

The thermostat effect

How groups use and abuse humor as a social process

By John Loneragan*

There is nothing quite as unfunny as a joke explained, and there is perhaps nothing more tedious than humor deconstructed. Anyone who has read – or attempted to read – Freud’s “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious”ⁱ will understand just how serious the business of humor can be.

Indeed, the late Australian humorist Campbell Mc Comasⁱⁱ lamented that “the most boring books in the world are those which psychologically analyse humor.”

However, analyse it we must, because working groups use humor consistently, sometimes enhancing their work and their development (as a group and as individuals), and sometimes impeding that same work, and that same development.

We observe three broad types of humorous intervention in the life of a group:

1. **Jokes.** Organised anecdotes, either fictitious or based on real events
2. **Spontaneous comments,** often called “one-liners,” usually delivered as a reply, observation or interjection, and
3. **Non-verbal interventions,** such as throwing a piece of paper at something (or someone!), slamming a folder closed or swiveling in one’s chair.

In my experience, one-liners comprise the great majority of humorous interventions in groups.

Humour can have positive and negative impacts

Humor is seldom neutral as a group dynamic. And group humorists are seldom neutral or insignificant people in the life of the group. At its most positive humor serves to:

- Encourage a more open culture, and therefore a broader and deeper level of discourse, and ultimately raising the quality of the results
- Diffuse awkward moments and situations
- Allow people to express important (at least to them) aspects of their personality, and
- Make tense and/or difficult issues more digestible.ⁱⁱⁱ

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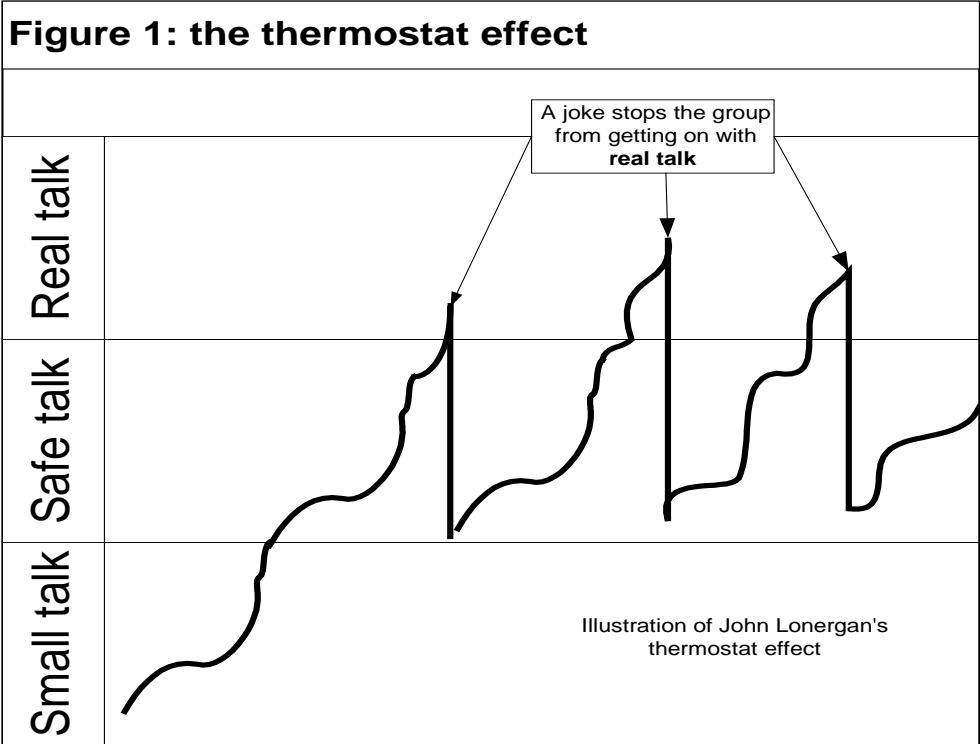
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That’s a powerful set of positives. The value of humor as a sociological lubricant is well documented and much needed. But it is a mistake to assume that humor is always positive, and that people who “don’t get the joke” are just boring, or – worse – not “on board” with the rest of the group.

In reality, humor often has a negative effect on the life and development of a group. Sometimes that negative effect is incidental, and sometimes it becomes systemic.

The **thermostat effect** is a term I coined to describe a dynamic that occurs time and time again in working groups of all occupations, qualifications, and task intents. Figure 1. illustrates how it works. The “crash” or humor points – when the group is in the *real talk* zone, are crucial moments in the life of any group.



If such points are regular, it indicates that humor is being systematically allowed – or used – to push the group back into safe or small talk. In such a circumstance, the group in fact has little chance of achieving its task objectives.

Hence the metaphor of the thermostat – a device to keep group discussion at a safe level and avoid the inevitable heat of real talk. Observing the effect in action, I have noticed:

- Often (not always) one group member who assumes the thermostat role.

