

HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER IN THE PUBLIC LECTURES OF MANAGEMENT GURUS

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This article uses conversation analysis in order to examine the in situ accomplishment of public lectures given by five management gurus: Tom Peters, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Peter Senge, Gary Hamil and Daniel Goleman. This reveals that humour and audience laughter are critical to understanding their live performances. The paper shows that collective laughter is not simply a spontaneous reaction to the gurus' humorous remarks or jokes. The gurus invite laughter by indicating to the audience members that and when it is appropriate and expected. Laughter is associated with the communication of messages which implicate criticism of either the audience members, or less commonly, the gurus themselves. The gurus' use of humour therefore creates an affiliative environment as they convey potential controversial messages. By using humour the gurus reduce the likelihood of audience disaffiliation and thereby enhance their reputations as highly effective and entertaining public speakers.

INTRODUCTION

A number of studies suggest that so-called management gurus currently dominate contemporary notions of the organizational ideal and the nature of the management role. (Barley, Meyer and Gash 1988; Gerlach 1996; Spell 2000). Management gurus are the authors of best-selling management books which purvey fashionable ideas, such as Excellence, Culture Change, Total Quality Management and Business Process Reengineering. The life-cycle of these ideas is characterized by a bell-shaped popularity curve (Abrahamson 1996; Carson *et al.* 2001), and most people in employment will have experienced, either directly or indirectly, the consequences following the implementation of one of them within their organization. In addition to writing best-selling management books (e.g., Peters and Waterman 1982; Kanter 1985; Senge, 1990; Hammer and Champy 1993), management gurus disseminate their ideas on the international management lecture circuit. As perhaps the highest profile group of management speakers in the world, they use their lectures to build their personal reputations with audiences of managers. Many gain reputations as powerful orators and subsequently market recordings of their talks as parts of video-based management training packages.

The literature on management gurus suggests that their public performances are critical to their popularity and success (Huczynski, 1993; Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1996; Jackson, 1997). Drawing on the work of Lewin (1951) and Sargant (1957), this literature depicts the gurus as experts in persuasive communication who seek to transform the consciousness of their audiences through powerful oratory. However, due to a complete lack of empirical research, there are at least two problems with this approach to understanding management gurus' oratory. First, it explains the gurus' oratorical power in terms of the gurus' use of rhetorical devices identified in the seminal work of Atkinson (1984a, b) on political oratory (see also Heritage and Greatbatch 1986). However, in contrast to Atkinson's research, perhaps because of the cost and difficulty of gaining access to the events, there are no detailed analyses of the gurus' live performances. Indeed, we are only aware of three brief descriptions of these events (Sharpe 1984; Oliver 1992; Guerrier and Gilbert 1995). Accordingly, there is an implicit and unwarranted assumption that the presentational techniques which are used in political oratory are also those used in management guru oratory and in the same proportion. The second problem is that, in drawing on the research on political oratory, the very limited literature on guru performances pays no attention either to the content of the gurus' messages or to the ways in which they evoke collective and individual responses from audience members.

These two problems mean that many questions remain to be answered with respect to how management gurus disseminate their ideas on the international management lecture circuit. For example, what presentational techniques do they use to communicate their messages and why? What forms of speaker/audience interaction occur during the gurus' lectures? What impact do audience members' immediate reactions have on the gurus' modes of presentation? While conducting a study which addresses these issues, we found that humour and audience laughter are critical to understanding the live performances of management gurus. The gurus and

their audiences accomplish important social actions through humour and laughter, especially in relation to the communication of messages which implicate criticism of either audience members or, less commonly, the gurus themselves.

In this paper, we examine humour and laughter in lectures conducted by five so-called management gurus: Tom Peters, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Peter Senge, Gary Hamil and Daniel Goleman. First, we discuss previous research on humour and laughter. We then introduce our analytical framework and describe our data, which comprise video recordings of the gurus' public lectures. Subsequently, we discuss the processes through which audience laughter is evoked, and examine what the gurus and their audiences accomplish through humour and laughter. We conclude by exploring the implications of our findings in the light of previous studies of both humour and public speaking.

RESEARCH ON HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER

Regardless of their specific emphases, theories of humour propose that the components of humorous remarks and incidents are "in mutual clash, conflict or contradiction" (Wilson 1979: 10). However, they diverge in explaining the functions and impact of humour. So-called disparagement and superiority theories link humour to hostility and malice, viewing it as a means through which people enhance their self-esteem and feelings of superiority by disparaging and laughing at others (Hobbes 1651; La Fave, Haddad and Maesen 1976; Zillman 1983). In contrast, relief theories explain humour and laughter in terms of the diffusion of tension which has been either intentionally or unintentionally built up in a situation. Humour and laughter, thus, express relief following the removal of a potential source of pain or stress (Berlyne 1968) and/or provide socially acceptable outlets for the release of repressed emotion, including aggression (Freud 1916). Finally, incongruity theories contend that laughter is related to surprise following the resolution of perceived incongruities, and that it may express affection as well as malice or relief (Koestler 1964; Berlyne 1968; Suls 1972; Cetola 1988).

