

# COMMUNICATION CURRENTS

Knowledge for Communicating Well



A Publication of the National  
Communication Association



## Humor as Serious Business

If we believe what we see on television, the typical workplace is either dry, rational, and chock full of consensus (like those cheesy, not-so-candid textbook pictures of “strategic decision making”), dramatic and tense (think *Grey’s Anatomy* or *Law and Order*) or circus-like (think *Scrubs* or *The Office*). And yet, for most of us, our jobs don’t really fit very neatly into any of these categories. Whether generally somber, tedious, or hectic, many of us enjoy our work when it is punctuated with laughter.

While few would argue that these moments of lightness should be outlawed, there is not much agreement about the role of humor in organizations. Is it just a natural way to let off steam? Meaningless small talk? A way to cause trouble? A source of hurt feelings, lawsuits, and misunderstandings?

All of these are possibilities, but organizational communication researchers Sarah Tracy (Arizona State University, Tempe), Karen Myers (University of California, Santa Barbara), and Clifton Scott (University of North Carolina, Charlotte) argue that humor is actually at the heart of many work processes. Like any other form of communication, humor can just as easily lead to harmony or heartbreak, but these researchers demonstrate that it nevertheless shapes how employees collaborate in difficult and unpredictable situations. In their study of correctional officers, firefighters, and 911 call takers, they claim that humor is actually serious business.

Regardless of the overall mood, pace, climate, or culture of an organization, department, or group, moments of tension are likely to emerge. The everyday business of making plans and decisions, coordinating activity, and dealing with clients is likely to involve some tension. This is particularly true in service occupations, where employees are more closely associated with the product (e.g., service) they offer. The firefighters, 911 call takers, and correctional officers Tracy, Myers, and Scott studied are all examples of a specific type of service occupation, human service workers—people whose job it is to help manage and attend to their clients’ overall quality of life. These employees and other human service workers such as nurses, police officers, teachers, and social workers often find the emotional demands of their jobs challenging, a fact that has made recruiting and retention within these occupations challenging.

For example, many human service workers are expected to show feelings of compassion, empathy, hope, and so on in the course of delivering product to their clients—even when they have mixed or negative feelings about them. This need to put on a good face is all the more difficult when the client’s situation is disturbing, tragic, or disgusting. Many employees strive to find personal meaning and identity in their work, and this positive sense of self can be difficult to maintain when clients behave badly or seem to deserve their situation. For example, the researchers cite a correctional officer who compared herself to his siblings, one an attorney and the other a business manager. Unlike her siblings, she found herself performing body cavity searches looking for contraband. By laughing about the irony and awkwardness of this task, she was able point out a sharp contrast, at once acknowledging the disgusting nature of the job and distancing herself from the role of “crotch inspector”—a task required during the strip searches that mark officers’ everyday work.

Scholars in disciplines as diverse as communication, psychology, sociology, and management have observed for some time that humor tends to emerge in the very moments we would least expect it—times of stress, confusion, and uncertainty. These episodes feel tense because interacting with and serving others, especially in organizationally dictated ways, can potentially conflict with our own feelings of self worth. In other words, people tend to joke around when there is some need to let off

steam. But does this popular steam valve theory of humor really tell the whole story?

Tracy, Myers, and Scott wondered if there was something more going on with humor. In separate studies of 911 call takers, correctional officers, and firefighters, all originally concerning other research topics, they noticed that humor didn't only make work more enjoyable—it also seemed to shape the way they thought about the otherwise serious work that was going on. It's one thing to say that humor isn't all that bad or that it's an interesting coping device, but quite another to conclude that this seemingly lighthearted communication actually changes the way they actually do their serious work. If humor seemed to consistently break out in ambiguous and threatening situations, the researchers wondered if the banter actually shaped how those situations were handled.

