One has to know the difference. “Irony serves the well-bred better than buffoonery; the one who uses irony makes jokes to amuse himself, the buffoon does it in an attempt to amuse others;” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, transl. 2003).

Though humor as a civilized pursuit did present advances since the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (buffoonery less acceptable and at least reduction of the use of insults as a way to achieve laughter), up to this day we see, for example, television shows that do exactly as condemned by Aristotle and other philosophers. Other examples of lowly humor can be occasionally found in the workplace. “Whoever knows how to do the job, does it - he who doesn’t know becomes the boss”. This bad joke clearly connects the boss with the second element of the pair wisdom/ignorance. “When you don’t do it, you’re lazy. When your boss doesn’t do it, he’s too busy”. This phrase associates the boss with laziness and deceit. In either case, humor is achieved by insulting.

Romans took pride in their humor, which Cicero (transl. 1966) considered as bearing “a polite gracefulness, more spirited than the one produced by the Greeks”. Quintilian (transl. 1976) is less consistent: he wrote that the Romans invented literary satire, but also that they “fell behind” in comedy. Anyway, both Cicero and Quintilian did make comments on “the adequate measure of gracefulness” within limits imposed by respectability. According to them, especially Quintilian, humor has to be elegant, graceful, so that it can (and should) be utilized as an instrument of persuasion. They also reject lowly forms of humor that, rather than reduce the distance between orator and audience, have the exact opposite effect. Those comments by Cicero and Quintilian reinforce the notion that humor can be very positive indeed in the workplace, as long as precise limits are respected – caricature, ridicule and mockery have to be avoided. The phrase “do it tomorrow, we have made enough mistakes for today”, depending on the circumstances, may be

refreshing and will not offend anyone, but to say “I like you – you remind me of myself when I was stupid” is both harsh and offensive.

Early Christianity morally condemned buffoonery and jest. Paul, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, considered humor as some kind of evil: “Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient” (Ephesians, 5.4, King James Version). Gantar (2005) showed that later, Christian thinkers speculated that laughter “was a symptom of Satan’s influence”. John Chrysostom (transl. 1888), for example, not only reproached jests but also reminded that Jesus never laughed: “And this [...] but nowhere laugh, nay, nor smile but a little; no one at least of the evangelists has mentioned this”.

George (1999) in his article “An Austere Age without Laughter” wrote:

To medieval thinkers, laughter was a complex subject, perhaps more complex than it is to most of us. It was considered to be a fundamental part of human nature, as the words of Notker Labeo, a monk of St. Gall who died in 1022, indicate: “homo est animal rationale, mortale, risus capax” (“Man is a rational, moral animal, capable of laughter”).

Thomas Aquinas (1274) was more open to humor and quoted Aristotle to support his point of view. He wrote: “Now this relaxation of the mind from work consists in playful words or deeds. Therefore, it becomes a wise and virtuous man to have recourse to such things at times. Moreover the Philosopher [Ethic. ii, 7; iv], 8 assigns to games the virtue of *eutrapelia*, which we may call pleasantness.” Medieval Christianity was too concerned with the domain of eternal life and good behavior to put much effort into understanding laughter as a phenomenon. At a certain point (more or less on the eve of Renaissance), good laughter and bad laughter were again considered separately, and Aristotle’s “virtue in the middle” was again accepted when humor was involved, as shown by Thomas Aquinas’s phrase.

Moreover, there was a popular culture in the Middle Ages that, according to Bakhtin (1984), had humor as common practice. That author examined both sides of medieval culture: the shadowy side, the very well known, and the side he termed as the carnival, or comic side. The popular culture then mixed joy and dread (of hell and punishment). Laughter was, since the fear of eternal damnation was so pervasive, a way of gaining relief.

Laughter and fear were indeed part of medieval culture, but the corporate world today shows some similitude. In the corporate world, laughter also happens to relieve stress. In addition to that, a very common way to express humor in corporations is to delight upon the ridiculous. Humor as a way to expose the ridiculous places people in a position of fear. This is true in the modern corporation as it was true in the Middle Ages (Joubert, 1579), when *ridiculous* had the meaning of vice, error, and deviation. Mistakes and attitudes that could lead to being ridiculous were a great cause of worry, not only as a matter of personal avoidance – noble men should refrain from laughing at another man’s disgrace. According to Alberti (1999), vulnerability to scorn is, to this day, the greatest concern of many people.