Drawing on these theories, empirical studies of humour indicate that humour serves four primary functions (Giles et al. 1976): (1) to create and maintain social cohesion and group solidarity (e.g., Bradney 1957; Roy 1958; Coser 1959; Sykes 1966; LaFave and Mennell 1976; Boland and Hoffman 1986; Dwyer 1991); (2) to attack others in socially acceptable ways and/or to enhance self-esteem at the expense of others (e.g., Perry 1992; Collinson 1988; Rodrigues and Collinson 1995); (3) to gain the approval of others (cites); and (4) to manage embarrassment, fear or stress in threatening situations (e.g., Coser 1962; Fine 1977; Linstead 1985; Dandridge 1986; Ott 1989; Vinton's 1989).¹ These studies powerfully demonstrate that people use humour to accomplish important objectives. However, although they adopt a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives, and have been conducted by researchers based within a range of disciplines, they all neglect one crucial aspect of humour and laughter; they do not attend to the interactional accomplishment and co-ordination of humour-related actions, such as jokes, quips, and laughter (Norrick 1993). The significance of this is revealed when one examines the findings of conversation analytic (CA) studies of the interactional organization of jocular talk and laughter. These studies, which are based on detailed analysis of audio and video recordings of naturally occurring interactions, reveal that people rely upon a range of tacit, seen-but-unnoticed practices and procedures in order to produce, recognize and manage humour-related actions. Thus, for example, although laughter is often depicted as a spontaneous response to 'humorous' talk, in practice it is routinely invited by prior speakers through the use a range of techniques which enable them to indicate that and when it is appropriate for others to laugh. Moreover, respondents have at their disposal an array of practices through which they can produce, or decline to produce, laughter and other humour-related responses (e.g., Jefferson 1979; Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff 1987; Glenn 1989, 1991/1992; Gavioli 1995; Rutter 1997).

It is perhaps not surprising that CA studies have had little, if any, impact on humour research. With notable exceptions (Glenn 1989; Rutter 1997), CA researchers have not related their findings to theories and issues in the field of 'humourology'. Consequently, the empirical, conceptual and methodological implications of CA work for humour research remain unclear. Below, we seek to clarify this matter by relating our CA findings to theories of humour.

METHOD AND DATA

CA has been successfully used in previous studies of public speaking in political contexts by Atkinson (1984a, b, 1986), Heritage and Greatbatch (1986), Clayman (1993) and McIlvenny (1996). CA directs analytic attention to the in situ accomplishment of social actions and activities (Atkinson and Heritage 1984). Using inductive search procedures to identify regularities in verbal and/or nonverbal interaction, CA research describes the practices and reasoning that speakers use in producing their own behavior and in interpreting and dealing with the behavior of others. Analysis emerges from the understandings of the parties' circumstances, which they unavoidably display as they interact with each other.

Our analysis focuses on video recordings of public lectures given by Tom Peters, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Peter Senge, Gary Hamil and Daniel Goleman. These gurus are renowned for their public performances and represent a range of popular ideas that have had a major impact on organizational life in the last fifteen years. The recordings are drawn from the following commercially produced training packages: Tom Peters - *Tom Peters Experience 1 & 2*, *Thriving on Chaos 1-3* and *Service with Soul*; Rosabeth Moss Kanter - *Managing Change* and *The Great Corporate Balancing Act* and *Lessons in Leadership*; Peter Senge - *The Fifth Discipline and the Infrastructures of a Learning Organization* and *The Knowledge-Building Process: The Important Role of Learning Communities*; Gary Hamil - *Lessons in Leadership*; and Daniel Goleman - *Emotional Intelligence: A Cornerstone of Learning Communities* and *Emotional Intelligence*. The videos involving Peters and Moss Kanter combine footage of the two gurus lecturing with case studies and interviews concerning organizations which are mentioned in the gurus' lectures. The videos involving Senge, Hamil and Goleman include complete performances. The 19 hours of video material contain 14 hours of the gurus lecturing to audiences of managers.

INVITING LAUGHTER

The management gurus' lectures do not involve any examples of audience members disaffiliating from the gurus' by booing, heckling or laughing derisively at their messages. However, the audience members do produce displays of affiliation by, inter alia, clapping, laughing supportively, nodding their heads and smiling. In some cases, these affiliative responses are produced by one or two individuals. In others, they involve multiple audience members acting in concert with each other. In this paper, we examine the latter forms of audience response, that is cases in which audience members produce *collective* displays of affiliation.

When audience members collectively display their affiliation with the gurus', they do so predominantly by laughing. Applause is confined to the beginning and end of the gurus' presentations and to three incidents during Tom Peters's lectures where laughter leads to applause, one of which involves only a handful of people clapping.² In this respect, the gurus' lectures are akin to various forms of public speaking, including university lectures and training seminars, in which applause is usually not treated as a relevant activity *either* on its own *or* in conjunction with laughter.

As Table 1 shows, the lectures contain 130 cases of collective audience laughter. By laughing at the gurus' remarks, audience members convey their appreciation of something humorous therein. Their laughter is manifestly supportive because it is, without exception, evoked by messages that are recognizably "humorous". Thus audience members laugh *with* the gurus, not at them.³ This is not to say that the audience members' laughter represents an unequivocal expression of support for the messages which the gurus convey through their humorous remarks. As in other settings, people may laugh "because they appreciate a good joke and not because they support the speaker" Clayman (1992:450).⁴

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Studies of political oratory demonstrate that collective audience responses, such as applause, are not simply spontaneous reactions to the messages which evoke them (e.g., Atkinson 1984a, b; Heritage and Greatbatch's 1986; Clayman 1993). As collective actions, their production is underpinned by the basic sociological

principle that people prefer to act like those around them so as to avoid social isolation (Asch 1951). Thus, for example, while individual audience members may wish to clap in response to public speakers' remarks, they will generally wish to do so in situations in which they are assured that other audience members will do the same. As a result, audience members usually clap in situations in which public speakers indicate clearly to them that and when these responses will become relevant activities for them to do. In most cases, the speakers then confirm the relevance of applause by ceding the floor until audiences' responses end or begin to subside.