They had noted a number of potential explanations for the humor during their field work, but it wasn't until Tracy, Myers, and Scott began analyzing their data systematically that they began to detect ways in which employees use humor to actually make sense of their work. The researchers analyzed about 1000 pages of data from over 300 hours of field observations and interviews. Since people tend to be surrounded by more information than they can possibly process, employees simplify their environment by using talk to highlight certain issues and ignore others. For example, 911 call takers used humor to refocus their attention on the strange calls they receive—the drivers who dial 911 to get directions or citizens who call for emergency rescue when their cat is caught on power lines.

This simplification is particularly necessary when employees are faced with a confusing or ambiguous situation that could be interpreted and acted on in more than one way. Faced with several conflicting ideas about what is going on, sensemaking happens when people collaboratively weed out less plausible interpretations of the situation and arrive at a relatively stable sense of what they believe is going on and what should be done about it. While some episodes of sensemaking are more successful than others, employees tend to do this in patterns. The sensemaking we do in one troubling situation is frequently related to the sensemaking done in a previous crisis. By nicknaming people who rely on firefighters for minor healthcare as “frequent flyers,” for example, the firefighters can justify the more casual treatment they give to non-trauma patients.

So what holds these patterns of sensemaking together? Sense-making researchers believe that people who work together tend to rely on a common repertoire of abstract ideas or symbolic resources. They believe that understanding the relationship between these patterns and resources is the key to diagnosing many organizational problems. Tracy, Myers, and Scott found the one thing that correctional officers, firefighters, and 911 call takers clearly had in common was a recognized tendency to use humor to deal with sense-threatening situations. Furthermore, this banter was oftentimes used when the preferred public identity, and dignity, of these employees was threatened. For example, the researchers listened to firefighters describe bullshit calls in which they were called to free a man who got his thumbs stuck in a sprinkler system or stop an adult son from masturbating in the bathroom. In these cases, humor functioned not just as a way to let off steam or to maintain egos. More than that, all of this joking around seemed to actually shape the ways that employees understood everyday tasks and problems. In other words, the banter wasn't merely a coping device but a tool used over and over to analyze and respond to difficult, chaotic, or confusing events that were commonplace in their work. This banter even helped new employees to learn about how to enact their new roles in these situations.

Tracy, Myers, and Scott concluded that managers need to take seriously the notion that humor can be central rather than peripheral to the ways people use communication to collaborate in trying circumstances. What's more, when it emerges in the actual process of work, these funny but seemingly-minor jokes, retorts, and stories actually influence work itself, not just the emotional mood or experience of it. Indeed, the researchers contend that managers should pay attention to employee humor, not because it should be curtailed but instead for the purpose of developing insights about what job tasks, client characteristics, and situations seem more or less uncomfortable or threatening. Through this humor, leaders can learn about these problems before they become unmanageable or cause problems with morale or turnover. The authors contend there is good reason to believe that most employees at all levels are more likely to retain what they learn from these situations, especially when the lessons are punctuated with humor. So, in fact, humor may not be so funny after all. In some instances, it is indeed serious business.

About the authors: Clifton W. Scott is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies and Organizational Science at University of North Carolina, Charlotte; Karen K. Myers is Assistant Professor of Communication at University of California, Santa Barbara; and Sarah J. Tracy is Associate Professor and Director of The Project for Wellness and Work-Life in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University, Tempe. The study was directed by Tracy when Myers and Scott were doctoral students at ASU. This essay is based upon the research article: Tracy, S. J., Myers, K. K., & Scott, C. W. (2006). Cracking jokes and crafting selves: Sensemaking and identity management among human service workers. *Communication Monographs*, 73, 283-308.

This essay appeared in *Communication Currents*, November 2006. Online at <http://www.natcom.org/?False>

[Landing Page](#) | [Enduring Impact of Coach Messages](#) | [Uncovering the Powers within PowerPoint®](#) | [Kokopelli: Southwest Icon and Male Fantasy](#) | [Common Misperceptions About Communication](#) | [Why Study Communication?](#) | [What's Most Important About Communication?](#) | [What's Unique About the Communication Discipline?](#)

[Archives](#) | [Current Issue](#)



Communication Currents is a publication of the [National Communication Association](#)

Copyright 2007, NCA | [About Communication Currents](#) | [For Media](#)

## Landing Page Content