For Hobbes (1650), laughter is the expression of humor that comes from situations of superiority. He considered that laughter is brought about by the passion of pride or glory experienced by a subject that feels above other (or others). For him, passions consisted by nature of experiencing pleasure or pain according to signs of honor and dishonor, that numbered twenty. Laughter was the twelfth.

There is a passion which hath no name, but the sign of it is that distortion of the countenance we call LAUGHTER, which is always joy, but what joy, what we think, and

wherein we triumph when we laugh. [...] I may therefore conclude that the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly (chapter 45, # 23).

Again, workplace humor, in an ideal world, should be strictly non-Hobbesian – unfortunately, places and circumstances do exist causing people to be ridiculed and bullied in the office (Harvey, Heames, Richey & Leonard, 2006). Hutcheson (1750), writing exactly one hundred years later than Hobbes, commented on benevolent laughter when trying to prove the excellence of human nature. Such kind of laughter, according to Hutcheson, is far more desirable than scorn, which happens to be its opposite. He deemed the laughable as resulting from a situation of contrast between what is expected and what really happens.

Finally, Bergson (1900) stated that laughter does have a social function:

In order to understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society. Above all, we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification (Chapter I, 1).

This historical summation shows two very basic facts about humor that enhance the understanding of the role it plays in the corporate world. First, laughter is a cultural phenomenon, since the perception of what is funny and what is not is largely dependent on the way human nature is perceived; second, laughter is a social process (Bergson), since it can only happen if more than one person (real or imaginary) is present. At least two characters must participate: the one who causes laughter and the one who laughs. Two other personalities may appear, the one being laughed at and the person who shares laughter.

### **The Rhetoric of Humor in Corporations and Institutions**

Humor in the workplace has to do with corporate ethos, individual ethos, and communication between orator and audience.

There is a gap between corporate ethoses, the image of corporations in general, and the internal practices in the organizations. Boskin (1997) quoted President Calvin Coolidge (“The business of America is business”) to show that humor *about* the American corporation is very rare. Still according to Boskin, there is a concern with maintaining an image of seriousness and efficiency. However, the same author reminds that “Within the workplace, raillery is frequently employed to define social place and status as well as to ameliorate conflict and intense pressures”. Such duality between company ethos and need for humor leads to the conclusion that the limits of humor in the organization are defined by its rhetoric function: to conquer the audience and cause relaxation (Quintilian, transl. 1976) while keeping socially acceptable behavior (Cicero, transl. 1996) by not surpassing the boundaries set by respectability.

It can be added that since proper humor can be an instrument of persuasion, a remark can be made on the ethos of the employees and managers who use it: those are people spirited and skilled in the use of language (good appearance, as in so many cases, also helps). It is necessary, for humor in organizations to be effective, that both orator and audience know what is being talked about. An example can be found in in the text box below, that shows mock timesheet instructions.

*TO: ALL PERSONNEL*

*FROM: ACCOUNTING*

*It has come to our attention recently that many of you have been turning in timesheets that specify large amounts of "Miscellaneous Unproductive Time" (Code 5309). Attached below is a sheet specifying a tentative extended job code list based on our observations of employee activities.*

*5316 Useless Meeting*

*5318 Trying to Sound Knowledgeable While in Meeting*

*5320 Waiting for Lunch*

*5393 Covering for Incompetence of Coworker Friend*

*5401 Trying to Explain Concept to Coworker Who is Stupid*

*5482 Eating Snack*

*5500 Filling Out Timesheet*

*5501 Inventing Timesheet Entries*

*5510 Feeling Bored*

*5601 Complaining About Low Pay*

*6205 Hiding from Boss*

*6206 Gossip*

*6211 Updating Resume*

*6611 Staring Into Space*

*6612 Staring At Computer Screen*

*6615 Transcendental Meditation*

*7281 Extended Visit to the Bathroom*

*7401 Talking With Plumber on Phone*

*Figure 1. Mock time sheet instructions*

The text, presumably inspired by facts occurred within real companies, is a fine example of rhetoric of humor in the workplace: it shows a subtle balance between logos, as it shows the ways workers are unproductive, and pathos, when it complains about stupidity and boredom.