Atkinson (1984a, b) and Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) identify seven rhetorical devices (contrasts, lists, puzzle-solution, headline-punchline, combinations, position taking and pursuits) through which speakers elicit applause from their audiences (see also Brodine 1986; Clayman 1993; Grady and Potter 1985; McIlvenny 1996). These devices facilitate applause by emphasizing messages and by providing clearly projectable message completion points around which individual audience members can coordinate their actions. Heritage and Greatbatch's (1986) analysis of political speeches delivered to the British Conservative, Labour and Liberal party conferences in 1981 revealed that just over two-thirds of the instances of full-scale applause in the speeches occurred in response to messages which were packaged in one or more of the rhetorical formats.⁵

Although the same principles concerning collective audience responses apply in the gurus' lectures, the generation of collective laughter is not as strongly associated with the use of the seven rhetorical formats as is applause (and possibly laughter) at political meetings. Only forty-eight (37.5 percent) of the messages which precipitate laughter in the gurus' lectures are packaged in one of these formats.⁶ In the other cases, the gurus use different procedures to provide messages which precipitate laughter with emphasis and clearly projectable completion points. This suggests that the gurus' oratorical power may not be as heavily reliant on the rhetorical devices identified by Atkinson as previous studies of management gurus (e.g., Huczynski, 1993; Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1996 Jackson, 1997) have claimed.

The gurus do not rely on audience members to recognize that collective laughter is a relevant activity on the basis of the content of their messages alone. Rather, they also establish the relevance of audience laughter through the use of a range of verbal and non-verbal actions during the delivery, and/or following the completion, of their messages. Occasionally, they announce that they are about to say something humorous. More generally, however, they 'invite' audience laughter by smiling, laughing, and using 'comedic' facial expressions, gestures and prosody. Consider the following extract from a Tom Peters lecture in which he quotes Ross Perot. The quotation involves Perot praising Electronic Data Systems (EDS) for adopting a "flat and fluid" structure, and disparaging another company, General Motors (GM), for retaining a cumbersome bureaucratic structure. Peters twice evokes collective audience laughter.

EXTRACT 1 [TOC2 – 35.56: "When you see a snake"]

Peters: My favourite Peroism of all was his description, right before leaving GM, of what he sa:w as the difference between Electronic Data Systems and GM.

(0.6) He said,

[At EDS (.) WHEN YOU SEE A SNAKE (.) YOU KILL IT'.
[Leans forward, glares, uses angry tone of voice

Audience:--> [hhhhhhhhhhh hhhhhhhhhh hhhhhhh-h-h[-h

[Turns and walks [

Peters: [He said, 'At GM when you see a snake, [you search the world for the top

[Leans forward/smile face

consultant on snakes'.

Audience:--> hhhhhhhhhh hhhhhhhhhh

Peters: Then you appoint a committee on snakes and you study snakes for the next two years. (1.0) <Flat (.) fluid (.) and get on with it (.) that':s the creature

Peters provides the messages which evoke laughter with both emphasis and clearly projectable completion points by, inter alia, using a puzzle-solution format. Thus he begins by establishing a puzzle in the minds of the audience members (lines 1-2): what did Ross Perot see as the difference between EDS and GM? He then offers a two-part solution which is formed as a contrast (Lines 3-4 and 8-11). In this way, he highlights the contents of the messages against a background of surrounding speech materials. He also provides the audience members with resources to anticipate the completion of the two messages, for they can match each part of the emerging solution to the puzzle in order to infer what it will take for it to be complete. In the case of the second part of the solution, they can also match it against the first part.

In establishing the relevance of audience laughter, Peters does not solely rely on the 'humorous' content of his remarks. He also invites audience laughter through the use of a range of non-verbal techniques. In the first case of laughter (line 6), which follows Peters's depiction of Perot's commendation of EDS, Peters uses comedic gestures, facial expressions and prosody. As he quotes Perot on EDS (lines 4-5), he suddenly leans forward, glares at a section of the audience and speaks louder as he adopts a 'mock angry' tone. Then, as he completes the quotation ("you kill it"), he bares his teeth as he 'spits' out the words. Together with Perot's incongruous metaphorical imagery - seeing and killing snakes in a corporate context - Peters's non-verbal actions establish the relevance of audience laughter. In the second case of audience laughter (line 12), which follows Peters's depiction of Perot's disparagement of GM (Lines 8-11), Peters, reverting to a 'low key' form of speech delivery, establishes the relevance of laughter by leaning forward and smiling at the audience as he completes the quotation. In both cases, Peters confirms the relevance of laughter by ceding the floor until the audiences' laughter ends.

The one hundred and thirty cases of collective laughter in our data occur in response to messages which convey to the audience that and when laughter is appropriate. Thus they do not comprise spontaneous reactions to humorous remarks, but rather are 'invited' by the gurus. In the next section, we examine what the gurus and the audience members accomplish by evoking and producing laughter in these cases.

THE ROLE OF HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER IN MANAGEMENT GURU PUBLIC LECTURES

With one exception, the remarks which precipitate laughter fall into five groups.⁷ Table 2 shows that seventy-two (55%) of the remarks which precipitate laughter communicate management ideas by praising or criticizing managers and organizations; twelve (9%) communicate management ideas without praising or criticizing managers and organizations; twenty-five (19%) communicate ideas without reference to managers or organizations; seven (5%) refer to potential shortcomings in the gurus' theories; and thirteen (10%) set up the delivery of key messages. Below, we examine each of these groups of laughter episodes in more detail.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Communicating Management Ideas by Praising or Criticizing Managers and Organizations

Often, the gurus extol the virtues of practices that the audience members are unlikely to be using and/or criticize practices which they are likely to be using. However, the gurus are careful to avoid directly criticizing their audiences. When they praise organizational practices, they do not draw attention to the fact that the audience members may not be using them. And when they criticize management practices, with rare exceptions (which are heavily mitigated), they do not direct their criticism at the audience members who are using them. Instead, they direct their disparagement at third party organizations and managers, who are often unnamed.⁸ By adopting this approach, the gurus are able to question common management practices without directly confronting the audience members who may be using them.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

When commending or rejecting organizational practices in these ways, the gurus sometimes evoke audience laughter. Thus, as Table 3 shows, thirty per cent (39) of all audience laughter occur in response to messages

which praise the actions, achievements, products or services of third party managers or organizations who are purportedly implementing the organizational practices that the gurus are advocating.

