The Serious Business of Humor
- A qualitative study of humor as a management tool

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Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This research was initiated due to the novelty of the topic. Humor is a common phenomenon in the daily interaction of many people; however this study is particularly interested in humor as used by managers. As a preconception to the study it was assumed that appropriately used humor results in benefits for a leader, thus we wish to explore how managers in Swedish organizations reason about if and how humor can be used as a management tool. For this purpose we employed qualitative research with semi-structured interviewing method. The subjects for investigation reside in Umeå, northern Swedish town, and are leaders in 8 medium/big sized, private, service companies.

The findings of this research suggest that managers often do realize the benefits of using humor and even consider it as a management tool. Our findings furthermore illustrate that the utility of humor to achieve the desired organizational outcomes of reduced stress, group cohesiveness, improved communication, creativity and leadership effectiveness is in fact very situation dependent. We could also see that our respondents tended to attribute the use of humor to their natural skills as they reason that they rarely use humor on purpose. Interestingly though, our findings showed both that managers were aware of the effects of humor and that they often utilized the benefits of humor. We therefore conclude that humor thus instead is consciously used as the managers often clearly are aware of the beneficial effects that humor brings. However, we do believe that it could be difficult to state to what extent one implements the benefits of humor in practice since humor is, as mentioned by the majority of our respondents, simply a part of their personality.

We think that one of the most important things that this study can contribute with would be to inform the reader that it is acceptable and OK to use humor also as a manager or a leader. People do not have to be less serious or effective because they have fun at work. On the contrary there are instead many benefits with humor that our research shows and if implemented, humor could contribute to make the workplace more pleasant.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Humor in human interaction

In contemporary society all over the world, people perceive laughter to be a method of coping with life’s difficulties (Ziv, 1988). Slogans such as “A good laugh every day prolongs your life” or “Laughter is the best medicine” reflect these cultural beliefs about laughter. However, laughter is much more than that and can provide some important insights into human interaction.

In its nature human interaction is multifaceted with many aspects to consider. If there is one facet that many people enjoy it is most likely an appropriate and relevant joke or anecdote that leads to genuine laughter. Since laughter is a primary indicator of humor we would like to draw your attention to the topic of humor. Humor is a social phenomenon and appears to be a natural and pleasant ingredient of human interaction. Assume the situation where you are watching a funny television show, how much do you laugh when you are alone? How much more do you laugh when your friends are around?

Apart from the social dimension, humor also serves various functions. As early as Freud, who believed that humor can release tension and aggression (Collinson 2002 p. 271), humor was a topic for discussion and research because it was considered to bring benefit to the initiator or the appreciator (Freud 1960b in: Lyttle 2006 p.242). However, with the years and much more research on humor it was discovered that the use of humor can have much broader benefits, such as psychological, cognitive and social benefits (Lyttle 2006 p. 240). Stress release and coping with difficult situations by means of humor are examples of psychological humor benefits (Lyttle 2006 p.240). As for social benefits, humor is found to be effective in bringing group cohesiveness (Francis 1994 in: Romero & Cruthirds 2006 p. 60) or even serve as social “lubricant” among team members (Meyer 2000 p. 317) by building a sense of community. Finally, the research into cognitive benefits of humor reports quicker learning (Roth 2006 p.121).

As the research in humor indicates, the vast benefits of using humor bring the discussion to the point where the settings for humor appreciation are given attention. One setting which has been widely researched and proved to be exceptionally helpful is to apply humor in training and education (Roth 2006 p.127), by bringing one of the thickest arguments that “learners are not sleeping when they are laughing” (Roth 2006 p. 121). Another instance is of more interest for this particular discussion and it is concerned with the place where the majority of the adult population spends over a third of the daily time (Miller 1996 p.16) – work. Since work is a place where “much time is spent in tedium, in conflict, in challenge, in fear and in accomplishing” (Farrell 1998 p.4 ) the topic of humor in the workplace mediating these instances might be of interest to practitioners and researchers.

1.2 Problem background

1.2.1 Humor at work: from uncivilized to accepted

The fact of suppressing humor in the workplace, due to the perception of it being “uncivilized” and “dangerous”, can be found in certain historical contexts (Collinson 2002 p. 274). Censorship through management control was implemented since managers were thought to maximize sales and coordinate labor and thus it was expected of them to be rational and
somber and the use of humor would have been considered as unprofessional. To illustrate the extremes to which humor was suppressed in the workplace, the example from the 1930s at Ford Motor Company might be a vivid case. There, management control practices were as absurd as not allowing workers to talk to each other, whistle or hum, since it was considered to be an evidence of insubordination (Collinson,2002 p.276) However, in the contemporary society there are still remains of the past inappropriateness of humor in the workplace, where work is taken seriously and humor is an evidence of play (Hughes & Avery, 2009 p.541) and thus unacceptable. Researchers tend to assign this phenomenon to the organizational culture that would establish whether humor is either embraced or denied in the work context (Cooper, 2008,p.1098).

1.2.2 Research on humor at work

From a theoretical perspective, humor as a beneficial phenomenon in the workplace received attention from organization science scholars only in the middle of the 20th century. According to Duncan et al., (1990) the interest for humor and work started in the 60’s with several important studies of humor and work. However, serious studies of the subject have since then been rather erratic with only a few studies in the entire decade of the 1970’s and only slightly more in the 1980’s. Unexpectedly though, the interest in the use of humor at work got an upswing more than a decade later through significant studies on effects of joking on employee and manager relationships and performance (Duncan & Feisal, 1989), on the link between humor styles and organizational outcomes (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006), and on humor’s ability to create or destroy relationships at work (Cooper, 2008). As it turns out, humor in the workplace can actually be a serious business and the dismissal of humor as a superficial phenomenon of organizational life fails to recognize the benefits of understanding the roles that humor plays in the work environment.

In terms of benefits, empirical studies support the theoretical development that the use of humor at work can achieve various effects on organizational outcomes, such as enhance group cohesiveness and communication (Meyer,2000), augment subordinate satisfaction (Decker, 1987), increase productivity (Avolio et al., 1999), reduce stress (Lee & Kleiner,2005) and boost group creativity (Lang & Lee, 2010). The benefits of humor and laughter have been the subjects of studies in several different practical settings from shop floors (Collinson,1992 in Collinson 2002) to hospitals (Sumners, 1990) where the research focus has predominantly been on subordinates and the cultures they create through joking relations. However, in the last decade the preoccupation with the topic of humor as something that managers can deliberately use to achieve organizational outcomes; a management tool (Cooper,2008,p.1092; Collinson,2002,p.273), has received attention within organizational studies.

1.2.3 Humor and leadership

Since managers are “those in positions of power and authority who have the responsibility for social control and organization in specific contexts” (Collinson, 2002,p.273) they play a crucial role in the daily interactions within organizations. At the same time, given that humor plays an important role in human interactions and, furthermore, how important leaders are for organizational interaction, more emphasize should be given to the relationship between humor and leadership. Even though humor is recognized within contemporary management theory, there is very little research on humor, leadership and management which results in few
contributions to the use of humor by leaders (Lyttle, 2006, p.241). The contributions are most significant on the leadership effectiveness where humor constructs desirable aspects of leadership styles (Holmes & Marra, 2006 p. 119).

We were able to identify a gap when it comes to the research on how managers can use humor as a management tool since predominantly conceptual or theoretical developments are achieved so far. For example, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) conceptually claim that humor can be used as a management tool providing the combination of humor styles and desired organizational outcomes. Empirical investigations, however, are sparse in this field, with a few exceptions such as Anderson (2005), where leaders, in qualitative interviews, were sharing their experiences on how and when they apply humor (p. 140). That particular study, was the only one found that considered such an aspect of humor in leadership as spontaneous v.s deliberate, where it was concluded that “deliberately learned and later put into practice so that it seemed a natural part of personality” (Anderson, 2005 p. 143) humor was the best option. Since this aspect did not receive considerable attention within previous research, we find it to be an interesting angle that should be further studied. Overall, we conclude that although humor as a management tool has received some conceptual development, the empirical attention has not been substantial.

The geographical empirical interest in the topic is strongly situated in the North America, and to our knowledge there are very few empirical studies in Sweden with the exception of Strömberg & Karlsson (2009). This makes Sweden an interesting target for empirical investigations. Stefan Sörensen, a senior lecturer in sociology and epidemiology believes that the reason behind the lack of serious research on humor in general, and in Sweden in particular, depends on the scientists’ prejudices on humor and its effects1. Nevertheless, it is interesting to investigate whether humor is valued by managers in Sweden in the coordination of employees.

On top of that there is a noticeable distinction in terms of cultural dimensions between North America, where most empirical studies on humor have been carried out, and Sweden. According to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions Sweden and North America differ in power distance index (PDI) and uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) (Hofstede, 2001, p79;145) which we believe could be important aspects for the human interactions in organization and therefore also in the use of humor as a management tool. Firstly, Sweden has a lower PDI than North America, which means that subordinates in Sweden expect that power is unequally distributed to a lesser extent than subordinates do in North America. This could signify that the use of humor as a management tool would be more easily implemented in Swedish organizations. Secondly, Sweden also ranks lower when it comes to the UAI than North America, which means that Sweden has a greater level of tolerance for unexpected ideas and events, indicating that managers’ attempt to use humor in their interaction with their subordinates might be more acceptable.

A study in Sweden could thus enrich the empirical knowledge on humor in the workplace and possibly increase the understanding of how cultural differences can affect the use of humor as a management tool. The intension with this study is to present findings that will appeal and be useful to managers and leaders in Sweden. They could also be applicable to other countries of similar nature.

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1 http://www.svd.se/nyheter/idagsidan/halsa/forskningsfalt-som-vaxer_2680521.svd
1.3 Problem
As it follows from the previous discussion we have identified a few aspects that make us realize the problem that will be investigated in this research. We found that it was suggested in previous research that humor in the workplace can lead to various organizational benefits and thus be valuable for managers to achieve organizational outcomes. However, very little empirical research has been undertaken to explore how humor can be used as a management tool. Furthermore, there is not much geographical diversity in the topic and Sweden offers an interesting environment for investigation not only because of its empirical weakness in the topic of humor as a management tool but also for its specific work culture. Consequently, the research problem is that there are few empirical studies on whether and how the phenomenon of humor as a management tool is addressed in Swedish organizations.

1.4 Purpose
The purpose of this study is to attempt to understand Swedish managers’ reasoning around if and how humor can be used as a management tool.

1.5 Research questions
With the intention of fulfilling the purpose of our research the following research questions were designed:

1. Is the benefit of humor in the workplace utilized by managers in Swedish organizations?
2. How could humor be applied by Swedish managers to achieve various organizational outcomes?

With the aforementioned research questions we have the ambition to assist the purpose of this study. The first question aims at establishing whether managers regard humor as a serious business and thus contributing to the little knowledge of using humor as a management tool in a Swedish work context. With the second research question, the intent is to contribute to the body of knowledge on how managers could use humor to achieve various organizational outcomes and whether they utilize humor consciously or if it occurs naturally without any deliberate purpose that can benefit the organization.

1.6 Definitions
Since the topic of humor in the workplace from the leadership perspective has nuances, these should be clarified for the sake of understanding the study.

Leadership vs. Management
A common question that surfaces in discussions on management and leadership follows; what is the difference between a manager and a leader? Leading constitute a major part of a manager’s job, however, a manager must also plan, organize and control an organization’s activities and its members. In other words, leadership concerns the interpersonal dimensions of a manager’s abilities while planning, organizing and controlling instead are administrative skills. Thus, a leader primary deal with change, inspiration, motivation and influence where it is important to have a vision of what the organization can become and mobilize people into accomplishing it (DuBrin, 2007,p4).
The concepts of leader and manager are often used interchangeably within organizational studies, the studies on humor and management/leadership being no exception. Given that there are very few relevant existing studies on the topic of humor in combination with management/leadership, we have chosen to use the concepts of manager and leader interchangeably in this study, even though we are aware of their differences. We do not wish to make too much of a difference between these studies and thus perhaps exclude existing research as a consequence of definitions.

Strategic use of humor & humor as a management tool

In this study we will mention the strategic use of humor and the use of humor as a management tool. We will use these two expressions interchangeably in an attempt to explain that humor can be used by managers to achieve organizational outcomes. In general, tool is a “handheld device that aids in accomplishing a task” (Merriam Webster online dictionary) however, we reason that when a manager takes up some tool or practice and utilizes it to facilitate his/her function it becomes a management tool. Thus, since the discussion in previous sections illustrates that humor can help managers in achieving benefits for organization, we will refer to humor as a management tool. Moreover, we found the similar approach to humor in Malone (1980) who calls humor to be “possibly a tool that could assist in getting people to get things done” (p. 357) in the context of management and leadership discussion.
1.7 Disposition of the paper

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<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>In the introduction to our study we introduce the reader to the background to the research, the problem that we have found and the purpose of our research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>This segment of the paper will cover various theories that relate to our subject.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>In this chapter we will present our previous knowledge and our philosophical assumptions in order to show the reader how they have affected the choices in terms of methodology and method made in this study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empirical findings</td>
<td>In this chapter we will present a summary of the findings from the eight interviews conducted in this study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>This chapter will introduce the reader to the analysis that we produced by combining the empirical data and analyzing it with the help of existing theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding remarks</td>
<td>In this chapter we will present the reader with the most significant findings of our study. We will furthermore answer our research questions and discuss whether we have fulfilled our purpose.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Truth criteria</td>
<td>This chapter is devoted to the trustworthiness of our study where we reason and exemplify whether our study fulfills qualitative research’s truth criteria.</td>
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2. Theory

The theory chapter is designed to introduce the reader to the theoretical perspectives that will be utilized in the research at hand. First of all, we wish to introduce humor as a concept for the reader to understand the depth of the phenomenon. Thus we present the definition and motivations of using humor on individual level that are represented by three humor theories: incongruity, relief and superiority. Apart from humor theories we also introduce the individual humor styles and humor in the leadership theory that aim to contribute with more understanding of humor as a phenomenon. Finally, the conceptual developments of humor application on the societal level will provide the theoretical framework with the functions of humor in achieving organizational outcomes.

2.1 What is humor?

As it has been already noted in the introduction, initially we introduce the reader to humor as a phenomenon. It is usually understood on a very surface level by the general public, but since in this study humor is taken seriously we wish to show the depth of this phenomenon. Furthermore, both the definition of humor and humor theories were selected to show the depth of humor, thus bring the reader as close to the knowledge we have as possible. That is the reason we start with defining humor in this study, as well as reviewing major theories of humor.