Humor actually can bring productivity. A survey coordinated by Mesmer-Magnus (2012), a professor at University of North Carolina-Wilmington, found that humor in the workplace "enhanced work performance, satisfaction, workgroup cohesion, health, and coping effectiveness, as well as decreased burnout, stress, and work withdrawal" (p. 190).

In order to verify how humor poses an influence in the workplace, a research was carried out. The chosen methodological location was a set of organizations in the Paraiba Valley, a highly industrialized area in southeastern Brazil. The Valley has certain features of a developed country, like airplane manufacturing and a strong information technology sector, and at the same time is physically located in a developing country, so some universality can be achieved. To obtain a representative sample of people working in the corporate world, questionnaires were given to approximately 200 individuals who held college-level jobs in eight mid-size corporations and in two technical colleges. Both questionnaires and analysis are tools of qualitative research: the aim is not to prove a thesis through an experiment, but rather investigate the use and limitations of humor at work. The theoretical background oriented the questions, but did not lead to the formulation of a hypothesis.

The questions were arranged in four groups of three questions each and they intended to clarify four basic issues:

1. Is humor accepted as a normal practice in the workplace?

2. Is there any difference in organizational performance because of humor?
3. What are the reasons for humor in the workplace?
4. Does humor happen between all levels of employees of the business hierarchy?

Besides the questionnaire, the respondents were invited to write anonymous comments on the subject.

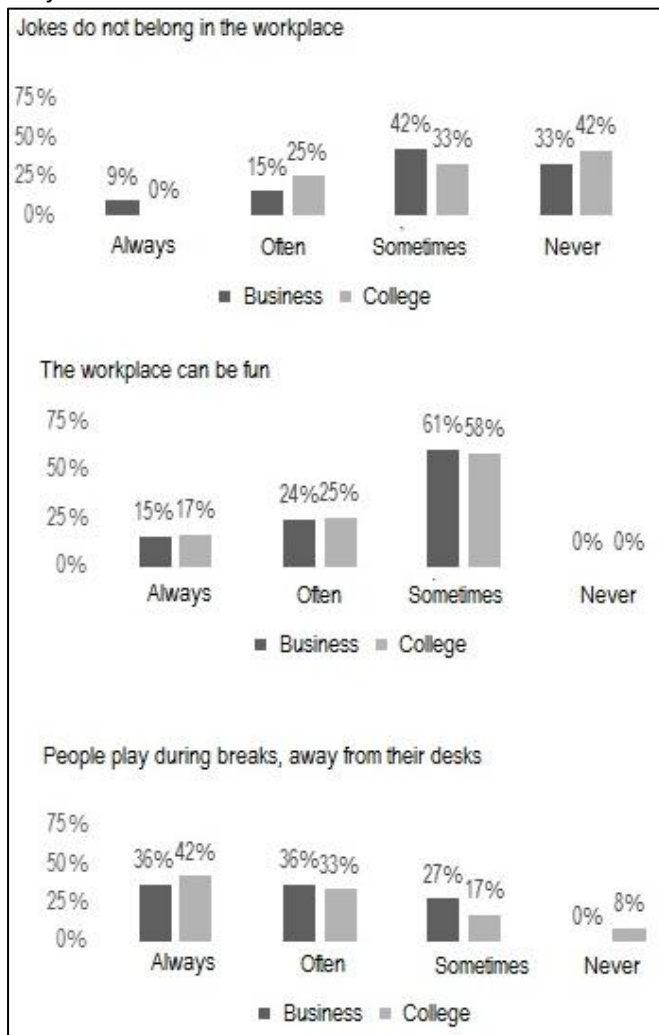


Figure 2. Questions on the practice of humor

Figure 2 summarizes the answers to three questions on the acceptance of humor as normal practice in the workplace. The results, as for the other blocks of questions, show no significant discrepancies between the attitudes toward humor of corporate workers and college professors. This is important, since college prepares people for the workplace.