By using humour, the gurus underline the remarkable qualities of the actions, achievements, products or services that they describe. By inviting laughter, they encourage audience members to produce collective displays of affiliation in response to their messages. In the following example, Gary Hamil praises the achievements of the coffee shop chain Starbucks that has adopted the practices he is recommending by elevating coffee into a highly desired product.

EXTRACT 2 [LA: 0:38:30]

GH: Now this is not only in kind of high tech products and it's not only things about the internet.=Let me give you some very (.) mundane examples for a moment. (0.4) take something that certainly in the United States we all know as a company Starbucks.=Now beginning to go international. (0.7) Who would have predicted here that you could get construction workers to line up three deep to pay two and a half bucks for a latte after all.

Audience: h[h h h h[h h h h h h h h h h h

GH: [Right. [And if- and if I'm sitting there inside Nestle running you know the world's largest coffee brand Nescafe (0.5) how do I feel when in less than ten years somebody can build a coffee brand (0.6) that in the largest market er: coffee drinking market in the world is a demonstrably more valuable brand (0.5) than my decades old coffee brand. (0.5) Does it matter that er Nestle (cabs) a little bit of market share from P and G: in the (.) isles of your local supermarket if most of the new wealth in the coffee business is being created here.

Hamil's rhetorical question in lines 4-6 illustrates the success of Starbucks by describing how construction workers queue to buy lattes from their outlets and depicting this as an extraordinary achievement ("Who would have predicted..."). Having evoked a collective display of affiliation (line 8), Hamil reverts to a serious stance as he refers to the implications of Starbucks' success in the 'coffee business' for its competitor Nestle.

In the following example, Tom Peters praises a motor vehicle that is purportedly a product of the customer-focussed management practices he is recommending to the audience members.

EXTRACT 3 [TPE1:00:19:00]

Peters: And that's the way customers make judgements of things in general.=Look at the other side of it though.=The delight side. (0.4) About a year or so ago: when we had some friends visiting us in California where I live, (0.4) I'd been reading about all this marvelous success that the Ford Taurus is having (.) and so I rented one because I want to try one and see what it was like. (.) (1.0) In two minutes I'd fell in love with the Ford Taurus. (.) You won't be surprised at the reason given the story I just told you. (0.5) In twenty nine years of driving automobiles it is the first car I have ever driven that has a place to put the coffee cup.

Audience: hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Peters: Five billion dollar development project (.) for Ford. (.) And I refer to the whole damn car as the coffee cup car. (.) Which is what it is to me. And that's the way people make decisions.

Trading off his earlier admission (not included in the extract) that he is ‘addicted’ to coffee, Peters evokes audience laughter in response to a message which reveals a trivial reason, the provision of a coffee cup holder, for his positive reaction to a motor vehicle, the Ford Taurus (lines 5-9). In doing so, he stresses both how remarkable the vehicle is and how idiosyncratic customers can be. In this way, he substantiates his contention that managers must take account of the apparently insignificant needs of customers and clients.

As Table 3 shows, twenty-five per cent (33) of all laughter episodes occur in response to messages which criticize managers/organizations for employing practices that the gurus reject.⁹ In these cases, the gurus use of humour underlines the inappropriateness of commonplace management practices. In the following example, Kanter derides the purportedly slow bureaucratic reactions of a number of giant American corporations to a new packaging technology.

EXTRACT 4 [GCBA1: 00.21.15]

RMK: They were the first producer of fruit and vegetable juice in the United State (.) to put their product in the cute little paper bottle.=The () packaging. (0.7) A Well known packaging technology all over Europe not used in the United States. I mean again it just shows we’re scouting the world (0.5) for technology including things like packaging can make a huge difference. (.) Anyhow they were not known in the United States. In the early eighties the European manufacturers came over (.) to make presentations to (0.2) to all the food companies to see if they could interest them in the packaging. (.) So they make presentations to all of the giants, Coca Cola, (.) Proctor and Gamble etcetera. And one of the giants (0.5) was sufficiently interested in this that they immediately set up a committee to study it.
(.) *Slight head tilt; closes lips slightly & smiles; holds head still for a moment*

Audience: hh[hh h- h- h- h [hhhhhhhhhh hhhh-h-[h
[*Expansive smile* [[

RMK: [Right (.) uhm [

RMK: [Ocean Spra::y heard the same presentation (0.8) committed the next da:y, (0.5) signed a deal by the end of the week, (0.4) and got an eighteen month exclusive license.

By using humour and inviting audience members to laugh, Kanter highlights the purported absurdity of the reactions of the giant corporations to the presentations made by the European manufacturers. By laughing, audience members display their appreciation of Kanter’s humor. Following the audience’s laughter, Kanter reverts to a serious stance as she praises the actions of a smaller company called Ocean Spray which, she claims, is not weighed down by bureaucracy.

In the following example, Peter Senge intensifies his criticism of bureaucratic structures which impede organizational learning by disparaging universities.

EXTRACT 5 [FD: 0.15.35]

PS: Look at- .hh (.) I: live in an organization (0.2) whose dedicated to science right?
(2.2) *Wide eyed expression, mouth open*
So if (in) any organization it would be ea:sy: (.) to display one’s ignorance (0.2) or one’s incomplete thinking it would be a university right? .hh How many of you have ever worked in universities.

(1.2) *Looks around audience, mouth slightly open; after about half a second he raises his hand*

D'you think they are characterized any less so by contro:l?

(0.2) *Closes mouth, slight smile*

Audience: hhhhhhhhhh hhhhhh[hhh

PS: [Some people would even argue more so.

[Stops smiling

By using humour and evoking laughter, Senge underlines the purported inappropriateness of universities adopting organizational structures which impede learning (lines 9-10). As the audience's laughter (line 10) subsides, Senge ceases smiling and adopts a 'serious' stance, as he develops his criticism of universities.