2.1.1 Definition of humor

Even though humor is all around us and is used constantly it is not a concept that can be easily defined, thus does not lend itself to a general definition. This is the reason why the researchers in the topic of humor can’t come to an agreement about the universal definition and customary adopt one or the other definition of humor depending on the purpose of a research (Cooper 2008 p. 1089). For example, in the conceptual paper by Lyttle (2006 p. 240) who aimed to analytically understand humorous interactions, humor was defined as "when something surprising or incongruous happens and we enjoy it". More specific, however, is the definition adopted by Cooper (2005 p. 766-767) in her theoretical investigation on humor as ingratiaatory behavior at work. Humor was given a definition of "any event shared by an agent with another individual that is intended to be amusing to the target and that the target perceives as an intentional act". Thus, considering the multiple nature of humor definition for the purpose of this study, the definition of humor that accounts for the human interaction is adopted and is as follows: “amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individuals, groups or organization” (Romero & Cruthirds 2006 p.58). As for the amusing communications, here these are defined as being funny remarks, jokes, anecdotes and other, however completely excluding sarcasm and ridicule due to their teasing and sometimes painful nature (Miller 1996 p.18-19). The definition provided above also assumes that humor situations and instances are humorous to all the participants, even though it allows for the broad understanding where some parties can perceive the humor negatively.

As leaders and managers play an important role for the overall interaction in the workplace we will also look if humor is mentioned in leadership theory.
2.1.2 Humor in leadership theory

The benefits of humor are also present in leadership theory. Sense of humor is repeatedly described as one of the general personality traits that contribute to successful leadership (DuBrin, 2007, p.34). The effective use of humor is indeed described as an important part of a leader’s role. Humor functions, which will be described further on in this chapter, such as relieving tension, boredom and defusing conflicts help managers handle certain issues and therefore exert power over the group (DuBrin, 2007, p. 35).

Although present in leadership theory, humor is not brought up often enough in the literature to appear an obvious part of leadership, which is why we feel the need to further explore humor theoretically. In order to deepen the readers understanding of the phenomenon of humor we turn to humor theories.

2.1.3 Theories of humor

The importance in reviewing the theories of humor is that they try to explain what and why may be considered humorous, namely three main theories of humor: incongruity, relief and superiority theories. Also, we would like to view these theories as contingency theories, since they elucidate what is the function of humor depending on different situations (Romero & Pescosolido 2008 p.398).

Incongruity theory

Incongruity theory tries to explain what can be considered as humorous. According to this theory the things that people usually find funny and humorous are somewhat unexpected, surprising or inappropriate. “The audience is led along a certain path of comprehension and then is abruptly switched to another path by the punch line” (Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap 1990 p. 258), so that the violation of the expectedness occurs. In other instances, the things that do not really match are put together by accident or even on purpose to make the instance funny or humorous. Incongruity is often present when a person “perceives a situation simultaneously from two incompatible frames of reference” (Cooper 2008 p.1096) or when a play on word meanings is intended. Thus, incongruity may occur due to an unexpected event or an object, a physical or moral defect, an odd or disproportionate object, or any deviation from an implied standard (Meyer 2000 p. 313) where one’s actions are directed at others, making humor a social phenomenon. It is important to note though that this theory emphasizes the cognitive aspect of humor, where one should have a necessary mental capacity to note and understand incongruous changes. In organizational setting, use of incongruity may assist in delivering unpleasant information or expression of feelings with minimal social risk (Graham et al. 1992 p. 174).

Relief theory

Relief theory is one of the theories explaining the humor from another angle than incongruity theory does, thus it suggests why people are motivated to apply or experience humor.

The main proponent of the relief theory is considered to be Sigmund Freud, who believed that humor is usually used as a "defense mechanism by the ego and super ego to reject the reality and protect itself from suffering" (Cooper 2008 p. 1096) such as when a sentenced outlaw attempts to joke while being led to the gallows. Also, this theory assumes that an individual
will laugh or experience humor when he/she feels that stress or tension has been released. In organizational setting, a skilful communicator using relief humor would start a meeting held to discuss future budget cuts, with a joke like "Well, it turns out we can still afford to have lunch - but I don't think the cook accepts the complaints", (Meyer 2000 p.312) thus releasing the overall pressure and tension about the upcoming topic. When the atmosphere in the board room becomes more relaxed, it also becomes more manageable and might lead to a more open and honest discussion on the issue. Additionally, self-disparaging humor, that is when jokes are directed at oneself, could be used as a tool by managers to achieve a release of stress and increased subordinate participation, thus being an effective tool in the hands of a skilful leader.

Superiority theory

Similarly to relief theory, superiority theory stands to explain the reasons behind producing and experiencing humor or laughter, thus answering the question why people are motivated to apply or experience humor.

Hobbes is often mentioned as the originator of the superiority theory, stemming from his political philosophy. His philosophy maintains that people are not making the social contracts out of altruistic concerns but rather to protect themselves, thus a person would feel jubilant whenever others look bad in comparison (Duncan et al. 1990 p. 259). Consequently, the superiority theory holds that one would laugh whenever he/she in some way feels superior to others. On the one hand, superiority humor is often used to gain control over the subordinates, while not always being of an aggressive nature and directed at another party. Also, applying this type of humor allows to "maintain boundaries without suffering negative effects that occur when using forceful or critical language" (Martin 2004 p.209). On the other hand, superiority humor can reinforce group unity by experiencing laughter on somebody’s faulty behavior together, while feeling triumphant over those being ridiculed (Meyer 2000 p. 315). In the organizational setting, though, status has a great importance in deciding who can execute humor over whom (Duncan, 1985,p.559) First, high status subordinates of a group joke more than low-status subordinates. Second, high-status initiators most often direct jokes towards low status foci. Third, when other (high-status) subordinates are present, high-status subordinates refrain from self-disparaging humor.

Additionally, Graham, Papa and Brooks (1992) attempted to understand how humor functions in the interpersonal relationships, and as a result three big categories of social humor functions were derived: expressive, positive and negative (p. 169). These categories in a way relate to the three theories we have just reviewed: incongruity being expressive, relief - positive and superiority of a negative nature. Finally, as Meyer (2000) observes, every theory of humor origin in fact seems appropriate for specific situations (p.316):

- relief humor for relaxing tensions during communication in distressing situations or relating to controversial issues
- incongruity for presenting new perspectives and viewpoints
- superiority humor for criticizing opposition or unifying a group

The discussion about definition of humor and further following theories of humor illustrates that humor can serve many functions and has many dimensions. The dimension we are interested in here is humor as communication means, where humor is a part of human daily
interaction. However, to contribute to a deeper understanding of humor on an individual level, differences in uses of humor are presented further.

### 2.1.4 Humor styles

In any organizational context leaders have a choice on how to introduce humor and this choice is between the different styles of humor. Humor styles reflect individual differences in uses or functions of humor. They were chosen to represent the humor’s dimension in relation to functions it fulfills as well as serve as an instrument to elaborate on the phenomenon of humor in this study. Moreover, humor styles here are assumed from the initiator’s perspective, thus suggest why a leader would choose one or the other style in various organizational situations. Even though humor styles proposed by Martin et al. (2003) are seen as independent from each other, the combinations of the styles are possible due to overlapping functions they serve (p. 54). The four humor styles identified in Martin’s et al. study are: self-enhancing, affiliative, aggressive and self-defeating.

#### Self-enhancing humor

This humor style is directed at enhancing the self. Individuals using this humor try to cope with the negative emotions induced by stress, or as Freud put it, as a healthy defense mechanism. This humor style is usually adopted by people having a generally humorous outlook on life (Kuiper & McHale, 2009 p.360). In other words, self-enhancing humor is closely related to coping humor, while not harming self or the other. In organizations, this humor can serve leaders in enhancing their image relative to others in the group (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006 p.59) and demonstrate the others that leader is a positive person, who can effectively manage stress/face threat by him/herself.

#### Affiliative humor

Affiliative humor has a function of improving the relationships with others in interpersonal interactions, it “oils the wheels of communication and permits the establishment of social relations with a minimum of conflict” (Ziv, 1984 p.32). Leaders applying this style of humor tell jokes or funny things to ease interpersonal tension and provide others with the sense of comfort; these leaders are usually liked by others and seen as non-threatening (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006 p. 59). Moreover, benign humor practiced by those in power can help them to increase their attractiveness to others, enhance group cohesiveness and identity as well as create the positive atmosphere and emotions in the organizational context (Martineau, 1972). Despite the inherently kind humor attached to affiliative humor, it still may involve gentle teasing or playful poking fun at others, perceived to be of a mildly aggressive nature (Martin et al. 2003, p. 53). To sum up, affiliative humor initiated by leaders can shape a behavioral strategy aimed at facilitating interpersonal closeness and relationship satisfaction in a way that is affirming to self and the others (Kuiper & McHale, 2009 p.363).

#### Aggressive humor

Aggression by nature does not produce positive emotions and similarly use of aggressive humor cannot expect establishment of positive relationships. In organizations, use of aggression by leaders might equal exercise of power and insensitivity, thus is not advised to practice in trying to achieve organizational outcomes by friendly means. Aggressive humor is expressed in sarcasm, teasing and “put-down”, where the initiator expresses humor without
regard for its potential impact on others (Zillman, 1983 p.102). Even though we do not anticipate positive outcome of aggressive humor strategically used by leader, we still review it here, for the purpose of possible empirical evidences of aggressive humor in our study.

*Self-defeating humor*

By producing an excessive amount of self-disparaging and cynical humor, individuals attempt to ingratiate others at their own expense, by being the butt of the joke (Kuiper & McHale. 2009 p.360). The function of this style of humor is to foster interpersonal communication or gaining the approval. For leaders, excessive self-defeating humor can result in subordinates perceiving him/her not seriously, thus endangering their power in the group or organization. Apart from negative impacts of this humor style resulting in perceived emotional neediness and low self-esteem, leaders capable of using an adequate amount of self-disparaging humor can facilitate closer relationships with subordinates by reducing their status and seen as more approachable (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006 p. 60).

As it was introduced earlier, humor is a phenomenon that is easier understood in its natural environment – interpersonal communication. While humor styles develop the understanding on the humor’s functions, the purpose with this study is to attempt to understand Swedish managers’ reasoning around if and how humor can be used as a management tool”, thus there is also a need to understand how humor’s functions can be used by managers strategically on a societal level. Since humor styles in this research are used as an instrument for elaboration on humor, in the following section they will be matched with the organizational outcomes. Organizational outcomes will represent the work environment where theoretically humor can be used as a management tool.

2.2 Organizational outcomes achieved with humor as a management tool

As a social entity, organizations have their goals and outcomes. Goals are concerned with fulfilling organizations’ obligations for society and stakeholders, while outcomes refer to an internal environment within the organization. What we are more interested in are the organizational outcomes, since literature on humor suggests many examples of organizational outcomes that can be achieved with the help of humor. The purpose of the study is to investigate if and how humor can be used as a management tool by Swedish managers. Considering that one of managers’ main responsibilities is to achieve various organizational outcomes in order to facilitate the overall functioning of the organization, we see that humor can be a tool to help managers achieve these outcomes. Therefore we wish to provide a discussion on the appropriateness of humor as a management tool in fulfilling managers’ functions and achieving organizational outcomes. Moreover, the investigation of organizational outcomes is also motivated by one of the research questions, which aims to answer “how could humor be applied by Swedish managers to achieve various organizational outcomes?”

Since our theoretical framework aims to facilitate our research we focus on some common outcomes recognized in the humor literature. Namely, reduced stress, increased group cohesiveness, improved communication, more effective leadership and fostered creativity will be examined one by one. These organizational outcomes are achieved in a long-term perspective by nature; however, since our focus is on human interaction that happens on a daily basis we see the need to break the organizational outcomes down into situations or
managerial concerns that would lead to a desired organizational outcome in a long-term. This motivation illustrates the problem of the study, which is to find out how the phenomenon of humor as a management tool is addressed in Swedish organizations. Another reason behind splitting the outcomes into situations/managerial concerns is to avoid misinterpretation of what each outcome constitutes, since every leader might have individual perception. Thus, identified organizational outcomes in this theoretical background are represented by the situations or managerial concerns that managers are likely to deal with daily. In order to make our assumptions on outcomes vs. situations/concerns compatibility more reliable we will turn to management theory for support.

Additionally, as it was introduced earlier in this chapter we wish to match organizational outcomes with the humor styles, aiming to elaborate on the phenomenon of humor.

The disposition of the following section allows us to initially acquire the knowledge about the organizational outcome at hand and later observe the situations or managerial concerns that represent it, finishing with the theoretical matching of humor styles and organizational outcomes. To start with the organizational outcomes, stress reduction is one of the desired organizational outcomes that can be achieved with the help of humor. For readers’ convenience we also provide the questions from the interview guide that were used to extract the information of the topic before each theoretical section.

2.2.1 Reduced stress

- Considering stress reduction as a desired organizational outcome that is affected by situations of *deadline* and *crisis*, how do you handle these situations?

  o According to your experiences can you use humor to deal with these situations in order to reduce stress? Why/Why not?

Stress is a physiological and psychological reaction that occurs when people perceive that there is an imbalance between a demand and their ability to meet that demand. The experience of stress is likely to affect people mentally, physically and emotionally and it can cause people to think less clearly, be less likely to get along with others and be less coordinated. Stress is an important management issue since ignored stress among the subordinates can lead to lower productivity and problems retaining valuable employees (Corville & Bernadi, 1999, p.11).

Over time, individuals have increasingly learnt to use humor as a method to cognitively manage situations and events that oppose their well-being and instead turned them into something to laugh at (Dixon, 1980). Existing humor research provides strong evidence that humor reduces stress and anxiety (Yovetich et al. 1990; Lefcourt et al. 1995; Kuiper & Martin, 1998). Findings suggest that humor plays an important role in the cognitive appraisal of threatening and thus stressful situations where it allows the individual to shift perspectives on the stressful situation to a less threatening view (Martin et al. 1993). A study by Kuiper et al. (1993) identified a positive relation between stressful situations and using humor as a coping mechanism and it was concluded that humor is a healthy means of reappearing stressful events as less threatening. Another study on humor, stress, and coping strategies showed that
individuals with a high sense of humor, experienced less stress than individuals with a low sense of humor even though all respondents experienced a similar number of everyday problems (Abel, 2002). Consequently humor functions as a coping strategy which makes situations less stressful and more manageable (Kuiper & Martin, 1998). In addition to humor promoting more positive perceptions, Kuiper et al. (1995) found that humor might increase the likelihood for individuals to search for alternative viewpoints of problems and emotionally distance themselves from the stress and thus reduce the experience of negative affect. The notion of humor as an emotion-focus coping technique is reinforced by Lefcourt et al. (1995) who describes humor as a means of taking one’s experiences less seriously and therefore lessens one’s emotional reactions to threatening circumstances.

