

THE NEED FOR HUMOR IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT¹

Harold Kerzner, Ph.D. and Al Zeitoun, Ph.D.

BACKGROUND

For several decades, the focus in project management was on the tools and techniques necessary to deliver a successful project outcome. Project managers possessed very little authority, if any, over the assigned team members. During project management training programs, not very much time was allocated to interpersonal skills practices and leadership styles.

As projects increased in size, complexity and risk, the importance of leadership, interpersonal skills training, and team building became increasingly more important. Techniques such as agile, Scrum, and other flexible and hybrid methodologies increased worker stress levels mandating that project managers may have to adopt a different leadership style for each project.

Leadership styles now focus heavily on engaging team members effectively for the duration of the project, including motivation, problem-solving, decision-making, and stress reduction. What is also now appearing in the literature are the benefits of including some humor into project management leadership styles. Occasional light-hearted humor and jokes that create shared laughter have been found to have many benefits in project management success.

THE ROLE OF HUMOR

Humor had been used traditionally only as an icebreaker when opening a project meeting. It would be used at the beginning of team meetings or brainstorming sessions to reduce pressure, anxiety and stress. The benefits and effective use of humor were either underestimated or misunderstood. When humor is used in the right way, it can diffuse tension and bring people together throughout the life of the project.

Humor has been researched and used by educators because of its relationship to cognitive biases. In addition to giving someone a good laugh, it also has a positive effect on memory retention where people seem to remember longer and better the information

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being discussed at the time when humor was presented. Psychologists refer to this as the “Humor Effect” and its relationship to different types of memory.

As project management leadership practices grew in importance, companies realized the need for project and corporate cultures that were aligned and committed to creating a better working environment for employees. The importance of the use of humor in project management is now readily appearing in literature. As stated by Valerio Pianella:²

Benefits of humor in project management include:

- Boosts morale and reduces stress
- Improves communication and builds trust
- Encourages creativity and problem-solving
- Enhances team cohesion
- Makes the workplace more engaging
- Facilitates learning and retention

Humor has now become a strategic component of cultural sensitivity. It can diffuse a tense or toxic situation, boost team member engagement, leave people with a happier mindset and a feeling of ownership of their work effort. As an example, expressing your appreciation to workers for the effort they put into an activity that may have failed or did not produce the correct results is a good idea. Adding humor to words of appreciation will keep people motivated and reduce tension.

New types of projects, especially those requiring innovation and creative efforts, are placing workers under significantly higher levels of stress. Workers can generate negative emotions that can lead to team friction, toxic behavior and reduced productivity. Humor, used correctly, can reduce negative emotions.

Humor can distract people from negative emotions, such as anger or anxiety, that people might experience when processing certain information. This can be attributed, among other factors, to the fact that processing humor places a significant cognitive demand on working memory, meaning that people focus on the humor rather than on negative emotions that they would otherwise experience.³

Humor can have a contagious effect on projects. It gives people a feeling of safety and a willingness to openly share their thoughts. Most people enjoy sharing humor because it lightens the atmosphere, resulting in a bonding of team members.

² <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/humor-project-management-valerio-pianella-zxfhe>

³ <https://effectiviology.com/humor-effect/>

Humor also plays a critical role in building and maintaining effective customer relations in business as well as in project management. Aaron Hall states that:⁴

- Humor can create a positive and memorable experience for customers.
- It helps to foster a sense of connection and relatability between customers and the brand.
- Humor can also diffuse tense situations and alleviate customer frustration.
- It promotes a friendly and approachable image for the business.
- By using humor, businesses can differentiate themselves from competitors and stand out in the market.

HUMOR RISKS

It is important to understand the characteristics and culture of the audience before using humor. The type of humor used must be relevant to the audience and the information being discussed. There must be a proper balance between providing humor and acting in a professional manner as the project manager so that the seriousness of the project is not compromised. If recipients of humor find the humor offensive or personally directed at them, there could be an unfavorable backlash impacting team collaboration.

Understanding the audience is of critical importance on multinational projects using diverse teams that come from countries or organizations where decisions are highly impacted by local cultures, religions, and politics.

There are certain potential pitfalls to be wary of while using humor in project management. One significant risk is causing offense or misunderstanding due to cultural or personal differences. What may seem hilarious to you could be offensive or entirely incomprehensible to someone else. Another possible complication is using humor to mask the severity or criticality of particular decisions or situations. While maintaining a lighthearted atmosphere is beneficial, avoiding crucial matters under the guise of humor might impair output quality and team trust.⁵

TYPES OF HUMOR

There are several types of humor. Some people differentiate between positive and negative humor. Positive humor is used to increase motivation and improve the outcome desired on the project by enhancing our relationships with people. Negative or off-color

⁴ <https://aaronhall.com/insights/the-power-of-humor-in-business-how-to-incorporate-and-harness-its-benefits/>

⁵ <https://hive.com/blog/light-hearted-leadership-best-project-management-jokes/>

humor is aimed at a specific situation or individuals and can worsen the moment. Sarcasm is often seen as a form of negative humor. People may regard the negative humor presented as insensitive or disrespectful. Humor should be avoided if it could be interpreted as vulgar or crude, and related to violence, sexism, profanity or abuse. You should also avoid corny or slapstick humor that may appear to some as overly silly or demeaning.