Plato (transl. 2000) considered laughter as some variety of vice, akin to illusion, and a close look at the answers to the questions summarized in Figure 2 reveals some agreement with Plato. The numbers show a mix of awareness (jokes, depending on the occasion, may not belong in the workplace) and tolerance (the workplace can be fun). Quintilian (transl. 2000) helps us to explain such contradiction, by proposing the existence of limits. It can be added that those limits largely depend on place and circumstances. For example, “real definition of a microsecond is the interval between pressing yes to delete all files and realizing you shouldn’t have.” This joke may not be funny at all to someone who has just accidentally deleted his files.

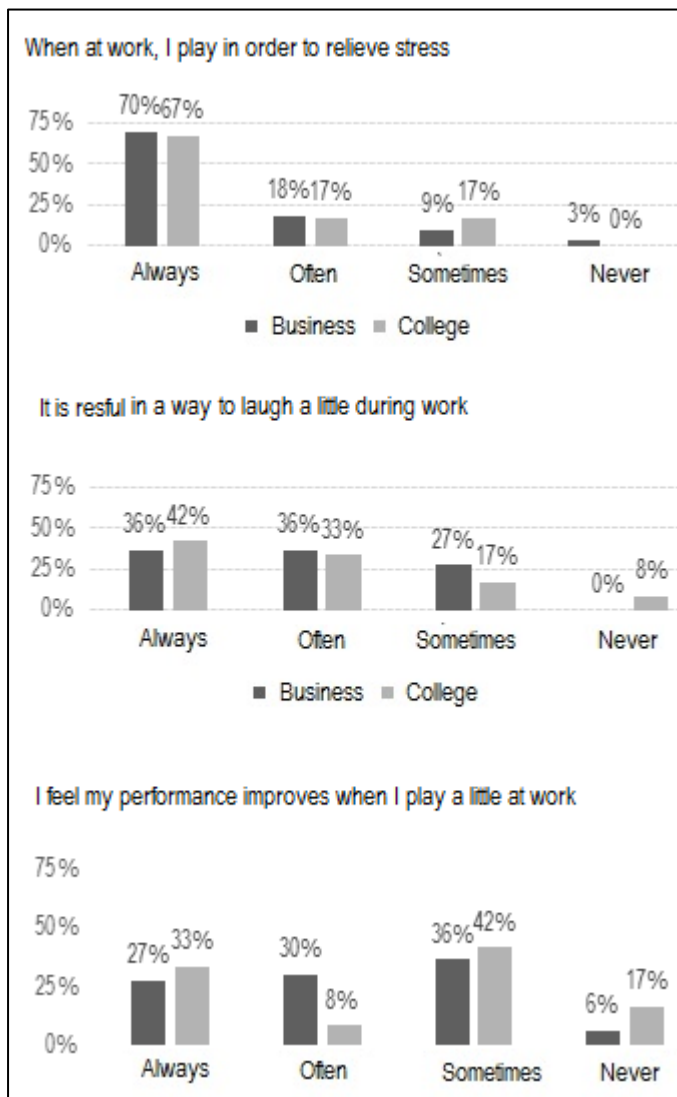


Figure 3. Questions on the practice of humor and organizational performance

Figure 3 shows how humor affects organizational performance. Despite Plato, who considers, as mentioned before, laughter as a form of vice, the plots, which represent the average organization, present humor as something desirable and, more than that, a performance-improving tool. As Aristotle and later Rabelais said, laughter is a trait of humankind.

An example, gathered during the research, vividly illustrates these points. During a particularly stressful discussion on which way to solve a serious problem of industrial construction, a manager, answering a technical professional who disagreed with him, said “You are so right that you are buried under an avalanche of right assumptions”. He sounded ironic, but he was creating an opportunity to enter into an agreement with his opponent about a minor point. Everybody laughed at the idea of an avalanche, an agreement was outlined, and the manager’s point of view prevailed. That was an instance of argumentation through laughter.

Quintilian (transl. 1976) conditioned the efficacy of humor to the keen obedience to limits. The stressful climate in corporate discussion when there is a lot at stake can be taken to such heights that pathos may take over the arguments to the point where technical skill may be temporarily lost.



Humor is very effective exactly in these moments (like in the case presented above), since it can mitigate the pathetic component that tends to obscure logic, which must prevail in these moments. Such aspect encourages a more careful look at the answers to the third question in figure 2. Performance can improve, not only because of relaxation, but also by reducing paths.