While there is strong evidence from cognitive studies that humor reduces stress, there is little research on how humor can affect employees in stressful situations at work. As previously mentioned, organizational outcomes are subjected to more detailed representation. Thus, with stress reduction as the desired outcome in mind, we have identified two situations, supported by management literature, which employees might encounter in their organizations and find potentially stressful, while managers need to help their employees in overcoming these situations. These stressful situations are deadline and crisis.

a) Deadline

In a fight against the clock people are likely to encounter situation that they are not in control of and tempers can flare at a moments notice. Although not all employees experience deadlines as stressful and negative, it is common that people feel pressured by a deadline and thus a stressful scenario of a deadline can bear serious consequences as people in stress tend to react rather than respond. Management theory identifies time pressure and deadlines to be the number one source of work stress around the world (Bloisi et al, 2003, p.283). The fact that people perceive jobs with many deadlines as particularly stressful has much to do with the lack of control that employees have in similar situations (Corville & Bernadi, 1999, p.12). In order to reduce the pressure on employees in times of a deadline, managers could learn and understand the use of humor and the effect that it has on stressful situations. In the paragraph above the literature suggests humor to be a coping mechanism that reduces stress and allows individuals to shift perspectives and look at stressful situations in a less threatening way. Managers that advocate humor in their organizations could thus ease the pressure on employees by diminishing the threatening experience from a stressful situation. In addition, Nezu et al. (1988) state that humor in stressful situations might be useful not only as a means of minimizing the negative affects from the situation itself but also as a way of coping with the consequences that arise from the situation.

The deadline is a common organizational situation that managers have to deal with in order to reduce stress among their employees. As previously mentioned management theory states, stress reduction is a crucial management issue since stress could have very negative effects on the productivity of the organization and the ability to retain valuable employees. Thus, reduced stress as a desired organizational outcome could be addressed if managers deal with stress caused by the deadline. Moreover, as the discussion illustrates humor can be a tool for managers to utilize in these situations.
However, deadline is not the only situation which employees may find stressful. It is not only the time pressure that makes them feel not in control, but the situations of crisis can also lead to stress.

**b) Crisis**

Humor could also be beneficial in order to avoid negative consequences from a rougher stressful situation, a crisis. A crisis in an organization can take various shapes. A recent crisis that has affected many organizations is of course the financial crisis; however, a crisis can be anything from bad publicity to changes in trading alliances. Bloisi et al. (2003) mention exactly economic uncertainty and furthermore personal problems to be commonly perceived as severely stressful situations to individuals. Management theory identifies a crisis to be a wide variety of crisis-like events with the common denominator of not being generally associated with the normal operations of the organization (Darling, 1994, p.3). A crisis-like event that increases the stress among the employees must therefore be dealt with through stress management and psychological counseling efforts are in order to reduce the immediate impact of a crisis on the employees. An ignored crisis situation could lead to significant human and financial costs for the organization as absenteeism, turnover, negative impacts on people’s morale and reduction in employee productivity is often the result. (Bartn, 1994, p.19)

Therefore, it is important that managers identify the seriousness of supporting their employees in times of crisis and consider humor to be a means of dealing with this negative situation.

Despite general assumption that humor is an important coping mechanism in times of a crisis, humor has actually proven to be very effective in more extreme stressful situations. A study by Henman (2001) consisted of interviews with former Vietnam prisoners of war who had been living in captivity for over 7 years during which time they were isolated, tortured, starved and beaten. The findings concluded that the individuals held captive developed their own method of coping with the captivity where humor allowed the prisoners to rely on their own power, find some sense in a senseless situation and remain connected to others. Although managers are not likely to find themselves in such extreme situations in their organization, we can draw from this example the conclusion that humor as a coping mechanism might also be useful in times of more severe, although less extreme, cases of stress. The use of humor to cope with stress in a crisis-like situation should thus be considered among managers since stress reduction is crucial in a well-functioning organization and as management theory argues that stress could have very negative effects on the productivity of the organization and the ability to retain valuable employees.

Similarly to deadline, it was illustrated that crisis adds to overall stress in the organization and it is important that manager’s identify the seriousness of supporting their employees in times of crisis and consider humor to be a means of dealing with this negative situation, since reduced stress is the desired outcome. Finally, to finish with theoretical development on reduced stress, Romero & Cruthirds (2006) suggest linking it to humor styles.

As argued by Romero and Cruthirds (2006) self-enhancing and affiliative humor are the most appropriate humor styles that managers can use to remedy the situations involving stress in the workplace. For example, self-enhancing humor is explained to have a coping function which can be beneficial in the situations of deadline that employees experience as stressful
and threatening much due to the lack of control that such situation brings. The guidance of a strong leader figure might be valued by the employees in a stressful situation of a deadline or a crisis. The explained benefits of humor should be considered by managers that identifies reduced stress as an objective for their organization. Existing studies proves that humor can be used to reduce stress and anxiety and should therefore be considered as a valuable coping mechanism in order to reduce stress.

2.2.2 Group cohesiveness

- Considering group cohesiveness as a desired organizational outcome that is affected by the managerial concern of dealing with a newcomer and a situation of conflict, how do you handle this concern/situation?

- According to your experiences can you use humor to deal with this concern and situation in order to enhance group cohesiveness? Why/Why not?

The joining together and bonding of a group’s individual members, in other words group cohesiveness, is a desired outcome in any organization. The more a group works together towards a common goal, while still fulfilling the needs of its individual members, the more effective the group will be (Brandler & Roman, 1999, p6; Duncan & Feisal, 1989). A united group is thus something that managers should continuously work to improve and they should recognize humor to be beneficial in the process of improving group cohesiveness. According to McGhee (1999) humor is valuable in the building of cohesive groups since shared laughter and fun would generate bonding and thus make people feel closer together. Another study by Kaplan & Boyd (1965) found that integration, adaptation and accommodation functions of humor may lead to increased group solidarity which would positively affect group cohesiveness. These functions were suggested to enhance group morale by providing a common ground and decrease social distance among group members. Pogrebin & Poole (1988) supported and extended this suggestion by introducing functions of humor that operate within a group’s subculture and which were expected to increase cohesion among group members. Humor was suggested to allow sharing of experiences and feelings among group members in a non-threatening manner, defining the working ideology of the group’s members and help the group to cope with forces beyond its control.

There is thus evidence that humor is also beneficial when it comes to building group cohesiveness. With group cohesiveness as the desired outcome in mind, we have identified two situations that employees might encounter in their organizations often and where manager’s use of humor might be effective. First is the situation when a new member enters a group, with the potential to disrupt the order of the previous group members. Second, is the situation of a conflict within a group that also might endanger the group’s cohesiveness. We will start with a new member in a group.

a) Newcomer

In contemporary organizations it is not unusual that employees find it less attractive to stay for the rest of their life within the specific organization but instead choose to move on to other
organizations in order to further develop. New people at work thus represent a situation that most managers deal with and the integration of the newcomer in the existing group is a crucial process for the group cohesiveness. According to management theory highly cohesive groups in which the members value each other are potential to be more productive than other groups (Bloisi et al., 2003, p. 400). The literature identifies humor to be helpful in the introduction of a newcomer into a work group. Vinton (1989) suggests that humor could help new members into the organization as it creates bonds among the employees as well as facilitates the accomplishment of work tasks. The humor practices of a work group would also comfort a newcomer by showing him or her that the members of the group appreciate each other and that membership in the group is valuable (Fine & De Soucey, 2005). Manager who deals with the situation of introducing a newcomer into a work group could understand that the joy and humor in the group would appear attractive to the newcomer and good examples could be set through further encouraging the use of humor in the work group which is suggested to lead to cohesiveness.

As the discussion illustrates, if a manager makes an effort to introduce a new member with a bit of humor in their interaction, the integration process is likely to go smooth and not influence group cohesiveness negatively. Thus, manager’s humor in the situation with a newcomer can positively affect group cohesiveness as an organizational outcome. However, not only newcomer can be a threat to cohesiveness in a group, a conflict could also brings challenges into the group.

b) Conflict

Another situation that would affect the cohesiveness of a group would be a conflict between the members of a group. As mentioned above, management theory suggests that cohesive groups work together and are likely to be more productive. Furthermore, management theory identifies dysfunctional conflicts as undesirable and likely to lead to negative outcomes such as aggression, violence and hostility (Bloisy et al, 2003, p.432). Humor literature identifies humor as being useful in improving group cohesiveness as humor is considered a solid method of avoiding escalation of emotions and saving face when resolving a conflict between conflicting parties (Smith et al. 2000). According to Forester (2004) having a sense of humor in challenging situations of conflict has little to do with being funny but very much to do with one’s ability to respond to others with understanding and imagination. In a situation of conflict, a sense of humor would enable people to respond to others in the moment and being able to take others experiences into consideration while recognizing the organizations larger sense of frustration and possibility (Forester, 2004). In other words, humor can be an important tool at critical moments of conflict if used with timing, affect and respect. Given the positive suggestions on the use of humor in a conflict situation, managers should deliberately use humor to widen the employees understanding of each others perspectives and thus possibly avoid or at least remedy situations of conflict. A study by Smith et al. (2000) found that humor is positively related to different types of conflict management strategies, with the exception of forcing, and that humor is often used when avoiding and compromising. In addition, it is suggested that business schools should reevaluate their more traditional approach to preparing students for managerial tasks by promoting not only “thought-mindedness” but also “a sense of humor” (Cox et al. 1990 in Smith et al. 2000). A conscious and reasoned adaptation of playfulness and humor offers opportunities for more creative conflict resolutions (Sclavi, 2008) and it should thus be considered among managers as a legit means of managing conflicts.
Group cohesiveness is an attractive outcome for managers to achieve since cohesive groups are better equipped to be productive and managers should therefore strive to avoid unnecessary conflicts that affect the cohesiveness of a group. Additionally, to avoid these unnecessary conflicts managers can utilize humor as a tool, as suggested above. To finish with theoretical development on group cohesiveness, Romero & Cruthirds (2006) suggest linking it to humor styles.

Romero and Cruthirds (2006) suggest that affiliative humor is beneficial in a situation where the desired organizational outcome is group cohesiveness. For example, affiliative humor is explained to have the function of creating closeness and providing others with a sense of comfort. Therefore humor should be considered valuable among managers who wish to create and maintain group cohesiveness. Newcomers in the group and conflicts between the group’s members are identified to disrupt group cohesiveness and humor could offer the ability to ease the tension in the group while avoiding negative emotions. According to management theory cohesive groups are more likely to be productive which is why managers should strive to create and maintain group cohesiveness and acknowledge humor as beneficial in order to create closeness and ease any tension in a group.

2.2.3 Improved communication

- Considering improved communication as a desired organizational outcome that is affected by the managerial concerns of improved daily interaction, trust establishment and organizational change, how do you handle these concerns?

- According to your experiences can you use humor to deal with these concerns in order to enhance group cohesiveness? Why/Why not?

In order for employees to work towards organizational goals, it is important that managers and leaders clearly communicate their vision and strategies. Employees should be informed and updated on why their work is central and they should feel a part of the development of the organization. Pastor (1996) argues that it is crucial for all organizations, especially organizations in change, to be able to communicate with all employees involved. By involving the employees it is more likely that they feel a part of the organization as a whole and managers and employees will thus cooperate for what is best for the organization. According to Romero & Cruthirds (2006) humor is very relevant in organizational studies since humor is common in most styles of communication. Humor is considered to be significant for the work environment and positively affecting the mood at work and the communication channels between group members (Decker & Rotondo, 2001, p. 451). Therefore managers should consider the utilization of humor in order to practice effective communication.

We have looked at organizational situations and managerial concerns in which communication is of high relevance in an attempt to investigate how humor can impact effective communication in different organizational circumstances. The situation of daily
interaction and two managerial concerns of trust and change were chosen to represent improved communication in an organization. We will start with the daily interaction.

a) Daily interaction

As the literature suggests, humor is a natural element in communication and therefore also in people’s daily interaction. Every day employees cooperate with numerous colleges and in order to achieve collective organizational objectives, the communication between employees must run smoothly. Management theory identifies communication breakdowns among the most common sources of organizational problems and to ensure that there is an effective communication in the workplace managers should constantly encourage employees to share their feelings (Bloisi et al, 2003, p 308). Therefore, managers should recognize the positive effects that humor can have on the communication between the members of the organization. According to Lynch (2002, p425) jokes and humor play an important role in our identifications of who we are, our thoughts on ourselves and consequently how we interact with others. By continuously working on employees’ interaction, the outcomes of organizational activities are more likely to be successful.

Humor in an organization creates an atmosphere which facilitates communication as positive emotions improve listening, understanding and the acceptance of messages (Greatbatch & Clark, 2002). Thus humor apparently influences and facilitates the crucial interactions, and consequently managers should make humor a natural element of communication in their organizations to achieve the desired organizational outcome - improved communication. To further explore the improved communication, we suggest considering trust as an important managerial concern.

b) Trust

As mentioned before, it is important that employees feel like they are a part of the organization as a whole in order for them to cooperate in what is best for the organization. However, employees will hardly naturally give up their own self-interest for the greater organizational good; instead it is managers who must build trust with their followers before they will behave transcendentally (Hughes & Avery, 2009, p543). McAllister (1995:24) strengthens the role of trust in an organization by arguing that in contemporary organizational studies interpersonal trust relationships are identified to be the foundation of organizational effectiveness (McAllister, 1995, p24). A study by Hampes (1999) developed numerous previous studies which have shown that people high in humor also tend to be high in intimacy by establishing a positive relationship between humor and trust.

The literature thus suggests that leaders and managers can facilitate trust in their organization and influence its effectiveness by using humor as a means of communication. Here it can be observed again that humor is a tool to be used by managers for establishing trust with employees and thus improving the communication between the two parties. Finally, change is the concern that managers should handle carefully and ease the tension any change is associated with.
c) Change

With changing and more challenging market environments many, if not all, companies at some point will have to go through fundamental changes in order to help cope with the new conditions. Whether the necessary change is major or small, many managers will find that the employees of the organization will find reasons to resist change. Two of the most common reasons to why employees resist change is according to organizational theory lack of information and fear of the unknown (Bloisi et al., 2003, p. 711). Routine as well will offer a sense of comfort to most people and deviation from what is known can be perceived as stressful and threatening. In the literature humor is identified to have positive effects on change. Given the emotional involvements in periods of organizational change, the production of humor should be promoted as a coping and sense making strategy (Meisiek & Yao, 2005, p. 158). Not the least since humor is mentioned to soften resistance and facilitate organizational change (Kahn 1989 in Collinson, 2002, p. 277) In other words, managers should consider the use of humor when managing change in order to ease the tension on the employees and assist them in processes of organizational change.

Thus, ability of a manager to use humor to his/her advantage in the daily interaction can lead to more relaxed atmosphere where change is perceived easier. To finish with theoretical development on improved communication, Romero & Cruthirds (2006) suggest linking it to humor styles.