When things might not be going well on a project, the project manager may need to speak difficult truths to the team. By selecting the right form of positive humor, the project manager may be successful in saying what needed to be said without offending team members as well as maintaining an environment where people feel appreciated and safe.

The most common, and most likely the best type of humor is situational humor involving typical situations that all project team members can relate to. Humor could relate to causes for missed deadlines, increased budgets, documentation, meetings, and decision-making. It is best to avoid humor that can be related to activities by specific people or team members. However, you might occasionally poke fun at yourself using light self-deprecating humor. Using self-deprecating humor too often might lower your esteem in the eyes of your team members.

Humor that is least likely to offend anyone are project management proverbs and laws. Examples of project management proverbs that are often used include:

- The same work under the same conditions will be estimated differently by five different estimators or by one estimator at five different times.
- The most difference making word in the project manager's vocabulary is "NO."
- The more ridiculous a deadline is, the more resources, it will consume.
- Limited resources on a project can't solve the problem, yet too many might just end up creating more problems.
- You can attempt to freeze the user's specs, yet he/she won't stop expecting more.
- The conditions linked to a promise are forgotten, yet the promise is always remembered.
- What you don't know might hurt you.
- A user will only share with you anything you ask about.
- Out of several possible interpretations of a communication, the least convenient one is usually the truth.
- What is not on paper has not been said.
- No major project is ever completed on time, within budget, with the same initial resources.

- Projects progress quickly until they become 90 percent complete; then they remain 90 percent complete forever.
- If project content is allowed to change freely, the rate of change will exceed the rate of progress.
- Project teams detest progress reporting because it clearly shows their lack of progress.
- Murphy is alive and well in all projects.

There are also Laws of Project Management named after individuals that introduced or promoted these laws.⁶ Some of the laws include:

- **Abbott's Admonitions:** If you have to ask, you're not entitled to know. If you don't like the answer, you shouldn't have asked the question.
- **Acheson's Rule of the Bureaucracy:** A memorandum is written not to inform the reader but to protect the writer.
- **Anderson's Law:** I have yet to see any problem, however complicated, which, when you looked at it in the right way, did not become still more complicated.
- **Benchley's Law:** Anyone can do any amount of work provided it isn't the work he or she is supposed to be doing at that moment.
- **Bok's Law:** If you think education is expensive—try ignorance.
- **Boling's Postulate:** If you're feeling good, don't worry. You'll get over it.
- **Brook's First Law:** Adding manpower to a late software project makes it later.
- **Brook's Second Law:** Whenever a system becomes completely defined, some damn fool discovers something which either abolishes the system or expands it beyond recognition.
- **Brown's Law of Business Success:** Our customer's paperwork is a profit. Our own paperwork is a loss.
- **Chisholm's Second Law:** When things are going well, something will go wrong.
Corollaries: When things just can't get any worse, they will. Anytime things appear to be going better, you have overlooked something.
- **Cohn's Law:** The more time you spend reporting what you are doing, the less time you have to do anything. Stability is achieved when you spend all your time doing nothing but reporting on the nothing you are doing.
- **Connolly's Law of Cost Control:** The price of any product produced for a government agency will be not less than the square of the initial firm fixed-price contract.

⁶ These were collected from multiple internet sites and from seminars' participants over the past 30 years.

- **Cooke's Law:** In any decisive situation, the amount of relevant information available is inversely proportional to the importance of the decision.
- **Mr. Cooper's Law:** If you do not understand a particular word in a piece of technical writing, ignore it. The piece will make perfect sense without it.
- **Cornuelle's Law:** Authority tends to assign jobs to those least able to do them.
- **Courtois's Rule:** If people listened to themselves more often, they'd talk less.
- **First Law of Debate:** Never argue with a fool. People might not know the difference.
- **Donsen's Law:** The specialist learns more and more about less and less until, finally, he or she knows everything about nothing, whereas the generalist learns less and less about more and more until, finally, he knows nothing about everything.
- **Douglas's Law of Practical Aeronautics:** When the weight of the paperwork equals the weight of the plane, the plane will fly.
- **Dude's Law of Duality:** Of two possible events, only the undesired one will occur.
- **Economists' Laws:** What men learn from history is that men do not learn from history. If on an actuarial basis there is a 50–50 chance that something will go wrong, it will actually go wrong nine times out of ten.
- **Old Engineer's Law:** The larger the project or job, the less time there is to do it.
- **Nonreciprocal Laws of Expectations:** Negative expectations yield negative results. Positive expectations yield negative results.
- **Fyffe's Axiom:** The problem-solving process will always break down at the point at which it is possible to determine who caused the problem.
- **Golub's Laws of Computerdom:** Fuzzy project objectives are used to avoid the embarrassment of estimating the corresponding costs. A carelessly planned project takes three times longer to complete than expected; a carefully planned project takes only twice as long. The effort required to correct the course increases geometrically with time. Project teams detest weekly progress reporting because it so vividly manifests their lack of progress.
- **Gresham's Law:** Trivial matters are handled promptly; important matters are never resolved.
- **Hoare's Law of Large Programs:** Inside every large program is a small program struggling to get out.
- **Issawi's Law of Cynics:** Cynics are right nine times out of ten; what undoes them is their belief that they are right ten times out of ten.