Teachers who add, through humor, some pathos to their knowledge (logos) are more likely to create a favorable ethos, which makes easier to achieve closeness with their audience, the students. Figure 2 also shows results that support Wittgenstein’s statement that humor is a way to look at the world. As such, it can reflect faith in human nature (as per Hutcheson) and therefore be able to provide a measure of relief. Teachers intuitively know that students are less stressed and more open to learning when they interact with a teacher whose ethos bears some humor.

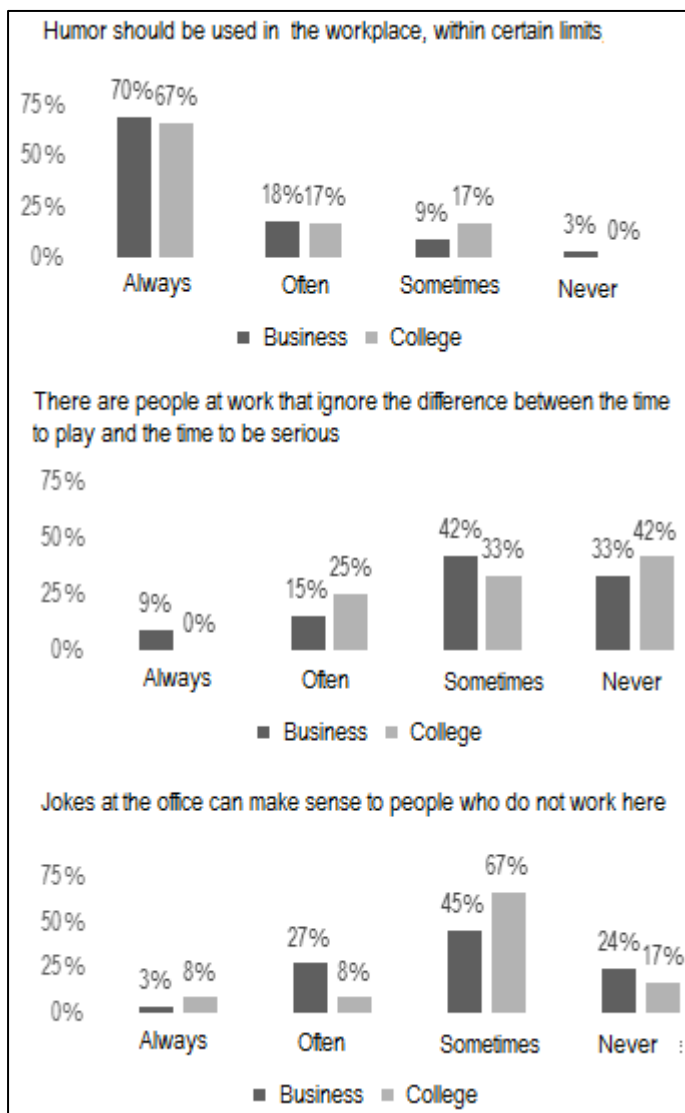


Figure 4. Reasons for humor in the workplace

Figure 4 makes very clear that there are limits to humor within the workplace. The comments on the previous plots are reinforced by the answers to the questions shown in Figure 4, which specifically shows that the majority of the workers agree with Quintilian (even though they have no knowledge of his work) in the sense that laughter can cause one to relax.