Romero & Cruthird (2006) suggest that moderate self-defeating humor would be beneficial for improving communication, when trust should be established or change should be introduced. Self-enhancing humor has a feature of decreasing the social distance among managers and the employees, thus making the communication process smoother as the manager is perceived as less threatening. The explained benefits of self-enhancing humor should thus be considered by managers who wish to improve the overall communication in their organization.

2.2.4 Increased creativity

- Considering creativity as a desired organizational outcome that is affected by the managerial concern of alleviating employee boredom, boosting employee motivation and making problem-solving processes more efficient, how do you handle these concerns?

  - According to your experiences can you use humor to deal with these concerns in order to facilitate creativity? Why/Why not?

A continuously changing environment brings pressure on today’s organizations to handle tougher and tougher competition. In order to meet the increased demands from their surrounding organizations today must be able to be flexible and come up with creative means of improvements. One method for managers to boost creativity in their organization would be through humor as studies of humor have shown that humor is positively related to creativity and problem solving ability. Studies by Isen et al. (1987) found that positive affects induced
by a comedy film could facilitate creative responding to tasks that normally reflects creativity. It was furthermore indicated that creativity, which is usually thought of as a stable characteristic can be facilitated by pleasant affective states. It was also recommended that small, everyday events was sufficient for the fostering of creativity and that other organizational settings such as business, could benefit from using humor as a facilitator for creativity (Isen et al. 1987).

Lang & Lee (2010) explain humor’s positive effects on creativity to rely on the fact that when a person acts in a humorous manner, the action is not accorded the same weight of responsibility as a serious action. Therefore, humor would allow people to test the openness, riskiness and accessibility of sensitive issues and situations where new perspectives could lead to new understandings (Lang & Lee, 2010). It could thus be beneficial and possible for managers to deliberately improve creativity within the organization thorough the deliberate use of humor.

We have identified one situation and two managerial concerns that occur naturally within contemporary organizations in order to later investigate how and whether managers’ deliberate use of humor in these situations with these concerns could lead to the desired outcome of increased creativity. The two managerial concerns are related between each other and are important for ensuring creative process in organization: motivation and ability to solve problems. While the situation also influences the level of creativity, it addresses the issue of boredom that might hinder creativity. First, we consider motivation level.

\[a) \text{Motivation}\]

Managers’ communication affects their ability to motivate people to perform their tasks. By inflicting no negative emotions leaders should stimulate employees to get things done and it is no surprise that humor can help when it comes to motivation as well. According to Holmes & Marra (2006) humor assists in pursuing workplace goals, “since it makes it possible to “do” both power and politeness, often simultaneously” (p.125). Kuiper et al (1995) found that people with high levels of humor were more likely to perceive positive challenge appraisals, show high motivation for task performance and perceive positive affects upon task completion. Managers could thus benefit from various affects on employees motivation from the utilization of humor in their communication. However, Farrell (1998) states that a manager’s ability to motivate employees depends less on the motivation skills of the manager and more on the level of maturity of the employee. In other words, if the employee is not in the mindset and thus ready to be motivated, no manager will succeed to motivate. The manager should instead attempt to create an atmosphere in which humor could freely exist in order to elevate the employee’s self-image (Farrell, 1998). According to Farrell it would thus be more appropriate to build the whole organizational culture around humor and the ability to let go.

As it follows from the previous discussion, managers can get employees into the right mindset for improved motivation by using humor, which in turn will contribute to smoother creativity process, thus an organizational outcome of creativity would be addressed. However, boredom at work has more effect on creativity.
b) Boredom

Episodes of boredom are experienced quite often by many employees regardless of their job titles. Not only workers performing routine, repetitive tasks, but also those with more enriched job designs are affected by this organizational phenomenon. As a result, people who are bored at work tend to lose attention, experience stress or even fall asleep (Fisher, 1993 p.396). Since consequences of boredom at work often lead to reduced efficiency or cognitive impairment (Game, 2007 p.703), managers should be on guard in order to address the problem of work tediousness timely.

For managers to aid the situations of boredom, the causes of work tediousness need to be understood and for that reason we will turn to management theory. Apart from many individual factors, work environment is called to intensify or reduce boredom (Fisher, 1993 p.398), it is thus the factor that can and should be addressed by managers. Coworkers, other colleagues and managers play a crucial role in any individual’s work environment meaning that they can directly arouse the environment through entertainment or conversation (Fisher, 1993 p.399) where an individual feels no dullness. Consequently, since managers are a part of their subordinates’ work environment, they have an opportunity to arouse work routines by operating the tool at their disposal - humor.

In the literature on humor, there are many evidences that humor does serve many functions and one of them is actually to alleviate boredom (Duncan, 1982 p. 136). The most significant study of Roy (1960) reveals the benefits of incorporating deliberate work breaks “banana time” to experience fun and enjoyment with the reason to alleviate boredom (in Jett, 2003 p.10). Even though there the breaks were administered by the workers, managers can also utilize this practice by interrupting the work of a bored subordinate(s) using humor, just to initiate the switch in mood and hopefully after a break new perspectives and fresh look on problems will happen.

The change in mood is especially important when a person or a group’s tasks require a fair amount of creativity (Brooks, 1992 p.17), thus humor would be a suitable tool for the reasons mentioned earlier. The third managerial concern influencing creativity is ability to solve problems.

c) Problem solving

Another situation where creativity would be desirable is when it comes to problem solving in a new context. Such a situation would require thinking outside the box and thus for employees to come up with novel means of handling unfamiliar problems. As mentioned by Isen et al (1987) humor is an effective tool that likely leads to divergent thinking and increased creativity. This argument was further supported by Edwards & Gibbons (1992) who found that subjects who watched a humorous film solved problems more efficiently than subjects who watched a plain descriptive film (Edwards & Gibbons, 1992 in Raoch et el, 2006). The detachment function that humor plays in coping with stressful situations can also be beneficial in problem solving situations. Humor is suggested to enable people to distance themselves from problems while allowing them to look at the problem from a new perspective (May, 1953) which would be an effective function in creative problem solving situations.
Managers should learn about these various positive effects of humor in order to apply them in problem solving situations which could lead to creative solutions, thus contributing to the desired outcome of increased creativity. To finish with theoretical development on increased creativity, Romero & Cruthirds (2006) suggest linking it to humor styles.

As argued in Romero and Cruthirds (2006) research, creativity as an organizational outcome could be triggered by manager’s use of self-enhancing and affiliative humor. These humor styles have the potential to create open work environments where ideas can be freely exchanged and creative problem solving is boosted. These findings suggest that self-enhancing and affiliative humor styles thus should be considered among managers who seek to increase the creativity level among their employees.

2.2.5 Improved leadership effectiveness

- Considering leadership effectiveness as a desired organizational outcome that is affected by the managerial concern of relationship establishments and control execution, how do you handle these concerns?

    - According to your experiences can you use humor to deal with these concerns in order to be an effective leader? Why/Why not?

Leaders and managers constitute the foundation in any organization and their effectiveness will mirror in the performance of the whole organization. This simple logic illustrates that leaders ought to be effective. From a contingency approach, for leadership to be successful it needs to be flexible and emphasize task or relationship strategy depending on the situation (Brooks, 1992 p.4). Thus, effective leadership should reflect both a task and a social dimension. Leadership effectiveness can have many angles however here it is defined in terms of relationship establishment/maintenance in daily interaction and control (approval/disapproval). As Husband (1988) put it, an effective leader “needs to see choices about communication as central to everything that will happen” (p.535), and we suggest that one of these choices can be humor.

We have identified two important managerial concerns which are likely to occur in a contemporary organization in order to research whether humor as a management tool can be utilized to achieve the desired outcome of leadership effectiveness. Relationship establishment /maintenance and control concerns, represent the issues that can be remedied with humor on a way for effective leadership.

a) Relationship establishment/maintenance

Leaders have special status at work and are given power over subordinates. This structure usually results in social distance between leaders and subordinates that in some situations may be undesirable (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006 p.64). When the wall between management and employees is too thick, the communication flows slowly and relationships are predominantly
cold and formal. In these cases relationships do not offer an open dialogue or camaraderie, however humor has an ability to aid these relationships.

Vinton (1989) claims that humor potentially can lower status differences and make people equal. Crawford (1994) supports Vinton’s findings by claiming that humor can be used to break down power structures that separate management and employee, while improving communication. Martineau (1972) found that humor is a great tool to use in initiating social interaction and maintaining relationships. Thus it could be concluded that humor might serve as a tool to originate social interaction on a daily basis by leader as well as to signal that the distance between him/her and subordinates is minimal.

However, why a leader would want to decrease a social distance? Simply put, by minimizing social distance humor can contribute to increased employee satisfaction (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006 p.64), to be a motivational factor (Priest & Swain, 2002 p.170) or to construct workplace solidarity (Holmes & Marra, 2006 p.125). By sharing humor followers would perceive a leader as being a part of the group (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006 p.64), while probing each other’s values and motives (Graham, 1992 p.165).

Consequently, leaders can use humor as a tool to decrease social distance, thus achieve closer relationships with employees that would facilitate job satisfaction, motivation and camaraderie. These aspects can be used to define an effective leadership for a perspective that leader becomes closer to employees and they feel comfortable around each other. However, any leader’s responsibility is to ensure order and goal achievement, meaning that control aspects of leader’s role are integral.

b) Control concerns

The prime functions of a leader are to direct and control. Through established relationships with employees providing the direction would be easier as well as motivating to enact the guidelines. Control, however, is of a more strict nature. Control includes such situations of leadership as criticism, approval/disapproval of behavior and promoting instructions. In these leadership situations humor again can serve as a tool to soften the control execution.

Graham (1992) reviews the articles of Civikly (1983,1989) where it was found that humor has a potential to transmit information that would be difficult to transmit with any other approach (Graham, 1992 p.166). This humor function is extremely useful when there is a need to provide with mild but at the same time serious criticism. As Meyer (2000) suggests, humor can enforce; which “allows communicator to enforce norms delicately by leveling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with the audience” (p. 320). In other words, humor would sugar the pill of a negative evaluative comment, but deliver it in socially acceptable packaging (Holmes & Marra, 2006 p. 129). Thus, humor can disguise leader’s criticism, while still deliver the message. Similarly, humor can be used as a means of social control, where leader can more openly communicate approval or disapproval of employees’ actions (Brooks, 1992 p.11) and influence behavioral norms. Usually, the cases of disapproval concern social norms, where deviations can be seen as humorous, thus leaders can use humor not only to control behavior but also teach and enforce the standards of social norms and values (Meyer, 2000 p.320). In these situations, sharing humor creates an instance of agreement between the two, consequently “maintaining the flow of agreement, humor can make persuasion easier” (Romero & Pescosolido, 2008 p.400). Finally, humor is said to
facilitate leader in delivering instructions, being an effective discourse strategy (Holmes & Marra, 2006 p.128). Similarly to providing criticism, instructions can be delivered with slightly humorous tone, to indicate that leader is no monster, but at the same time clearly communicating the concern and the message. This strategy was found to elicit positive responses, thus should be noted by practicing leaders.

To conclude the control issues for leaders, by utilizing humor as a strategy for communicating social norms, providing criticism or instructions the serious message can be delivered, while the packaging would elicit positive responses, in contrast to negative emotions or anxiety. The possibility to execute control and not cause negative emotions, but obedience of employees would suggest that leader’s approach to each situation is carefully chosen and directed at maintaining good relationships through which leadership effectiveness is built. To finish with theoretical development on leadership effectiveness, Romero & Cruthirds (2006) suggest linking it to humor styles.

As suggested by Romero and Cruthirds (2006) self-enhancing humor was regarded to be an appropriate humor style for leaders to become more effective by establishing good relationships with the employees. Self-defeating humor was also considered beneficial to the manager as it would decrease the distance from the employees and therefore putting them at ease. To sum up the solidified position and the decreased distance from the employees would positively affect leadership effectiveness when applying self-enhancing and self-defeating humor styles.

2.3 Humor moderators

- Are there are any factors apart from situations, which affect the effectiveness/appropriateness of using humor as management tool? (i.e gender, ethnicity)

Despite the fact that the research questions of this research aim to investigate: “Is the benefit of humor in the workplace utilized by managers in Swedish organizations?” and “How could humor be applied by Swedish managers to achieve various organizational outcomes?” we still wish to address the fact that many scholars urge to consider individual differences when studying humor and leadership in organizations (Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990, Brooks, 1992, Decker & Rotondo, 2001, Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). This concern is actually supported by the contingency theory in management, suggesting that leadership should be flexible and take different forms depending on situations as well as audiences. Moreover, when considering the context of contemporary organizations diversities of many types are inevitable, thus requiring leaders to exercise flexibility in their leadership approaches and tools. Dimensions that define diversity are numerous; however the most usual are gender, and ethical origin.

From the perspective of humor, the realization of the intended purpose of humor depends on the judgment of the audience, due to social nature of humor. As Duncan (1982) noted “humor appreciation is as uniquely individual as are all other attitude and personality factors” (p.140). The most recognized individual differences in humor literature are gender and ethnical origin, due to their significance in organizational context. Thus, the leader initiating humor at work should not only adjust it to the situation but also to know the composition of the audience to avoid the potential of humor becoming a “double-edged sword” (Malone, 1980)– when being funny to some and offensive to others.
Using humor moderators in this theoretical background has a purpose of making the investigation of humor as a management tool at work interesting to learn from, by recognizing potentially harmful side of humor.

**Gender**

Males and females differ in both usage and appreciation of humor. Researchers found that men tend to use and appreciate humor more often than do their female coworkers (Decker & Rotondo, 2001 p. 453). Similarly, males are more inclined to use and appreciate negative and offensive humor, thus expectations of such communications from men are more accepted. Females, as noted by Duncan et al., (1990), were historically assumed to be less humorous and even “incapable of retelling a joke” (p. 260). This assumption puts women in disadvantage, since humor from females is not expected and “it is not what many people were socialized to perceive as a norm” (Decker & Rotondo, 2001 p.460). Thus, in their study Decker& Rotondo (2001) found that female leaders using jokes and laughter as a communication strategy can potentially enhance their ability to communicate effectively, as perceived by subordinates, and perceived leadership ability by creating a positive working environment (p. 460). When it comes to humor types, gender-based /sexist humor, when unwanted, can cause conflict or even division in the group or organizational environment (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006 p. 65). For a leader it is noteworthy that such humor in mixed gender work environments can hinder the achievement of organizational outcomes.

**Ethnical origin**

With the increasing internationalization the composition of employees’ cultures becomes more varied. There are hardly any medium or big size organizations without ethnical variety, thus leaders in such organizations should be well aware of the ethnical composition of the audience when using humor as a management tool.