In summary, by using humour and inviting the audience members to laugh in response to messages which praise or criticize third party managers and organizations, the gurus emphasize either the positive or negative aspects of the achievements, actions, products or services they describe. In addition, they provide audience members with opportunities to publicly affiliate with them in contexts in which they are recommending practices that audience members are unlikely to be using and criticizing practices that audience members are likely to be using. However, as noted above, audience laughter embodies a degree of ambiguity. While it displays audience members' appreciation of the gurus' humorous remarks, it does not unequivocally register their support for the messages that the gurus convey through their use of humour. The ambiguous character of laughter is significant because it enables the gurus and their audiences to engage in 'affiliative' exchanges, even though the gurus may be criticizing practices that audience members are using or commending practices that they are not using, and even though, at least some, audience members may disagree with the gurus' views.

Communicating Management Ideas Without Praising or Criticizing the Achievements, Actions, Products or Services of Managers and Organizations

Table 1 shows that, with the exception of Goleman, each of the gurus evokes laughter on three occasions (nine per cent of all laughter episodes) in response to messages which communicate their management ideas without directly praising or criticizing the achievements, actions, products or services of managers and organizations. In five of these cases the gurus convey their management ideas by reference to non-management contexts. These occur in lectures given by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2), Peter Senge (2) and Gary Hamil (1). In following example, Gary Hamil tells an unattributed story about Khrushchev's maiden speech as president of the Soviet Union, during which he denounced the crimes of his predecessor, Stalin. Hamil uses the story to illustrate his point that it is difficult to promote change in organizations.

EXTRACT 6 [LA: 01:05:00: "Khrushchev"]

GH: And it takes courage. (1.0) You know being an activist is not an easy thing. (0.7) There's a- there's a wonderful story uh- (.) when when () Khrushchev took over the supreme soviet (0.8) his maiden speech (0.5) er he used it to denounce the crimes of Stalin. (0.7) And he went through this litany of horrors that- that Stalin had perpetrated on the Soviet Union. (0.8) And er (.) half way through this lo:ng speech somebody sitting at the back of this huge auditorium shouted out a question. (0.6) he said Comrade Khrushchev you were there you were with Stalin why didn't you stop him. (1.1) Khrushchev looked at him and said >who said that<. (0.8) No hand went up. Right. (0.3) He said now you know why:.
[Right.=

[Dips head & raises and lowers eyebrows

Audience: h-hhhhhhhhhh hh[h h h h h - h - h

GH: [Think about it.

GH: So it does take some courage.

In the other seven cases the gurus convey their views concerning the changing nature of either work or the environment in which organizations operate. These occur in lectures given by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1), Tom Peters (3), Peter Senge (1) and Gary Hamil (2). In the following example, Peters twice evokes audience laughter in response to a joke which he attributes to an unnamed academic. The joke refers to the impact that auto-pilot systems will have on the role of commercial airline pilots. Peters uses the joke to illustrate his contention that organizations and individuals must adapt to constantly changing environments.

EXTRACT 7 [TPE1:0:04:40]

Peters: And s- issues number one relative to this customer orientation customer obsession (.) customer revolution (0.3) is that everyone had best be [inventing (.) creating and recreating (.) markets with extraordinary regularity. (1.0) [(.) In fact the best description of how these times are changing I think was er- was one I ran across the other da:y, this is a comment from a University of Miami Professor of Management Science, (.)
[addressing the Airlines Pilot's Association (.) describing
[*looks up from notes, slight smile*
the aero (.) plane (0.2) of the year two thousand and five. (0.5) He said the crew will consist of one pilot and a do:g. (1.5) The pilot will be there to nurture and [feed the dog,
[*Looks at audience*

Audience: [h-hhhhhhhhhhh
[*Looks at notes, closes mouth, smiles*

Peters: the do:g will be there to bite the pilot (.)
[if he tries to touch anything.
[*Smiles*

Audience: hhhhhhhhh

In these cases, then, gurus produce humorous remarks which substantiate their management ideas without explicitly praising or disparaging managers or organizations. Although the gurus may imply that audience members, and managers in general, have failed to recognize the importance of the phenomena they describe, the gurus do not directly criticize them. In this way, the gurus minimise the risk that the audience members will react negatively to their messages. Apart from bolstering the gurus' ideas, these humorous remarks, like those discussed in the previous section, allow audience members to publicly affiliate with the gurus, without having to unequivocally align with their propositions.

Communicating General Theories Without Referring to Managers or Organizations

Table 1 shows that nineteen per cent (25) of all laughter episodes occur in response to gurus' jokes, quips or stories which communicate general theories without referring to managers or organizations. Most of these cases (twenty-two) occur in Goleman's lectures. This reflects the fact that Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence is rooted in the personal development literature and he makes little effort to relate it to organizational practice. Consequently, he generally says little, if anything, about organizational practice and discusses the actions of individuals (including himself) in non-management settings. In the case of Senge, he devotes long passages in his lectures to outlining the epistemological theory which underpins his views concerning organizational learning.

In communicating their ideas in this ways, Goleman and Senge risk alienating their audiences, just as they do when they discuss organizational issues, for audience members may disagree with their 'innovative' ideas. In addition, the gurus may commend ways of behaving in non-management settings which are not in accord with the actions of the audience members and which thus may implicate criticism of them. As in the case of organizational issues, the gurus address this possibility by, inter alia, not directly criticizing the audience members.

All the cases in Senge's lectures and half (eleven) of those in Goleman's lectures involve the speakers praising or criticizing third parties. In the case of Senge, he disparages academics on three occasions for developing esoteric theories that few people understand and writing papers that few people read. In the case of Goleman, he praises either real or imaginary individuals for using emotional intelligence on four occasions and disparages others for not using emotional intelligence on seven occasions. In Extract 8, for example, Goleman illustrates a pattern of interaction, which apparently leads to divorce, by depicting an exchange between an imaginary married couple.