- It is difficult to challenge thermostat interventions without being seen as a killjoy. Certainly, when a thermostat intervention is *first* challenged, the response is almost always another “humorous” comment.
- The person who makes a serious intervention – taking the group into real talk – will feel the thermostat most directly. Indeed, it is because I work as a facilitator and try to help groups work in *real talk* that I first became aware of the Thermostat Effect.^{iv}
- The group will tend to have an ambivalent reaction to thermostat interventions. On the one hand, some will recognize them as potentially trivializing the discussion; on the other hand, they will be seen as acting as a safety valve, a release, and as being just plain funny. So the group will often not self-correct, and will therefore spend the bulk of its working time in safe talk.
- For that reason, the “group joker” is often a much-valued group member, whom the group will act to defend where necessary. I know this from repeated and sometimes painful experience.
- Because “one-liners” can often be hurtful to the person at whom they are specifically directed, the “group joker” can also be person invokes some fear, or at least wariness, in other group members. This gives the joker (or jokers, because it is not always one person) a kind of dark power in the group, which can act as a thermostat in its own right.
- At its most destructive, humor can be targeted – at an individual, sub-group or perhaps even the whole group - in a way that it becomes a form of bullying, masquerading as fun.

With some persistence, the Thermostat Effect can be countered. Responses such as, “now that the laughter has died down, can we come back to the point that Karen was trying to make” are unlikely to have immediate impact, other than to prompt another thermostat comment.

However, if such interventions are made with persistence, the group will fairly quickly realize – at least unconsciously – that its work will proceed with greater effectiveness if there is more real talk.

At this point, it seems important to reiterate that humor *can* be a positive and helpful part of group life. This paper is *not* the Wet Blanket Guide to Group Dynamics.

For humor to be a positive part of group life, it needs to pass through the following filters:

- **Context.** If the discussion is in real talk, and/or if someone is making a point that is serious – at least to them – a humorous intervention is inappropriate.
- **Timing.** This is really a subset of “context.” If a point is being made ad nauseum, or is obviously not of interest or relevance to the group, a humorous intervention may well help to relieve the moment, and those trapped in that moment.
- **Taste and Base-level Appropriateness.** Whatever the context, any humorous intervention must conform to the cultural norms of the group, and the legal and policy parameters of the organisation and jurisdiction.^v
- **Tone.** Many humorous interventions will be offensive to one or more people in the group. In itself this will be enough to render the humorous intervention inappropriate. That said, the tone in which an intervention is delivered is as important as its content.
- **Frequency.** Occasional humorous interventions may be acceptable and helpful; however, if they persist, sometimes to the point that they define their author in the context of the group, they lose value.

For those who enjoy humor in groups, and particularly for those who enjoy making humorous interventions, I encourage you to ask, and keep asking, three questions:

1. Will the intervention I am about to make help us as a group to achieve our task, and to become a more effective group?
2. Is the current discussion real talk? (because if it is, I am at risk at being a thermostat)
3. Have I reached my mythical quota of humorous interventions for today?
4. How does the group see me, overall, relation to my use of humor, and is that how I want the group to see me?

The answers to each of those questions will involve a judgment—and a decision based on that judgment^{vi}. My final encouragement is to make those judgments and those decisions with due seriousness – and with a dash of good humor.

The author

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Notes

ⁱ Freud, S., *The Penguin Freud Library, Volume 6*, Penguin. London, 1991

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Gray, M., “Public Speaking,” *Information Australia*, Melbourne, 1999

ⁱⁱⁱ This is often used in movies. A wonderful example is the 1974 movie, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, in which humor is used to liberally to make the terrible story of McMurphy and his fellow inmates digestible to the viewing audience.

^{iv} I first used the term “Thermostat Effect” while working with a client group in Australia in 1990. Observing that the group was consistently using humor to trivialise very serious set of challenges it was then facing, I raised the “thermostat” issue with the group. The reaction was instant and hostile.

It happens that a visiting speaker, perhaps setting the tone, had offered this joke early in the workshop:

Q: What do you call a man who has lost 75% of his intelligence?

A: A widower.

I won’t comment on the appropriateness of that joke. However, in the notes which were sent to participants in the week after the workshop, the following joke was included:

Q: What do you call a facilitator who has lost 75% of his sense of humor?

A: John Lonergan

^v Legal and social standards have changed significantly in the past 10 years. Where once it was conceivable that a person might lose a friend because of an inappropriate joke, that same person might now lose his or her *job* because of that same joke. Beware.

^{vi} In 2002, a now senior manager who had been a participant in the 1990 workshop referred to above approached me. His brief was brief: “John, remember that thing you did with us about humor a couple of years [sic] ago? I’m having trouble getting my team to get beyond the funny side of our work. Could you come in and give us that talk...please?”