Usually, people tell jokes about other ethnic groups because they feel superior to these groups (Duncan et al., 1990 p. 262). Such intentions may exacerbate the relationships or cause a conflict in the group when the target of the joke is present. As La Fave and Mennell (1976) suggest, humor at an expense of other ethnic group has potential to be anti-humane, thus is suggested to be avoided by leaders using humor to achieve organizational outcomes (Brooks, 1992 p.19). To use humor in mixed ethnical groups leaders should know the composition of the group’s cultures in order to benefit from such communication strategy (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006 p. 65). Apart from being anti-humane, humor, by some cultures, can be perceived as inappropriate in the workplace or even taboo. This might have heavy consequences for the leaders in terms of credibility, when practicing humor too often.

To conclude, ethnical diversity should be handled with caution whenever leaders utilize humor as a communicative strategy, however in mixed ethnical groups ethnic humor is strongly recommended to avoid.

**The relationship between organizational outcomes, humor styles and moderators**

As a summary of our theory chapter in Figure 1 we present a model that illustrates how we consider the important parts of organizational outcomes, humor styles and moderators relate to each other. The aim of this model is to offer the reader the opportunity to comprehend how
we see that these theories affect each other. It should be noted, however, that this model serves only an illustrative purpose and it is not our research purpose to further expand this model.

![Diagram showing the relationship between organizational outcomes, humor styles, and moderators.](image)

**Organizational Outcomes**
- Reduced Stress
  - Deadline
  - Crisis
- Group cohesiveness
  - Newcomer
  - Conflict
- Improved Communication
  - Daily interaction
  - Trust
  - Change
- Creativity
  - Boredom
  - Low motivation
  - Ineffective problem solving
- Leadership effectiveness
  - Relationship establishment
  - Control

**Humor Styles**
- Self-enhancing
- Affiliative
- Aggressive
- Self-defeating

**Moderators**
- Ethnicity
- Gender

Figure 1 The relationship between organizational outcomes, humor styles and moderators
3. Methodology and method

In this chapter the choices in terms of methodology and method are presented and argued for. We will start with our own preconceptions, moving on to philosophy of science and thoroughly explain the choices in the method with the aim to achieve transparency for the study.

3.1 Researchers’ preconceptions

Preconceptions concern the prior knowledge, attitudes and experiences of the researchers which will influence not only how the researchers see things but also what the researchers see (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p30). With this paragraph we therefore wish to inform the reader about our previous knowledge, attitudes and experiences that could have an influence on the findings of this study.

We are both students at the International Business Program at Umeå University, majoring in management. The fact that we have theoretical knowledge of management could have affected the findings of this study. Our knowledge within the field could have contributed to the quality of this research since our understanding allowed us to ask more appropriate follow-up questions. Moreover, we have both worked on the side of our studies and personally experienced how leader’s humor can affect the employees. Based on our own experiences we have a rather positive attitude to the use of humor as a management tool, however, we have also experienced that humor can be inappropriate as well. In our study we tried to avoid the excessive incursion of our own values on the findings of this research, though we believe that it is difficult for any researcher to stay objective since it was us, for example, who chose the quotes for the empirical description. We have chosen to describe our preconceptions in an attempt to stay transparent and offer the reader the possibility to create his or her own opinion on whether our preconceptions have affected this study.

3.2 The relationship between philosophy of science, methodology and method

We have chosen to use a framework designed by Carter & Little (2007) of the relationship between philosophy of science, methodology, method and knowledge in order to introduce the disposition of this chapter to the reader.
This framework illustrates how important it is to: define the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions and to realize that these assumptions will guide them in the methodology selection. Finally, the choice of methodology will result in adoption of specific techniques for method of data collection which will produce data and knowledge as a result of the research.

As Figure 2 illustrates we distinguish between methodology and method and define them as follows:

- **Methodology** is a theoretical analysis defining how research should be approached in accordance with research problem (Richardson 1997 p.31).
- **Method** is a particular strategy that defines actual techniques for data collection or in other words research action (Carter & Little 2007).

### 3.2.1 Philosophy of science

The methodology chosen for this research is grounded in the philosophical assumptions that we as researchers have made concerning our study. As can be seen in Figure 2, our epistemological standpoint justifies and evaluates knowledge and together with our ontological standpoint it therefore modifies the methodology of this study.
Ontological considerations of a study concern the nature of social entities and can be divided into two classical ways of conceptualizing reality. Objectivism is an ontological position implying that reality exists independently from social actors while constructivism is an ontological position that asserts that reality is constructed through the constant interaction of social actors (Bryman & Bell, 2007,p.22-23). The purpose of our study, attempt to understand Swedish managers’ reasoning around if and how humor can be used as a management tool, is the foundation of our ontological position. The subjective realities our respondents can contribute with allow us to understand their individual perspectives that they have on manager’s use of humor as a management tool. We believe that people themselves construct the reality around them rather than assuming its existence. Our ontological position of social constructivism thus implies that we assume humans to create their own social reality which we will interpret in this study.

Our reasoning around the reality that we will study in this research is closely connected to what we as researchers believe to be appropriate knowledge and are thus grounded in our epistemological assumptions as can be seen in Figure 2. Epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge and can be divided into two classical opinions on whether the social world can and should be studied on the same conditions as natural science. Positivism is an epistemological position that asserts that social science can be objectively studied through the methods of natural science and therefore be generalized into laws (Bryman & Bell, 2007,p.16). Interpretivism is an epistemological position that instead advocates the subjective meaning of social action and therefore asserts that social science could be studied through interpretation (ibid,p.19). Given the fact that we in this study wish to attempt to understand the reasoning among managers in Swedish organizations about if and how humor can be used as a management tool, we consider the personal interpretations and experiences from managers to be the knowledge through which we will understand the phenomenon of humor as a management tool. Since humor and its use in organizations is complex and context dependent phenomenon, there is no best practice of the use of humor as a management tool. Instead we seek to understand the social world through the interpretation of that world through its participants (ibid,p.402) which we believe would provide us with appropriate knowledge understanding if and how Swedish managers can use humor as a management tool.

3.3 Methodology

As shown in Figure 2, the methodology of this research has been modified by our ontological and epistemological positions. We will now describe our methodology for this study which in turn will furthermore justify, guide and evaluate our techniques for collecting the data of this study.

3.3.1 Why a qualitative approach?

It is commonly argued for in the literature that there is no intrinsically superior research method, the different methods can instead be more or less appropriate to the research problem that we are interested in and thus it all depends on what we are trying to find out (Silverman,2005,p.6; Silverman & Marvasti,2008,p.8). Bryman & Bell (2007) describe qualitative research as a research strategy that usually emphasizes words instead of quantification in the collection and analysis of data which usually signifies a quantitativen
research (2007, p.28). In this study we are interested in Swedish managers’ experiences and thoughts on humor as a management tool and therefore we feel that a qualitative research model is more appropriate to apply. According to Miller, Dingwall & Murphy (2004;327) a quantitative research design is appropriate when stating that an event occurred while the qualitative research is appropriate when the purpose is to explain why and how the event occurred. In addition, while quantitative research seeks to eliminate the human factor, qualitative research instead takes advantage of people’s feelings, insights and perspectives in order to gain deeper understanding of their reality (Neuman,2005 p.126). Our philosophical assumptions have thus defined how this study should be approached according to its purpose which is furthermore connected to our justification of choosing a qualitative research design. Rather than measuring we are in this study interested in understanding managers’ perspective and reasoning on if and how humor can be used as a management tool.

3.3.2 Scientific approach

The scientific approach of a study concerns the relationship between theory and the empirical research. The two classical alternatives to approach a study are through deductive or inductive research. In a deductive study the researcher creates a hypothesis from existing theory to test in the reality while in an inductive research theory would instead be the outcome of the empirical research (Bryman & Bell, 2007,p.14). For this study we have considered neither one of these approaches purely as we do not consider them to be suitable for our purpose. We dismissed the option of a pure inductive approach which requires little or no theoretical understanding prior to the research since it is argued that in order for researchers to derive valuable output from conducted interviews, they would need a certain level of theoretical understanding (Kvale, 1997,p.120). We also believed that a pure deductive approach was not an option for our research since we felt that the existing literature on humor in the workplace was too narrow to serve the purpose of our study.

We have instead chosen to adopt a mixed approach to this research, which we believe better serves the purpose of our research. In qualitative research it is accepted and encouraged to utilize both induction and deduction in research and practice (Willis,2007,p.197). In the abductive approach, which is a mix between inductive and deductive approaches, the relationship between theory and research is different than in the previous mentioned approaches in the sense that theory and research are more intimately intertwined (Blakie, 2009,p.156). In our study we have used secondary sources such as previous research and other conceptual scientific articles to build up the theory, in the analysis of the empirical material and in the design of the interview guide. Therefore the results of this study would evolve from the synthesis of theory and research. Our study is thus consistent with the literature which suggests that in an abductive research strategy, data and theoretical ideas should be used together in a creative and developing process (ibid). Theory in this approach is considered to serve as an initial foundation for the research, while the acquired data from the investigation would extend or alter the theory.

3.4 Method

After explaining the methodological approaches of our investigation, the next step is to present the choices related to method and other issues associated with implementing the method. While methodology is preoccupied with theoretical considerations of a study conduct, method focuses on more practical issues. Namely, the discussion includes the
appropriate techniques for data collection as well as sampling strategy, sample size considerations, guide for conducting the data collection and practical issues of the data collection. This discussion is particularly important to show the reader that we are capable of conducting the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006 p.51).

3.4.1 Data collection strategy

Data collection in qualitative research has a purpose of getting in-depth understanding of the topic as understood by population chosen to be investigated (Bryman & Bell, 2007 p.474). Not only ideological consistency but also the purpose of the study defines the method employed to get empirical data. We view the world as consisting of multiple realities, reflecting the individual’s understandings, thus for us, as researchers, to reach these individual understandings, there is a need to engage in communication with the individuals. This ideological position is consistent with our purpose which is to understand Swedish managers’ reasoning around if and how humor can be used as a management tool. We think that the only way to comprehend the motivations and factors underlying the manager’s use of humor is through interaction, thus by interviewing the person. Interview is one of the most practiced techniques of data collection in qualitative research. Moreover, the appropriateness of this method is supported by the fact that many studies on humor with the managers in focus utilize this particular method (for example Anderson, 2005).

a) Semi-structured interviews

Interview can take three forms: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Strictly structured interviews are common in quantitative studies, where the topic and themes for discussion are planned in detail, where no deviation from the topic is desired (Bryman & Bell, 2007 p.210). Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, are the opposite type of interrogation, where researchers are clear only on the topic of the interview, welcoming any direction the conversation might take. Finally, semi-structured interviews are the mix of the two previous approaches, where the researcher is neither planning every question, nor takes any direction the conversation goes. In essence, semi-structured questioning suggests some planning, where only the major themes for discussion are predefined, while allowing the informants to express themselves and their personal interests, keeping the focus on the topic of investigation (Bryman & Bell, 2007 p.476). Since we adopt a mixed scientific approach to our study, allowing us to construct theoretical framework prior to the study and aim to expand it as the study progresses, we chose to utilize semi-structured interviews for our data collection. It means that we will design an interview guide with the themes outlined in our theoretical framework, but in order to broaden our understanding of the topic, we will have open questions allowing the respondents to freely reflect on the themes to get new insights and angles that are beyond our preconceptions.

A particular notion we wish to incorporate in our interview process is cooperative inquiry. According to Heron (1996:in Willis, 2007 p.262 ) cooperative inquiry is a form of inquiry where research is with people not just on or about them. We believe that this approach might help our research to become richer in new insights, when we suggest a participant to alter or expand the initial theoretical framework together with us through discussion. In practice, we provided our respondents with a list of humor styles and the organizational outcomes, defined in the theoretical framework. Further we together discussed how different humor styles could be appropriate in achieving various organizational outcomes. This form of inquiry was
applied in the last part of our interviews as can be observed in our interview guide (Appendix 1 & 2). Since we have not employed this approach during the whole interview it would be more appropriate to state that we have utilized cooperative inquiry only partly.

b) Language

It is important to consider the language of the interview and how it can affect the quality of our study. The purpose of this study is to understand Swedish managers’ reasoning around if and how humor can be used as a management tool. Thus it is crucial for us to capture their reflection on the phenomenon of humor as a management tool and the words that they use to express themselves. For that reason we chose to conduct all our interviews in our respondents’ mother tongue, which is Swedish. Our motivation behind this choice is the assumption that our respondents would be more likely to freely express themselves and develop their answers if they are interrogated in Swedish. Since this research is otherwise written in English, we translated the significant empirical findings into English and presented them in our empirical chapter and analysis. While English is not our mother tongue either we acknowledge the possibility of our translation to be biased. However, we had English as our language of instruction throughout our university studies and we believe that the risk of our mistakes in translation would be less significant for the contribution of this study than the underdeveloped answers from our respondents provided in English. To allow the reader to judge our translations and to still follow the original expressions of the respondents, the original citations used are available in the Appendix 3.

3.4.2 Sampling

Sampling is crucial for later analysis. Despite the possible wish to study everything it is not possible, meaning that some choices will have to be made. As noted by Miles & Huberman (1994 p.27) choices made about sampling will limit the conclusions of the study as well as influence the level of confidence researchers and others would have about the study.

a) Sampling strategy

Research of qualitative nature, which prime focus is on understanding the individuals’ lived experiences or communications (Marshall & Rossman 2006 p.55), recognizes the practice of non-probability sample. It is this sample that is capable of representing the theoretical significance to the study, rather than random sample. Out of non-probability sampling techniques we adopted a double-level sampling consisting of purposive + convenience and theoretical sampling. Initially, purposive sampling strategy, emphasizing the importance of the criteria for sample selection (Merriam, 1988 p.48), guided us in making appropriate choices to fulfill our research purpose. Thus, purposive sampling strategy defined the list of cases appropriate for investigation, namely the organizations. However, the list was really extensive and due to time constraint we had to delimit the sample and utilized the convenience sampling to define our final organizations. Within these organizations the choice of respondents was predefined by our purpose and theoretical interest to attempt to understand Swedish managers’ reasoning around if and how humor can be used as a management tool. Thus, in identifying the respondents within cases we were guided by the concepts of theoretical sampling, meaning that we selected respondents who could contribute to theoretical understanding of the topic.
b) Delimiting the sample

Considering our research purpose, we are interested in organizations and their managers. However, the variety of existing organizations and their activities suggests defining more specific selection criteria. First, we decided to select the organizations, thus we had to make a choice between examining the organizations that broadly vary in their activities or the ones that are similar. To decide on this issue, we were reasoning the following way: the variety in activities will differ the organizational outcomes for which managers aspire, thus some organizations would not be able to address the theoretical framework we wish to utilize. We selected to study the service focused organizations, where assumingly our theoretical framework can be explored, since we believe that hierarchical structures there are flatter and involve more daily interaction than in other type organizations.