- **Johnson's First Law:** When any mechanical contrivance fails, it will do so at the most inconvenient possible time.
- **Malek's Law:** Any simple idea will be worded in the most complicated way.
- **Patton's Law:** A good plan today is better than a perfect plan tomorrow.
- **Peter's Prognosis:** Spend sufficient time in confirming the need and the need will disappear.
- **Law of Political Erosion:** Once the erosion of power begins, it has a momentum all its own.
- **Pudder's Law:** Anything that begins well ends badly. Anything that begins badly ends worse.
- **Putt's Law:** Technology is dominated by two types of people, those who understand what they do not manage and those who manage what they do not understand.
- **Truman's Law:** If you cannot convince them, confuse them.
- **Von Braun's Law of Gravity:** We can lick gravity, but sometimes the paperwork is overwhelming.

The laws and proverbs were in no specific order of importance but show the types of situational humor that almost everyone could relate to and enjoy.

THE PATH FORWARD

The challenges and issues facing project teams are expected to increase significantly over the next several years. Projects as well as organizations will undergo changes that will induce additional stress and pressure upon team members. Humor will be used more often than in the past to help workers become more resilient to adapt to changes, increase morale, support collaboration efforts internally and with stakeholders, build trust, work together to make better and timely decisions, and boost productivity.

While organizations invest in technology and build AI enabled leadership, project and organizational cultures will actively and increasingly support the use of humor where applicable. Courses that discuss project leadership styles will contain modules on humor, discussing types of humor, possible delivery systems and appropriate timing for the humor, and how much humor should be included. Skills at delivering humor may very well become a strategic project management competency that will help humanize effective leadership. This maturing competency might contribute to creating more responsive cultures to the degree of change and uncertainty surrounding future projects. Humor and project management leadership can most certainly exist together.

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About the Authors



Harold Kerzner, Ph.D., MS, M.B.A

Senior Executive Director for Project Management
International Institute of Learning
New York & California, USA



Dr. Harold Kerzner is Senior Executive Director for Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has an MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 38 years taught project management at Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers and has had published more than 60 college textbooks/workbooks on project management, including later editions. Some of his books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, (3) Project Management Case Studies, (4) Project Management Best Practices: Achieving Global Excellence, (5) PM 2.0: The Future of Project Management, (6) Using the Project Management Maturity Model, and (7) Innovation Project Management.

He is a charter member of the Northeast Ohio PMI Chapter.

Dr. Kerzner has traveled around the world conducting project management lectures for PMI Chapters and companies in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, Trinidad, Barbados, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Venezuela, Columbia, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, England, and Switzerland. He delivered a keynote speech at a PMI Global Congress on the future of project management.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award in 1981 for his contributions to the field of project management.
- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

- The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. They also give out a second Kerzner Award for project of the year in Northeast Ohio.
- The Project Management Institute (National Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that demonstrated excellence in project management.
- The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.
- Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management.
- The Italian Institute of Project Management presented Dr. Kerzner with the 2019 International ISIPM Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

Dr. Harold Kerzner can be contacted at hkerzner@hotmail.com



Dr. Al Zeitoun, PgMP, PMI Fellow

Strategy Advisor & Global Future of Work Executive
Maryland USA



Dr. Al Zeitoun is a Future of Work, business optimization, and operational performance excellence thought leader with global experiences in strategy execution. His experiences encompass leading organizations; delivering their Enterprise Digital and Business Transformation; guiding fitting frameworks implementations; and using his empathy, engineering insights, and collaboration strengths to successfully envision new business models and execute complex missions across diverse cultures globally.

In his recent role with Siemens, he was a Senior Director of Strategy responsible for driving the global program management practices, Master Plan governance, and enabling the Strategy Transformation processes and priorities.

In his position, as the Executive Director for Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Abu Dhabi, UAE, he was responsible for creating the strategy execution framework, achieving transformation benefits, governance excellence, and creating the data analytics discipline necessary for delivering on the \$40B complex country energy mission roadmap.

At the McLean, USA HQ of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Zeitoun strategically envisioned and customized digitally enabled EPMO advisory, mapped playbooks, and capability development for clients' Billions of Dollars strategic initiatives. Furthermore, he led the firm's Middle East North Africa Portfolio Management and Agile Governance Solutions.

With the International Institute of Learning, Dr. Zeitoun played a senior leader and global trainer and coach. He was instrumental in driving its global expansions, thought leadership, and operational excellence methodology to sense and shape dynamic ways of working across organizations worldwide. He speaks English, Arabic, and German and enjoys good food, travel, and volunteering. Dr. Al Zeitoun can be contacted at zeitounstrategy@gmail.com