EXTRACT 8 [EI: 0.36.50]

DG: .hhh It goes like thi:s.=One of the partners has a grievance. (0.6) Let's say it's: the wife. (.) .hhh And she doesn't (.) express the grievance in a .h effective (.) form of feedback you know () (to use) like you know dear: (0.4) you know they're feeling clo:se and everything and .hhh you know dear sometimes when you leave your dirty (.) clothes on the bedroom floor for me to pick up .h it makes me feel like you don't respect me that you feel like I'm your maid or (.) something and .hhhh you know (.) it doesn't make me feel so good so .hhh I'd feel better if you picked up your laundry and (.) put it in the laundry room yourself. She doesn't do that. (0.5) What she does do is wait till she's really steamed up. (.) And her amygdala is really (.) perking up here and sparkling. And she says you are the biggest slo::b I've ever seen in my life.

Audience: [h-h-hhhhhhhh hhhhh[h-h

DG: [Now (.) that's not feedback that's a character attack. And if you're atta:cked .hhh what's your natural response you defend yourself. So he says something (.) lame like well I did it last Tuesday or .hh he counter attacks,=he get's defensive,=he .hhh er: well you left the dishes in- the dirty dishes in the sink or something like

In the eleven cases in which Goleman does not praise or criticize the actions of third parties for using or failing to use emotional intelligence, he uses humour to emphasize aspects of his theory. In the following extract, for example, he stresses the importance of humour as a means of relating positively to others by quoting an unnamed friend's humorous 'saying'.

EXTRACT 9 [EI: 0.43.30]

DG: So social skill is absolutely essential (1.1) to dialo:gue, to being able to do this well. (2.5) .hh Humour of course is (0.2) one of the great (positive) ().=As my friend () says .hhh (0.8) if you can't laugh about it it's just not funny any more.

Audience: [hhhhhhhhhhh hhhhhhhhhh h-h-h-h
[*Looks at audience; start of a slight smile*

DG: Let's go from the individual to the group.

In these contexts, humour and laughter operate in the same ways as they do in relation to messages that are explicitly linked to organizational issues. As noted above, some audience members may disagree with the gurus' ideas, and in eleven cases Goleman praises practices that audience members are unlikely to be using and criticizes practices that they are likely to be using. Consequently, as in the case of organizational issues, the gurus' use of humour not only affords audience members opportunities to collectively affiliate with the

gurus in the context of potentially unpalatable messages, but also enables them to do so without having to express agreement with the gurus' ideas.

The laughter episodes considered thus far involve gurus and their audiences inviting and producing collective displays of affiliation in response to potentially confrontational messages. In the next section, we examine cases in which the gurus evoke laughter in response to messages which implicate self-directed, as opposed to audience-directed, criticism.

References to Potential Shortcomings the Gurus' Theories

Perhaps understandably, the gurus rarely risk undermining their own credibility by considering possible shortcomings in their work since. Nonetheless, five per cent (7) of the instances of audience laughter occur in situations in which the gurus refer to potential problems in their theories. These occur in lectures given by Moss Kanter (1), Tom Peters (3) and Peter Senge (3). In the following example, Peter Senge accepts that a concept (infrastructure) which has been central to his theory about organizational learning is inappropriate. Senge probably addressed this issue because it was in the public domain at the time of his lecture.

EXTRACT 10 [FD: 0.48.50]

(Discussing co-edited volume: *The Fifth Discipline Field Book*)

PS: So what infrastructure meant to us .h wa:s how do you desi:gn an enterprise so learning isn't left to chance. .hh So that people have the ti::me for learning. .hh people have the resources for learning. .hh People have the occa::sion (.) .h. That learning is part of working. (1.8) Daniel I don't know if you're gonna (0.2) be surprised by this. (0.2) I shouldn't have been because I think I did this a few years ago. (.) .hhh As a matter of just kind of course uh- (.) I should have done this obviously about (0.2) three years ago. .hh I looked up the definition of the word infrastructure this morning.

(0.7) *Looks at document he is holding, closes mouth, pulls up lip corners, shakes of head once*

Audience: h-h-h-h= (*Isolated laughter occurs half-way through PS's head shake*)

PS: =Because many people have been telling m- me: I don't know for the last couple of years well this infrastructure doesn't quite kind of capture what you're talking about. .hhh My Websters dictionary said the permanent installations required for military purposes.=

=*looks at document he has read from and purses his lips*=

Audience: hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh-h-h-h-h-h-h-[h-h-h

PS: [.hhhh er We have organized a few conferences around this subject of learning infrastructures. .hh I don't think we've ever included a dictionary definition (.) which was probably a bit of a shortcoming on our parts. (0.5) .hhh So: .h you may have to suspend this wor(h)d. .We may have to find a better word. I do not mean the permanent installations required for military operations.=

After summarizing "what infrastructure meant to us" (lines 1-4), Senge indicates that there is a problem with his use of this concept (lines 4-13) . He says that he has looked up a dictionary definition of the term because people have been telling him for some time that the term doesn't "quite capture what (he's) talking about". He then reads out a dictionary definition which is clearly absurd in relation to his use of the term (lines 13-14). This evokes collective laughter by audience members (line 16). Having treated the issue as humourous, Senge then addresses it in serious terms (lines 17-22). The importance that Senge attaches to this issue is demonstrated by the fact that he returns to it when concluding his lecture and, in doing so, again treats it as a 'serious' matter.

By treating shortcomings in their work as humorous, the gurus exhibit that they are in a position to take them lightly. By doing so, they propose that they do not regard the shortcomings to be of critical importance. And, by inviting laughter, they encourage the audience members to publicly ratify their treatment of the shortcomings in humorous terms.