Furthermore, the variety of types of organizations called for even more clarity. We distinguished between public and private organizations, since it is claimed to make a difference for humor research. Workers in public organizations are considered to have higher degree of self-motivation, due to the public purpose they are serving than the private sector employees (Vecchio, Justin & Pearce 2009 p. 172-173). This fact encouraged us to study private sector companies, since we view humor as a management tool that facilitates managers in their daily interaction with employees.

Due to time and financial constraints we further limited our sample to a geographical location convenient for us. We are studying in Umeå, and thus chose organizations from Umeå and its suburb for investigation.

Finally, the matter of size of organizations was also considered to have consequences for the conclusions arrived at. We chose to focus on medium or big organizations, assuming that these organizations would allow us to explore the variety of organizational situations leading to organizational outcomes to the fullest. For example, in small organizations where the level of turnover is more likely to be low, the situation of integrating a newcomer into the work environment would be seldom, thus difficult to reflect upon by manager. To sum up, we delimited our research sample to the medium/big, private service focused organizations located in Umeå. Out of these companies we made a list and using convenience sampling (Bryman & Bell,2007 p. 197) contacted the companies. As a result the companies that fulfilled our criteria are from insurance (2 companies), recruitment (2 companies), banking (2 banks), auditing (1 company) and financial services (1 company) industries.

c) Choosing respondents

In choosing respondents within the companies we were considering their relevance to the purpose of our study, meaning that the position occupied by the respondent made him/her responsible for dealing with the situations defined in our theoretical framework. As we have argued in the introduction to the study, managers’ position makes them responsible for achieving organizational outcomes, thus making them our targets for investigation. However, not any manager would have been relevant for our study, since we are interested in their lived-experiences, the managers with at least 3 years of experience in the position were preferred. The criterion of 3 years was arbitrary, assuming that 3 years would be enough to live through all the situations we wish to explore. Moreover, personnel responsibility was
considered as another important criterion for our respondents, since it is through interaction with their subordinates they have an option to use humor as a management tool.

Practically, it was rather difficult to get in contact with some of the respondents selected for inquiry. Especially, since a few of the chosen organizations had their call centers in Stockholm, making us dependent on the receptionists’ knowledge about the personnel in their local offices. This inconvenience was resolved by conforming with the respondents, who we were connected with, their appropriateness for our study. However, in one case, when arriving at the interview, the respondent suggested to switch to a more suitable colleague since that respondent, after reading the interview guide, realized that this other person could better contribute to our research.

All but one person among the respondents that we asked agreed to participate in our study, acknowledging the novelty of the topic. The person rejecting the participation was fully booked on the dates we suggested for the interview.

d) Sample size

Purposive sampling is often associated with the notion of sample size that allows reaching theoretical saturation, meaning that new case brings no new insights (Merriam, 1988 p. 48-51). Additionally, purposive sampling requires data collection and review in conjunction to see when the saturation is achieved. Given that humor is a subjective phenomenon we expected that it would be problematic to reach theoretical saturation since each new respondent would contribute with new perspectives. As a result after conducting 8 interviews we felt that our empirical findings provided us with a broad foundation for analysis even though we did not reach the case where no new insights were introduced. Our reasoning about how many interviews to conduct is supported by Kvale (2009) who suggests to “interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know” (p.43).

3.4.3 Interview guide

The interview guide consists of three sections, meaning that the sequence of questions is considered to be important. This is the case because first we wanted our respondents to get comfortable and speak freely and openly on the topic that was easy to relate to, when asking for information about his/her responsibilities and years in position.

Secondly, the middle part of our interview guide aimed at extracting the information about how the managers saw their leadership role and how humor fitted into their daily activities when carrying out their responsibilities. By posing questions about their leadership we wanted to give our respondents an opportunity to mention what is important to them as leaders. Especially, we wished to see if humor was an important part in their leadership, by asking about their leadership before introducing humor as a possible management tool.

Finally, the third and the most extensive part of the interview guide investigated three aspects. First, respondents reflected upon the understanding of humor as a phenomenon and its advantages in communication. Moreover, we asked our respondents to recollect from their experiences what effects their humor had on the employees, to see whether they notice positive/negative effects of humor. In the same section we were also interested in respondents’ observations concerning their own instances of use of humor, inappropriate
situations for humor and factors affecting the effectiveness of humor. Second, respondents were asked to reason around the instances of use of humor that were defined in our theoretical section. There we had in-depth discussions on the reasoning behind using humor as well in order to extract as detailed information as possible. When some of our predefined situations were not mentioned by our respondent, we made sure that all the situations were reflected upon. Third, after covering the pre-defined situations we moved on to explaining different styles of humor to our informants and suggested them to link these styles to the organizational outcomes, which previously were broken down into situations. As it was stated in the semi-structured interview discussion, the linking process was done together with the respondents in order to grasp the motivations behind the choices made and reflect on the whole phenomenon altogether.

The reason for matching humor styles with organizational outcomes and not with situations is that our prime interest is in understanding humor styles’ function, rather than situations’ appropriateness. Since achieved organizational outcomes are the desirable results of the functions that humor serves, humor styles will be examined in connection to outcomes they can achieve. Moreover, as it was discussed in the theoretical background chapter humor styles are introduced in this research to enrich the understanding of humor as a phenomenon.

When it comes to theoretical significance of the parts of interview, the first part has a function of ice-breaking and establishing the relationship between the respondent and interviewee. Second part serves as an introduction to the topic of leadership as well as explorative function. Final part is the most theoretical one; at first, allowing the respondents reflect upon the topic of humor freely and suggest the situations where the humor would be beneficial to use on their own, while later suggesting some situations for examinations in order to alter or expand the initial theoretical framework.

3.4.4 Conducting the interviews

To achieve transparency in our research we will explain our choices made prior, during and after the practical part of the research.

When initially contacting our selected respondents by phone we informed them about the overall purpose of our study, thus addressing the ethical issue of informed consent (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009 p. 70). The information about the purpose allowed people to make an informed decision on whether to participate in the study or not, depending on the interest in the topic of the research.

After we had the consent from our respondents the interview guides were sent out to allow the interviewees to prepare for the upcoming meeting. We reasoned that the better respondents are prepared the broader and more reflective answers we will get from them.

All the interviews were conducted in the quiet rooms suggested by our respondents. Before the actual questioning, interviewees were promised confidentiality, implying that no personal data identifying the person will be disclosed (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009 p. 72). This concern was put in practice when writing the empirical case by changing the name of the respondents, not mentioning the years of employment and name of the company, however leaving gender and industry visible to the reader. During the interview, both researchers were present to, firstly, allow for more various follow-up questions from both researchers, and, secondly, to
have a rich discussion afterwards on impressions and interpretations arrived at during the
interview session. Also, with the permission of the respondents all the interviews were
recorded, to further transcribe them. Apart from recording, important comments were also
written down by hand by one of the researchers, while the other was focusing on posing the
questions to respondents.

All the empirical investigations were done during one week’s time. After each interview
within 3-4 days the transcripts were sent to the person for validation. With only two
exceptions we got the responses from our respondents that the transcripts reflected the
understandings they expressed during the interview. The two respondents, referred as
exceptions, simply did not answer our inquiry for validation; however it may be explained by
the high workload and time shortage.

3.4.5 Data analysis strategy

Our interviews produced a lot of data to be analyzed. As it was already mentioned in the
interview guide section, some of the questions asked in the beginning of the interview did not
have any theory to be analyzed with, since their aim was mainly explorative. Thus the data
produced by these questions was analyzed applying meaning condensation approach (Kvale,
2007 p.106-107). This approach allowed us to compress long statements into shorter still
reflecting the main message of the statement.

For analyzing the rest of the interview data we approached analysis as bricolage, which allows
a “free interplay of techniques during the analysis”(Kvale, 2007 p.115). Adopting this
approach we reasoned that since our study is a pilot study where humor is investigated to be
appropriate for using as a management tool, we would wish to provide the reader with the
significant findings. By combining the approaches of data condensation, counting the times
respondents used the same reason as well as interpreting the findings using previous theory
made it possible to highlight the most important findings. However, we also wish to point out
that since our study is qualitative and as researchers we interfere with our subjective
interpretations, the findings could not be generalized, nor was it the purpose of the study.

For simplicity, when presenting the empirical data and writing the analysis our respondents
were given arbitrary names, first letter of which corresponded with the industry they are
employed in (for example, Rebecca working in the Recruitment industry). We have chosen to
provide the reader with an extensive empirical data chapter because our interviews resulted in
very extensive data and in presenting this data we did not want to leave out any important
reasoning of our respondents. The understanding of our respondents reasoning on if and how
humor can be used as a management tool is the purpose of this study and we wanted to
provide the reader an opportunity to see their actual reasoning.

3.4.6 Secondary sources and their critique

In order to facilitate the reader’s understanding of our research process we will explain how
we have searched for literature and furthermore how we have evaluated the literature used in
this study.
In this study we have used various secondary sources in order to gain knowledge about humor in the workplace prior to our empirical study of humor as a management tool. The secondary sources that we have utilized are primary scientific articles which we have searched in the databases available at Umeå University library. The two main databases that we have used are Emerald and Business Source Premier. In order to find reliable articles we have used the search tools peer reviewed and times cited in this database which indicate that the articles have been reviewed and extensively cited by other researchers which we believe have provided us with reliable and relevant sources.

The words that we have used in the initial search process include humor, humor in the workplace, organizational humor, humor as a management tool and managerial humor. Through an extensive literature review on humor in the workplace we have found the most relevant articles for our study and on several occasions we have furthermore studied research that these studies are based on. We have to the greatest possible extent used original sources and in the case when authors refer to previous studies we have compared with other sources that also cite the original study in order to avoid the risk of interpretation faults.

Given the fact that the existing literature on humor as a management tool is limited, the choice of secondary sources has been rather difficult. Therefore it has often been necessary for us to use secondary sources in the form of theories and previous research which were not originally carried out to serve the same purpose as this study. As a consequence there is a risk of mistake in our interpretation of the results from previous research in the sense that the findings might not be directly applicable to our study. However, when using secondary sources in this study we have argued for why we believe that they can be relevant for our study which we feel can be convincing enough.

In this study we have also used a number of method books (ex. Willis 2007, Merriam 1988, Blaikie 2009) in order to support our methodological choices for our specific research and to help us create an interview guide for our interviews. In an attempt to provide the reader with a thorough argumentation for our research strategy we have used the authors that we feel best explained the different methodological concepts. Furthermore we used a variety of authors with the intention to avoid individual researchers reasoning. In the construction of our interview guide and the process of choosing an appropriate sample, we have utilized specific books for qualitative interviews (ex. Kvale 2007, Kvale & Brinkman 2009) which we believe have helped to ensure the suitability of our interview guide and its process.
4. Empirical findings

In this chapter we will present a summary of the findings from the eight interviews conducted for this study.

4.1 Anna

Anna is currently working as a leader in the accounting industry. As a leader Anna is responsible for the operation and development of the office and that the employees enjoy working at the office. When talking about her leadership Anna mentions the importance of presence as a leader so that she can offer help and support in the employees’ daily activities. She believes that a leader should be able to handle inquiries or ideas from the employees as soon as possible so that they feel that they can come to see her any time.

Anna finds it rather complicated to define humor. On the one hand she thinks of humor as joy, fun and a common happiness and on the other hand she also thinks of humor as a silly joke that someone makes on the behalf of someone else. (Since in this research humor is seen as a positive phenomenon, we guided Anna towards our definition of humor adopted for this study). Anna believes that there are many advantages with humor. In combination with the work life it is important that people feel happy and joyful about going to work rather than having someone at work that makes people laugh. Anna thinks that humor is important in the communication with other people in the sense of sharing a joyful experience. She does not believe in people who always try to joke in order to ease the mood. Neither does she see herself as the funny person who is the center of attention that constantly tries to entertain people. Instead she mentions that for her humor comes spontaneously in different situations. She is doubtful about the advantages of the artificial humor that takes a lot of space and that instead a nice social and balanced humor is desired.

“I definitely think that to a certain point you can learn to use humor and I definitely think that there are advantages to that, but again not at the artificial joke level, instead I am more positive about telling something funny or being self-ironic” (1)

Anna reasons that comfort at work cannot be built around humor alone, however she does feel that humor allows the leader a closer relationship with the employees. Anna can think of several situations in which the use of humor would not be appropriate such as private performance review discussions with the employees. However, she does not see any other factor that would affect the appropriateness of using humor. Though she mentions that it can be annoying when people keep on telling joke after joke that are not funny and no one is laughing but with the person going on and on without sensing the other people’s reactions.

Deadline: Anna feels that humor per se would not decrease the stress from a deadline; however joy and comfort at work would be helpful. She argues that if people feel joy at work and that they are comfortable with their colleagues they have better conditions to deal with the stress. However, she points out that it must though be remembered that all stress is not work related and that there could be other reasons behind stress. Anna is careful when using humor in situations of deadline since people can be irritated and even more stressed out if they have four hours to meet a deadline and someone starts to joke.
“can you leave and come back tomorrow with your jokes because now I have to deliver” (2)

Crisis: In a crisis situation Anna is doubtful that humor is helpful in order to ease the situation for the people involved. She believes that the situation rather requires other solutions such as support programs and knowledge on how to act and that it is important that the leader has the resources necessary to bring in.

Newcomer: Anna confirms using humor in a situation of a newcomer in the sense that a newcomer is always participating in organizing the personnel parties. She continues by reasoning that the joy must be present in the group either way and if there is joy in a big group then that joy will persist even if there is a new person entering the group.

Conflict: On the other hand Anna believes that in a conflict situation a leader should be careful with using humor as it could go very wrong, especially if one of the participants would feel targeted by the irony. It is more important for a leader through the discussion to make the people understand each other and why the conflict occurred.

Daily interaction: Anna gives an example of a means of improving the employees’ daily interaction by describing their open office landscape at the workplace. The open space places people closer to each other and along with the safety of the group it facilitates the employees’ daily interaction with each other.

Trust: Anna believes that humor can be useful in establishing trust with the employees but that the trust must be build by something else than humor from the beginning.

“I definitely think that humor enforces trust but it requires that you came from something that was built on something else than humor in the first place” (3)

Change: When it comes to change in the organization Anna does not feel that humor is useful; instead she reasons that if the employees act resistant towards a change then the managers must work harder on reaching out with the message on why the change should be carried out.

Boredom and low motivation: Anna does not experience humor to be very useful when handling bored employees. Instead she reasons that the concern requires that the leader encourages people to step outside their comfort zone and dare to be creative. She uses the similar method in dealing with unmotivated employees.

Ineffective Problem solving: In a situation where the employees have ineffective problem solving skills Anna rather believes in active coaching of the employees in order to develop their competences and techniques than humor.

Establishing Relationships: Anna believes that humor can be useful in establishing the relationships with the employees implying that humor increases the presence and availability of the leader. Openness of a leader encourages other people to share their experiences and anecdotes as well.