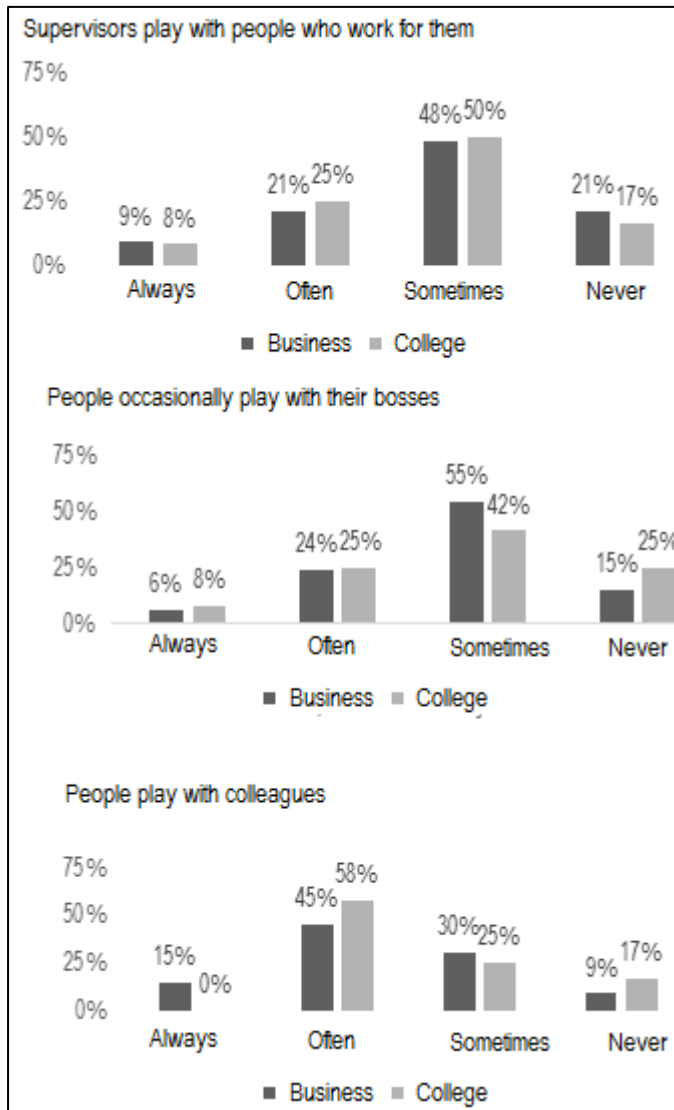


Figure 5. Questions on hierarchy

Figure 5 demonstrates how humor happens between hierarchical levels. The answers in general show cordiality, a local trait that showed up despite the intention to find general patterns. The theory on cordiality as the core of Brazilian personality was famously developed in the 1930s, by Sergio Buarque de Holanda, a historian. According to Bergson (1900), there must be some level of involvement between the actors of discourse who practice humor. Such concept was reinforced by Perelman & Tyteca (1958) – arguments establish a relationship between orator and audience. In order for workers to play with their bosses, there must be some “camaraderie”, which is common in Brazil.

The plots show that humor in the workplace can spread horizontally or vertically, but horizontality, meaning humorous interaction between workers of the same level, is predominant. Therefore, hierarchy always has an influence on the way humor shows up in the workplace.

Besides the questions whose answers were plotted, there was a field in the questionnaire where the respondents were encouraged to write freely. The texts showed a few patterns that corroborated some of the predominant answers seen in the plots, but did add a few other considerations, especially the importance of courtesy. The patterns observed are listed below.

- Humor is not mandatory, but it does help to create a better work environment.
- Humor stimulates innovation and creativity since it is associated with freedom.
- Humor helps to develop the self-esteem of otherwise shy workers.
- Courtesy is even more important than humor.
- Humor must not go beyond certain limits (this was part of the questions, but the respondents nevertheless did stress it).

### Conclusion

After analyzing the answers to the questionnaires, a few conclusions may be drawn. The research did not contemplate scorn, condemned by both Aristotle (transl. 2000) and Plato (transl. 2000), and did not include laughter stemming from superiority described by Hobbes. The laughter researched was Bakhtinian, used to relax from stressful situations; Aristotelian, in the sense of ethical balance between extremes; and Quintilianean, exerted within the limits of respectability demanded by the work environment.

Laughter is inherent to the human condition, according to Aristotle (transl. 2000), Freud (transl. 1969) and Rabelais (transl. 2012); is rhetorical, since it depends on an interaction between orator and audience; has a strong social component (Bergson, 1900) and can have a specific objective, like written by Bakhtin (1984) and Hobbes(1650), not always for the benefit of everyone involved.

It is clear that humor is practiced in the organizational environment. There must be a specific context for its appearance, triggered by individual impulses. Laughter cannot be imposed – if so, the effect will be the opposite of the intended result, since it will no longer exist in the realm of rhetoric. Humor, then, happens when certain conditions are set for a pact between orator and audience: same knowledge of the world, absence of strong cultural discrepancies, proper timing, and, as one of the respondents wrote, “a work environment that has enough freedom to allow for laughter and play in proper conditions.”

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