In the preceding sections we have examined the role of humour and laughter in the communication of the gurus' ideas. This accounts for eighty-nine percent (116) of laughter episodes. In the majority of them (109), gurus convey ideas that might imply criticism of audience members, although they are careful not to directly address this possibility. In the remaining cases (7) the gurus deal with issues that might be deemed problematic for themselves. Apart from enabling the gurus to underscore the positive or negative aspects of particular states of affairs, the use of humour and the elicitation of audience laughter assists the gurus in dealing with the potentially negative aspects of either audience-directed or self-directed criticism. In the case of audience-directed criticism, the gurus provide audience members with opportunities to affiliate with them in contexts in which they could be seen to be implicitly criticizing the audience. This generates affiliative exchanges between the gurus and their audiences, even though audiences are not required to publicly display their support for the gurus' ideas. This enables the gurus to deliver potentially unpalatable messages in a positive climate. In the case of guru-directed criticism, the gurus use humour to present problematic issues concerning their ideas as suitable for light-hearted treatment and therefore as manageable. By inviting audience laughter, they encourage audience members to produce collective displays of affiliation which exhibit appreciation of, and ratify, their humorous treatment of the issues in question. Again, this allows the gurus to deliver potentially problematic messages (in this case for them rather than audience members) in affiliative contexts.

Setting up Key Messages

Ten per cent (13) cases of audience laughter are evoked by remarks which gurus make whilst preparing to deliver key messages. Seven of these, which occur in lectures given by Moss Kanter (3), Peters (3) and Hamil (1), pave the way for messages concerning management practice. In the following extract, Tom Peters sets up a story about the poor service he received at a hotel by announcing that he is going to reveal to his audience "two personal habits" (lines 1-2), and in doing so evokes audience laughter (lines 1-3).

EXTRACT 11 [TPE:0:19:00]

Peters: Now (0.5) I will er: reveal to you two personal habits that are none of your damn business basically.

Audience: hhhhhhhhhh
(0.5)

One of them is that I do my writing (0.6) by getting up about four o'clock in the morning (0.5) and the second one is that if we had a physician (0.8) at this conference he or she would probably be able to classify me as physiologically addicted (0.8) to coffee.

The other six cases, which occur in Goleman (5) and Senge's (1) lectures, set up messages concerning general theories that are not explicitly linked to management. For example, in the following extract, Goleman teases his audience by suggesting that he does not have enough time to relate the findings of a study which apparently shows how to predict which marriages will end in divorce. After the audience laughter which follows, he goes on to discuss the study's relevance with respect to his theory of emotional intelligence.

EXTRACT 13 [EI: 0.36.50]

DG: Gottman did other research (.) this was done by John Gottman of the University of Washington. ((Clears throat)) Where er: (1.0) he was able to analyze the same data and find a particular interaction that if repeated (0.4) over and over (.) would mean the couple which were- they thought was happily married would divorce within three years. (0.7) But I think our time is short so I (don't kno[w]). No I'll tell you what it is.

[Smile face-->

Audience: hhhh[hhhhhhh hhhhhhhhhh hhhhhhhhhh hhhh-h-h-h
 DG: [heh heh (*Laughs silently*)
 (0.2) *Looks down; serious face*
 DG: It's worth it. (0.5) .hhh It goes like thi:s.=One of the partners has a
grievance. (0.6) Let's say it's: the wife.

Apart from the provision of 'entertainment' and 'light relief', the use of humour in these contexts may both attract the audience members' attention prior to the delivery of key messages and establish an affiliative context prior to the delivery of messages which could implicate audience-directed criticism. In addition, as the extract from the Tom Peters' lecture shows, the humour may also address potentially problematic aspects of what follows. Thus the two personal habits to which Peters refers are (1) that he gets up at 4am to write and (2) that he is addicted to coffee. Having evoked laughter in response to his announcement that he is going to reveal these habits (lines 1-3), Peters adopts a serious stance as he discusses them (lines 5-8). By eliciting laughter he has (1) guarded against the possibility that he will be heard by audience members to be revealing habits that he regards as serious problems and (2) encouraged the audience to publicly display, through collective laughter, that they are aware of this. In other words, Peters appears to use humour and laughter to, *inter alia*, nullify the potentially face threatening aspects of revealing ones "personal habits".

In summary, gurus sometimes evoke laughter in the course of setting up the delivery of key messages. In addition to attracting the audiences' attention, the gurus may also establish an affiliative context and, in some cases, an appropriate interpretative framework for what follows. Even in these cases, then, humour and laughter may be critical to the delivery and reception of the gurus' ideas.

DISCUSSION

Collective audience laughter is not simply a spontaneous reaction to the gurus' humorous remarks or jokes. The gurus invite laughter by indicating to audience members that and when laughter is appropriate and expectable and, in most cases, then remain silent until the laughter either ends or begins to subside. The gurus largely evoke collective laughter in response to messages which convey their key ideas. These messages implicate audience-directed and, less commonly, guru-directed criticism, with the result that they could alienate audience members and/or undermine the gurus' credibility. In addition to emphasizing the unusual or absurd aspects of the states of affairs the gurus describe, the gurus' use of humour creates an affiliative environment as they convey or, less commonly, prepare to convey potentially controversial messages. In the context of guru-directed criticism, it also allows the gurus to propose that they regard potential flaws in their theories to be of little, if any, significance.

As in other public speaking settings, affiliative audience laughter displays audience members' appreciation of the speakers' humour, but it does not represent an unequivocal expression of support for the messages that the speakers convey through their use of humour (Clayman 1992). In contrast to applause, which usually represents a "purified expression of support" (*ibid*), shared laughter allows audiences to affiliate with speakers without having to unequivocally align with the positions they express. This may account, in part, for the fact that shared laughter occurs in a far greater range of public speaking settings than does applause. For, as in the case of the gurus, the ambiguous character of laughter allows speakers and their audiences to participate in affiliative interactions, even when speakers are indirectly criticizing audience members and some or all audience members disagree with the speakers' views.