Control: When it comes to control however, Anna believes that it is important to keep humor apart from any constructive message the leader must deliver. With that said, the leader can still choose to deliver the constructive feedback in a positive manner in order to highlight the employee’s good qualities.

Additionally, Anna finds humor to be useful during presentations, especially during a presentation with a negative message.

Humor styles: Anna identifies both self-defeating humor and self-enhancing humor as useful to improve group cohesiveness, communication and the effective leadership. However, she points out that as a leader she cannot upraise herself too much implying that the self-enhancing humor must be used on a decent level. Anna furthermore identifies affiliative
humor as important for group cohesiveness. When it comes to aggressive humor she concludes that she does not use this style of humor and does not know when it could be useful.

4.2 Rebecca

Rebecca is currently working as a leader in the recruitment industry. It is in her responsibility to ensure that the organization functions and employees get assistance and coaching. Crucial in her leadership is to give employees freedom of actions and thus take the responsibility for their decisions. To be effective in her leadership Rebecca needs to have clear frames and limits within which she has freedom of action. The knowledge about how her leadership is perceived by the subordinates is learnt from annual surveys of employees and monthly follow-up conversations. Rebecca thinks that her leadership style is the reflection of who she is as an individual. On top of that she utilizes the common practices/methods of her organization in terms of follow-up and performance reviews.

Humor to Rebecca is something that makes people laugh. At work, it was noted that the fact that people share and laugh at and with each other makes them more close and brave to share more.

“It would be very boring to work in a humor-free workplace. I would not feel well there.” (4)

Rebecca sees only advantages and no disadvantages with humor, however noting that it is not everything and everyone she can joke about. She assumes that humor comes naturally to her, it all depends on situation. However, she could not remember ever planning or using humor on purpose. At the same time she admitted that she attended a seminar on laughing benefits and got some inspiration and confirmation on her approach to humor. As a person she gladly jokes about herself, especially if something silly happened to her, thus as a leader showing that it is an acceptable behavior, encouraging others to share their stories as well. The effect she observes on her employees from her humor is that they become more relaxed and willing to share, while also having a good time at a workplace. When it comes to learning to be funny, she thinks it is on a very individual level, some are naturally funny while the others are funny in their own way.

**Deadline:** Rebecca has her own remedy for deadlines. When employees are stressed she initiates a coffee break to get people away from their tasks and let them relax and talk about something else and there jokes and fun comes naturally. So when they are back to their seats more effective ideas are appearing.

**Crisis:** When it comes to experienced crisis situations, Rebecca mentions reorganization where some people had to leave work, which affected the group as a whole. Also a sort of crisis is when employees experience personal problems in their lives, such as divorce, death or illness. Rebecca deals with some of these crisis situations with humor aiming to shift the focus.

**Newcomer:** As a leader Rebecca tries to make an introduction of a new worker to the group as well as present the others in a funny way. During team building there are also funny moments that bring the happiness to the work atmosphere. Rebecca is convinced that it is important for her as a leader to show the way how to behave, believing that if you feel good at work you achieve better results and humor is the way to feel good at work.

“I think that it is a big difference between having fun at work and not being serious. I am convinced that you can have fun all day and still be really effective.” (5)
Conflict: To resolve some tensions in the group Rebecca tries to get those involved to communicate and there humor can be used to initiate a dialogue and exaggerate the situation to let the parties see the silliness of it.

Daily interaction: As a leader Rebecca thinks that she can influence the daily interaction in the office by being an example of how it can be done, by encouraging the dialogue and making fun of herself. The idea is to better let employees laugh when they see her then cry. However the exact receipt is unknown, since humor comes naturally to her.

Trust: According to Rebecca trust is more about feelings, when employees can relax and share with a leader what is on their mind. When people openly share it is also possible to have a laugh about that and see the positive side of a situation. It is not only to laugh about something but also to show compassion and feelings. If she can laugh and have fun with employees she feels that there is trust between them, thus happy and sad issues can be shared.

Change: In case of organizational change, Rebecca feels that information about the upcoming change is the most important aspect. She feels that humor is very important in this situation but to tell where it would be more or less helpful she finds difficult.

Boredom: Rebecca believes that she does not have bored employees, since the organization is led by common values that include fresh thinking that stimulates creative climate.

Low motivation: This usually happens when employees have high workload, at these times Rebecca, as a leader, helps employees to step back for a moment and have coffee together or go for an after work meal in order to talk about something else.

Ineffective problem solving: To help the ones stuck in their problems, Rebecca initiates a group solving session, where others can contribute to new solutions. Here again, a coffee break is useful. For Rebecca coffee breaks mean humor. Coffee breaks, after work meal or a walk with a colleague; these situations provide a more relaxed atmosphere where humor comes naturally.

Establishing Relationships: To create good relationships with employees, Rebecca thinks that it is important to consider what employees have to tell about her as a leader and act upon it. Also to dare show your employees that you as a leader can sometimes make wrong decisions, to show that she is a human being after all. Humor here is not everything, rather an important element.

“It is of course not all about humor, humor is one part. I am not a good leader just because I can make people laugh and have fun at work, but I think that it is one important part.” (6)

Control: Rebecca as a person in a leading position has a need of control and usually it is numbers she wants to see from her employees. She prefers to joke about her control need and sees that humor eases up the tension and she still gets the wanted result, by being funny about herself.

As it was already stressed by Rebecca that humor has no disadvantages if used appropriately, thus she as a leader distinguishes among situations where humor would be inappropriate, like personal disasters. She thinks it is crucial with humor to feel the mood and adapt to situations accordingly, so that no one is hurt and leader is still taken seriously. Language was named as a factor that might influence the effectiveness of humor, since a person with foreign background might not be aware of language specific jokes, thus end up feeling indirectly bullied. Some female/male jokes at coffee break are assumed to be a bit provoking, but it is not something to be completely avoided, since you can actually tell anything if you say it in a right way.

Additionally, Rebecca freely reflected upon other situations where she does not or would not use humor as a tool. For example, performance reviews that always take too much time can be spiced up with humor. In another instance humor was mentioned to be an important ingredient
in learning and remembering things. She reasoned that when you can connect humor to any information it is easier to keep it in mind as well as retrieve it when needed. On top of that she referred to first customer meetings as an appropriate situation to utilize humor as an ice-breaker to ease the tension and encourage an open dialogue. Finally, Rebecca uses humor during review meetings where numbers are usually discussed. She admits that sometimes it gets boring there, so humor comes naturally as a spontaneous idea without any preplanning or manuals designed.

**Humor styles:** Self-enhancing humor is used by Rebecca to help herself and her employees to deal with stress situations, to lead them the way out of the difficult situation. Affiliative humor was theorized to improve communication and group cohesiveness, since these two are self-inclusive, better communication leads to better cohesiveness in the group. Self-defeating humor was practiced to improve communication and deal with stress, considering that if she shares with silly situations she has been in, the others would feel more willing to share as well. Aggressive humor, however, was suggested to be used but with caution and paying attention to the individuals' perception of this humor, since it is not all who understand that style of humor. Although, Rebecca assumes that aggressive humor can in fact be beneficial and increase creativity by being a bit provocative.

### 4.3 Fredrik

Fredrik is currently a leader in the industry of financial services. As a leader he sees as crucial to value his employees and let them feel a part of the group thus allow them to develop and grow as individuals and professionals. He experienced that valued personnel is motivated, feels comfortable and as a leader you get the best and positive outcomes from valued employees. When talking about his leadership, Fredrik describes himself as a democratic leader where there is no place for internal cannibalism. Humor was mentioned as an important aspect of leadership, however he admits that it is done without knowing it, since humor is something that comes naturally to Fredrik and has never been planned or used on purpose. It was learnt from his own experience that humor can be helpful in a great variety of situations. For Fredrik especially enjoyable in using humor with employees is to get it back since he considers it really amusing while the indicator of wrong usage of humor is when you don’t get it back.

Humor to Fredrik is something warm and includes the aspects of amusement as well as comfort, which stimulates development of solidarity. Glimmer in the eye was also seen as a part of humor concept. When discussing the advantages of humor it was noted that humor is an important ingredient in relationships at work, however as a leader he has a great responsibility to be correct in using humor, since otherwise it can turn to be harassment, which is unacceptable. As the main success factor in using humor were mentioned the ability to use humor on an appropriate level ,know the limits and know the people you are using humor with, since we all are individually different. In a position of a leader, Fredrik considers humor to be a multi-task tool that can be used sometimes and excluded other times.

> “Humor is not the tool that is on the bottom and that you never use but in my toolbox humor is probably a multi-task tool that I use quite often.” (7)

During the years he observed that humor is contagious, it spreads and brings the relationships to another level.
“What must be remembered, no matter if you work in a group in a company or if you are out meeting customers, is that it is not the companies that do business with each other, it is people that do business with other people.” (8)

**Deadlines:** In situations of deadlines Fredrik would rather help the personnel by providing extra resources, than using humor with people who are under time pressure. At the same time it was noted that he uses humor to create a comfortable atmosphere at work, which makes people feel more loyal to the company and thus feel internal motivation to go that extra mile. Fredrik mentions though that it might not be so good to joke with a stressed out person.

**Crisis:** The situation of a crisis can be remedied with humor according to Fredrik, however it wouldn’t solve the problem rather ease the situation. Humor would act as a valve and make people feel better, even though the problem would remain unsolved.

**Newcomer:** Fredrik has often witnessed how humor is a great source to make people feel comfortable in a group. He points out that whenever you come to a new group where people have fun and joke with each other it will make you feel welcome without anyone making fun of you. This pleasant atmosphere allows newcomer to relax and integrate into the group more easily.

**Conflict:** Humor in these situations would be an absolutely appropriate tool. Fredrik sees the advantage of humor, in a way that it can play down the situation and allows breaking the deadlock, thus encouraging a more open discussion on a conflict topic.

**Daily interaction:** According to Fredrik humor can and is an important ingredient in daily interaction with his employees. He experienced that humor helps employees feel safe in the group. The feeling of safety, in its turn, allows group members to dare asking questions, dare asking for help and openly bring up the issues where they don’t feel secure. As was already mentioned before, Fredrik does not see humor as the only remedy for situations, rather as an important ingredient.

**Trust:** As it was experienced by Fredrik, trust is something one has to earn and continuously work on. In order to earn trust a leader should be sincere, clear and open with his/her employees. Even though humor can be helpful in playing down some situations and create an atmosphere of comfort for employees, trust to a great degree depends on leader’s ability to stand by his/her decisions, back up employees and defend them.

**Change:** According to Fredrik’s experience, change in organization should be discussed in a group, however leader has the biggest responsibility, thus he would have the last word. In such situations humor was seen as appropriate to play the situation down and let people see that change is no evil, but can also be positive.

**Boredom, low motivation and ineffective problem solving:** In all these concerns it was perceived to be less appropriate to use humor then in previous situations. It was more of a leader’s concern for employees and investigation into what had lead to boredom, low motivation or ineffective problem solving, than using humor to remedy these concerns. Fredrik saw a solution to these concerns in providing more resources, assistance and maybe offering additional education for employees.

**Creating relationships:** As a leader, Fredrik thinks that sincerity and openness with employees plays a big role in creating good relationships. Not least important was the ability to compromise and be the right leader for the subordinates. Humor was called to be a spice of life if it is used appropriately and correctly, since without humor life would be very dull and boring.

**Control:** In situations where a constructive feedback or issues on poor performance are discussed, it was experienced by Fredrik that clarity was an appropriate approach. However, humor was also seen as a possible tool in some situations of control execution, follow-up, effectiveness or difficult conversations. With humor it is easier to explain a person that there
is no problem with you as a person, but the thing you did was not good. This way the critics would come easier and not diminish the self esteem of an employee. Additionally, it was noted that on job interviews humor used by the interviewee or interviewer works perfectly to ease the tension and allow newcomers to relax and feel comfortable. On top of that Fredrik was convinced in ice-breaking effect of humor, since he practices it constantly and sees that it works whenever he meets new clients or maintains the relationships with the old ones. When humor is a part of a conversation it leads to relaxed atmosphere and the tension disappears. When talking about learnt humor, it was noted by Fredrik that humor is the way you are as a person and if anyone tries to be funny when he/she is not it is easily seen through and can have an opposite of positive effect on those who present it. As was observed by Fredrik, even those people who seem serious at first gradually show who they are and it becomes apparent that there are many different types of humor, everyone has its own. Finally, the issue of inappropriateness of humor was continuously stressed by the respondent. In such situations as discontinuation of employment, conflict or unhappy customers there is rarely a place for humor, rather understanding and respect. However, sometimes when the problems are over some jokes about them can be used.

Humor styles: Fredrik distinguished two humor styles, self-enhancing and aggressive as the ones he does not and would not use as a leader. Especially aggressive humor was considered more as a bullying, thus could not be used in a workplace. The other two humor styles, affiliative and self-defeating, were approved to be usable in achieving all the organizational outcomes.

4.4 Betty

Betty is a leader within the banking industry. Her responsibilities consist of leading the employees and the whole office, as well as dealing with external issues, meeting customers and participating in local affairs. In her daily issues she is guided by the centrally developed methodic, and to be successful she needs right people at right places. To monitor the employee and customer concerns annual surveys are employed.

Humor to Betty is a way of looking at things in an easier way and not so serious, which allows to ease the atmosphere and don’t take yourself too seriously as well. As an element of communication, she agreed that humor is very important, however, she also pointed out that humor should be a part of personality, otherwise it can be misinterpreted. Effect of humor, as noted by Betty, depends greatly on what is being joked about. Personally, Betty sees herself as a person who does not easily laugh at just anything; however she noted that she uses humor quite often deriving from her own experience. Usually she jokes about herself to show that she is just like others, especially when she makes a mistake, while she would never joke at others expense. As a leader, she is very cautious with humor, since she is in a position of power, thus inappropriate humor can turn to be offensive.

“Humor with responsiveness and intuition that is something you would have to have, I think.”(9)

Cultural background was mentioned as a significant factor influencing the effectiveness of humor or at least not until you really knows the person, and then you can dare to joke much more openly. Considering humor about gender, she sees that currently it is easier for women to joke about men than the other way around. Again, as a leader, Betty would be exceptionally cautious with any type and kind of humor.
“I think that if you know each other then you dare to joke about anything but I would be very cautious as a leader”(10)

**Deadline:** Enough with resources was the first thing to consider by Betty in deadline situations. Humor was not considered to be a solution to the problem; rather it was seen as providing a better condition for employees to succeed in their work. When working late over the difficult tasks humor can be something that eases the tension and gives spirit to keep on working.

**Crisis:** In a crisis, which to Betty could be a robbery, she is guided by the specifically designed behavior guidelines, so humor is an absolute “No” in such situations, because they are taken seriously. However, when the crisis is over, Betty assumed that humor would be more appropriate and useful.