Studies of humour and laughter in a variety of social contexts suggest that they may be used to mark the boundaries of social groups (e.g., Coser 1959; LaFave and Mennell 1976; Zijderveld 1984; Davies 1984). It is unclear whether the gurus and their audiences can be classified or, more importantly, would classify themselves as, members of distinctive social groups. Indeed, part of the management gurus' mission is to recruit managers to such groups, that is to groups whose boundaries are defined by reference to their members' affiliation with the gurus' theories. Nonetheless, our analysis suggests that humour and laughter may be associated with the generation of group solidarity and social cohesion *during* the gurus' lectures. By evoking and producing affiliative laughter, respectively, the gurus and audience members engage in public displays of

consensus and “like-mindedness” (Glen 1989: 140) and thereby *constitute* themselves as “in groups” who share the same sense of humour in relation to the circumstances and events that the gurus describe.

Whether these publicly displayed group affiliations actually reflect audience members’ commitment to the gurus’ ideas and thus may extend beyond the life time of the gurus’ lectures is, of course, open to question. Research on the relationship between humour and persuasion offers conflicting conclusions. Some studies indicate that humour enhances persuasion (e.g., Kahn 1989), whereas others suggest that it does not (e.g., Markiewicz 1974; Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap 1990). However, CA research on public speaking does suggest that the effective use of humour by gurus’ may have a positive impact on their ability to win and retain ‘converts’. Thus Atkinson (1984) suggests that certain rhetorical devices, when used effectively, attract and sustain audience attentiveness to what is being said and thereby contribute to the memorability of the speakers’ messages. This is because the devices make messages stand out from surrounding speech materials and, in some cases, evoke collective audience responses which, in turn, heighten audience attentiveness and contribute to the prominence of the precipitative messages. Atkinson’s research concerns the generation of applause during political speeches. However, the same principles apply in relation to humour and laughter in management gurus’ lectures. As we noted earlier, humorous messages stand out from surrounding speech materials, irrespective of whether or not the rhetorical devices identified by Atkinson are used. Moreover, as Atkinson notes, just as applause enhances the prominence of preceding messages, so to do other forms of collective audience response, including audience laughter. Given that speakers are unlikely to persuade audiences to affiliate with their positions unless they sustain the attentiveness of their audience members (Atkinson 1984), it seems likely that humour is one means through which gurus and other public speakers create the conditions necessary to win and retain converts.

Regardless of whether the management gurus use of humour makes them more persuasive, it is, we believe critical to understanding their success on the management lecture circuit. It enables them not only to attract and sustain audience attentiveness, but also to deliver potentially unpalatable messages in non-offensive ways. While managers may welcome exposure to ideas which question what they do, most will not wish to place themselves in situations in which they will be directly confronted. By using humour and evoking laughter, the gurus reduce the likelihood of this happening and thereby enhance their reputations as highly effective and entertaining public speakers. This helps them to maintain their star status, even when the popularity of their ideas begins to wane.

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Table 1: Incidences of audience laughter in the gurus' lectures

| | RMK | TP | PS | GH | DG | Total |
|---------------|-----|----|----|----|----|-------|
| Full Laughter | 29 | 41 | 15 | 11 | 34 | 130 |

Table 2: Types of remarks which evoke audience laughter

| | RMK | TP | PS | GH | DG | Total |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|
| Praise/criticize managers/organizations | 22 | 32 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 72 (55%) |
| Management ideas without praise/ criticism | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 12 (9%) |
| 'Non-management' ideas | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 22 | 25 (19%) |
| Potential shortcomings in the gurus' ideas | 1 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 7 (5%) |
| Set up to key messages | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 13 (10%) |
| Other | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 (1%) |
| Total | 29 | 41 | 15 | 11 | 34 | 130 (100%) |

Table 3: The incidence of messages which praise or criticize managers and organizations

| | RMK | TP | PS | GH | DG | Total |
|---|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------------|
| Praise managers/organizations etc. (30%) | | 12 | 18 | 1 | 2 | 39 |
| Criticize managers/organizations etc. | 10 | 14 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 33 (25%) |
| Total | 22 | 32 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 72 (55%) |

ENDNOTES

- 1 Superiority and Disparagement theories focus on the second of these functions of humour, while Relief and Incongruity theories are associated with the other three (Francis 1994). Giles et al. emphasize that people may use humour to achieve any combination of these objectives in any given situation.
- 2 These occur in *Thriving on Chaos 1*, *Thriving on Chaos 3* and *Service with Soul*
- 3 For consideration of disaffiliative laughter, see Clayman's (1992) analysis of this phenomenon during the 1988 presidential debates in the United States.
- 4 In this regard, it is noteworthy that the three cases of applause during Tom Peters' lectures occur in combination with affiliative laughter, with audience members first laughing and then clapping. For, in this context, applause ceases to represent an unequivocal expression of support for the speakers' views since, given their laughter, audience members may be applauding the speakers' wit rather than their messages.
- 5 Atkinson (1984a, b) suggests that these devices are not restricted to political oratory but have a powerful appeal when used effectively in a wide range of contexts where the aim is to persuade an audience.
- 6 The authors are currently writing a paper which explores the reasons for this in more detail.
- 7 The exceptional case involves Hamil disparaging the game of golf.
- 8 When the gurus anonymize their targets they may be adhering to the common consultancy practice of respecting the confidentiality of clients. But such an approach also enables the gurus to manage potential criticism in the audience is not presented with a target for which they can have positive or negative feelings. Furthermore, without knowing the identity of the manager or organization being discussed there is no way in which audience members can independently assess and so challenge what the guru is saying.
- 9 There are no examples of gurus evoking laughter in response to messages which criticize products or services.