**Newcomer:** Betty experienced that groups where humor was widely practiced easily integrated new employees, since laughing altogether during coffee breaks is a significant aspect. As a group leader her function is to show that it is ok to joke, although she would not allow herself to joke as much as employees do among themselves.

**Conflict:** When a conflict arises, Betty initially would reason with both parties about the source of conflict and handle it objectively. When the case is investigated and handled, some amount of humor can be helpful in easing the tension.

**Daily interaction:** Betty stressed that she needs to be a role model for her employees and show the limits. The capability of laughing together on what had happened is a great and simple measurement of how employees feel at work and even an indicator of how it is going economically for the business. To sum up, Betty specified that it is very important in her leadership to be participating to achieve good interaction.

**Trust:** To earn trust from her employees, Betty needs to be close to them and be there for them. Humor in this case should be used only if it is a part of ones personality, since otherwise it is easy to see that it is not natural. In other words, Betty strongly believes that you should not be someone you are not, if you are not good at joking just don’t do it.

**Change:** Since usually changes are coming as orders from above, the best thing Betty believes in is to be participating and discuss all together how to implement the change in the best way. Humor here was not assumed as something appropriate by Betty.

**Boredom and low motivation:** According to Betty both these concerns can be addressed with leader’s participatory attitude toward employee problems. Even though humor was considered as possible remedy against boredom, constant fun at workplace is not what the work is about, everyone has his/her responsibility to deliver to the organization. At the same time, Betty developed her arguments to mention that if people laugh they have more fun at work and they will deliver good results.

**Ineffective problem solving:** Betty practices a method where she closely listen what the problem is and then actually asks an employee what he/she thinks is a possible solution and in 99% of the cases they know the answer. So the only thing that is left to do is to show appreciation and then both are happy. The way she considers humor in problem solving is to include it in the process, to get a break from a stressed condition or just ease the atmosphere.

**Establishing Relationships:** Humor is important in establishing relationships with employees, though Betty is more guided by the approach to be close and be there for her employees.

**Control:** This is another situation where Betty would not use humor. Since control includes giving critique as well, she reasons that humor in the situation of critique is not appropriate.

“The critique can be misinterpreted and that is not what you want”(11)
Instead she is fond of constructive feedback, when she confirms an employee as an individual, but comments on the behavior, this way an employee would not lose the face but still get the criticism.

Additionally, Betty came up with additional situations where she would use humor to assist her leadership. Information meeting or when meeting with customers, however, knowing the boundaries is crucial. In the situation where new information is going to be presented and employees might not like it, humor can be a tool to deliver the message. Also it was mentioned that she uses humor when she feels comfortable with the situation and the mood is appropriate. She noticed that the fact that she as a leader dared to share silly facts about herself triggers the others to dare doing the same, thus stimulating communication and relationships in the workplace.

_Humor styles:_ Betty assumed that self-enhancing and aggressive humor styles were not appropriate for her as a leader. In case of self-enhancing humor, she couldn’t see how this style could be beneficial for a leader, and as for aggressive humor, it is not appropriate at work at all. Even though she admits that some sort of aggressive humor can improve group cohesiveness, there is a risk that it might turn against organizational objectives. Affiliative humor style was approved for all organizational goals presented, and self-defeating was favored for achieving better group cohesiveness and communication.

### 4.5 Barbara

Barbara is currently working as a leader in the banking industry. Barbara’s leader’s role involves ensuring the result of the office and supporting the subordinates. She argues that as for many other service firms their workplace is dependent on the atmosphere in the office and as a leader it is important that she practices her preachers. If she as a leader openly admits that she makes mistakes, then it becomes more ok for others do the same which creates a more relaxed atmosphere in the office. Barbara believes that everyone is born with a leadership gene and thus some people have more or less talent for it, depending on how they are as persons. With that said she does not believe that less funny and open people are not good leaders but that they do have a longer way to go and a more difficult time getting people to follow them.

For Barbara humor is situations where people can recognize themselves in what is funny in a subtle way. The advantages that she sees with humor include seeing things from other perspectives which allows taking the edge out of something. She often uses humor in the daily communication with the subordinates even if it is something that she does without thinking and she has noticed that it is easier to be popular as a leader if you do not take yourself too serious and admit that you make mistakes as well.

“I think I’m a bit of a self-masochist, I think it is fun to tell people about things I do wrong, and I think it is nice for the co-workers to feel that I am just as crazy as they are” (12)

Barbara rarely deliberately uses humor in different situations instead humor can be used whenever a situation occurs where the use of humor would feel natural. So she does not continuously use humor for a specific situation as some sort of steering instrument. The advantages with humor have Barbara learnt by doing and realized that humor is useful in many situations. However, there are also situations where humor would be inappropriate to use as a leader when the situation instead requires you as a leader to support and listen.
“It can never go too far. If you are going to be a leader then you need your professional ground to lean on” (13)

**Deadline:** Barbara feels that humor sometimes is appropriate and sometimes not appropriate when dealing with a stressful deadline. As a leader it is more a question of resources and whether the person really has as much to do as he or she experiences because in that case the person first and foremost needs help to accomplish the task. However, humor can be used to motivate people to give that extra something to accomplish the task.

**Crisis:** In a crisis situation Barbara is not likely to use humor in the moment of the crisis to ease the stress on the coworkers, but experiences humor to be useful in the aftermath of dealing with the crisis.

**Newcomer:** In the case of a newcomer in the group Barbara does not experience humor to be the ultimate recipe of improved group cohesiveness. Humor is important for group cohesiveness but a continuous personnel care where the group has a good time together in combination with common goals in order to avoid sub groups is more important.

**Conflict:** In a conflict situation Barbara recognizes individual discussions with the people involved to identify what the conflict really is about as a first step to avoid the conflict to affect the group cohesiveness. Humor could be a part of the confrontation of the problem in order to take the edge of the conflict but is not individually a solution.

**Daily interaction:** Barbara is of the opinion that it is important for the leader to attempt to improve the employee’s daily interaction by improving the communication in the organization as a whole. Barbara experiences lack of information to be the most common source of conflict. The communication is founded in the atmosphere at the workplace and when there is a good atmosphere then lack of communication becomes less of a problem.

**Trust:** When it comes to establishing trust Barbara believes that humor is beneficial for the leader. If the ceiling is high at the workplace and if the leader has some distance to him or her and tell the employees about the mistakes that he or she has made, then there is a base of trust and more likely that the employees will trust their leader. However, trust occurs through many other things as well; who can you tell something to, who can keep a secret, which is another side of humor.

**Change:** In a situation of change in the organization Barbara does not believe in humor helping communicate the change. Sometimes a leader must take important decisions that not everybody is happy about and as a leader you cannot be loved by everybody all the time. In such a situation it is more important to listen to the arguments and try to better explain why we are doing this change and why it is good for the organization.

**Boredom:** When it comes to dealing with bored employees, Barbara suggests a kick off where the employees can have a good time so that they experience that fun things also occurs in their workplace.

**Low motivation and ineffective problem solving:** If the employees despite the kick off stay unmotivated then the situation instead requires a plan for the employee in question. Why is the motivation so low, is this not the right industry for this person, how does this person wish to develop within this workplace? When it comes to low motivation and ineffective problem solving humor is not the solution to increase the creativity but instead the leader must figure out if this person needs support or education of if he or she is simply at the wrong place.

**Establishing Relationship:** Barbara thinks that humor is an important part in effective leadership and the establishment of relationships. Humor is one important part. The ability to listen is another important part. To stand up for your decisions is one important part and to stand up for your employees’ decisions is another important part. Barbara considers humor to be an opener in many situations. Often as a leader you must be able to go out for lunch and build relationships on the side and that requires that you can read this person and adjust.
“It is about handling the person as the person is which requires you to be a chameleon” (14)

Barbara thinks that it is hard to get a close relationship without being able to laugh together.

“If everything is super serious and super professional then you as a person stays a square and do not build relationships. You are a contact, nothing else.” (15)

Control: Barbara believes that the use of humor in the case of control of an effective leader is very situation dependent. But in the delivery of sensitive information it is crucial for the leader to start positively, deliver the more sensitive message and then finish positively in order to avoiding to crush the subordinate. As a leader you win nothing when crushing a coworker, then you end up with someone who does nothing or even go on a long sick leave. Another situation where Barbara deliberately uses humor is during presentations as an introduction where the audience is smiling creates a better atmosphere for the rest of the presentation.

Humor styles: Barbara identifies both affiliative humor and self-defeating humor as useful to achieve all organizational outcomes. Affiliative humor is good for the overall ambiance in the office and Barbara see self-defeating humor as a kind of defense; by criticizing herself she will avoid others to get the time to do it first. Barbara has never heard of self-enhancing humor and cannot really reason around when she is using it, assuming that she might use it when dealing with customers. Barbara does not use aggressive humor in her current industry but she has experienced and used his type of humor in other, often male dominant workplaces where there is much jokes on the behalf of others and jargon, however, always with a glimmer in the eye.

4.6 Irina

Irina is currently working as a leader in the insurance industry. The leadership role that she has today concerns development to a great extent; development of the coworkers, development of the activities and development of the customer meetings. Irina thinks that as a leader it is important to be structured both on short and long term in order to keep scope for conversations with subordinates that can occur. She states that she steers after the motto FAW- fun at work, as it is important that people are allowed to laugh at work.

“Without the workplace being a playground one should be allowed to have fun at work.” (16)

Humor according to Irina is joyfull, positive and it should be soft and honest. Humor makes life easier to live. She identifies humor as an important part of the own communication with the employees. By greeting the coworkers with small talk and smiles in the morning it can help turn an awful start of the day that a punctured cycle tire could bring. Irina believes to be a positive person to whom humor naturally occurs without really thinking about it. However, during the years she has learnt in which situations humor could be more beneficial. An information meeting that has been very strict with lots of information is often closed by asking if anyone has a joke before the meeting is adjourned. If laughing people would leave the meeting thinking that it was a good meeting even if it was not so much fun for everybody. Irina believes that humor is something that can be useful to all people, whether they are open or less open. Irina can see that her use of humor has a positive effect on her employees since when she jokes at herself it allows her to get closer to the employees. However, it is important
to always read the person in question so that you as a leader think about how and when you use humor and thus do not use humor when it is not appropriate.

“I think that everybody could benefit from humor, but it is a matter of respecting people for who they are.”(17)

Irina identifies religion, ethnicity and type of humor to be the moderators to affect the effectiveness of humor.

**Deadline:** Irina believes that humor partly can be used to decrease the stress that can occur in the situation of a deadline. By using pictures instead of only numbers and texts to describe a big objective it could help to defuse the situation for the employees, making it more positive and less stressful. On the other hand there are extremely stressful situations where humor is not an option and that instead requires the leader to steer with a firm hand.

**Crisis:** Another situation that requires a leader to steer with a firm hand is during a crisis situation. One crisis situation that Irina has experienced was when some of the co-workers died in a car accident. In that situation humor was not appropriate and instead support teams were brought in. Irina thinks that the employees in most grave crisis situations wish to have a person that will take the lead and steer with a firm hand. However, once the crisis is lightened, humor is an important part of coming back.

**Newcomer:** In the case of a newcomer in the group, Irina is of the opinion that in such a situation it is important that the leader sets a good example by showing that we like to have fun at work. Meanwhile the leader must also read the new group member and make sure that the jargon in the group won’t make the newcomer feel excluded.

**Conflict:** Irina thinks that humor also might be useful when it comes to handling a conflict situation. However, it depends on how deep the conflict is, the reason of the conflict and how many people that are involved. A more shallow conflict could be made clear with humor while a deeper conflict rather requires sitting down with the people involved in an attempt to make them meet each other. In such a situation Irina thinks that it is more difficult to use humor to reestablish the group cohesiveness.

**Daily interaction:** When handling manager concerns such as the employee’s daily interaction, Irina thinks that humor could be useful. By setting a good example the leader will show the subordinates that it is ok to talk and to laugh, however, without making the workplace a playground.

**Trust:** Irina believes that humor could be beneficial for the leader in establishing trust in the workplace. She personally used humor through a funny first presentation as the new leader with the objective to open up and showing that a positive atmosphere is important with the intention that the employees would feel the same and open up so that they could together build from there.

**Change:** In a situation of change in the organization Irina thinks that the most important task of the leader is to explain the reason of the change and why it is important to go through with the change. However humor could often help to introduce the change in order to play down the situation and make it easier to take in the change.

**Boredom:** When dealing with bored employees Irina often uses humor to get, for example, group work going and to boost creativity. When it is time to introduce new group activities on a Thursday morning in November when it is dark outside and more than 6 months until the summer holidays then the creativity could be far from being on top and then humor could be a good means of boosting the creativity.

**Low motivation:** When the subordinate instead is unmotivated, Irina has used humor to make them experience the tasks as fun in order to increase the motivation. Although she points out
that there could be several reasons to why an employee feels unmotivated and for example in the case of personal matters it is more appropriate to listen.

*Ineffective problem solving:* Irina has no concrete examples of how to use humor to deal with ineffective problem solving other than that humor can be used to cheer up the mood in an attempt to come up with something new.

*Establishing Relationship:* Irina feels that it is a fine line when using humor to establish relationships in the workplace. Although humor is important it is also important that the leader keeps the distance since the subordinates are not her buddies. There will be certain situations where the leader must steer with a firm hand and then the leader’s decision applies.

> “I think that it is important that it does not go too far so that people lose faith in the leader or forget who is in charge.” (18)

*Control:* Irina cannot remember using humor to facilitate the leadership concern of control. She explains that people tend to shut down a little when receiving constructive feedback and in such situations she thinks that it is better not to use humor since it might make the message less clear. In addition Irina mentions that humor is very important in any type of kick-off when all employees are gathered for example before the start of a new year, in order to provide the positive feeling and motivate everybody to give their all.

*Humor styles:* Irina identifies both self-enhancing humor and self-defeating humor to be useful in achieving the organizational outcome of effective leadership. Self-defeating humor is a humor style she uses a lot, for example at her first day as a new leader. She thinks that affiliative humor is useful to achieve all other organizational outcome but she is not keen on aggressive humor which she does not use at all.

4.7 Roger

Roger is a leader who is currently working in the recruitment industry. Apart from being responsible for the local office, practically his role is to motivate and develop employees and hired personnel. He needs to be structured, time concerned and delegating in order to be effective as a leader. By doing employee surveys and estimating costs he extracts valuable information to decide whether he is achieving effectiveness as a leader. Practically, Hersey/Blanchard model is used to guide him in his leadership, where situational awareness is in focus.

Humor for Roger comes in form of laughter or simply when someone is having a good time. It can be a glimmer in the eye or just a good joke about how much there is to be done at work, allowing to have a nice work atmosphere and to see that job is not everything. Considering communication at work, Roger thinks that humor can be a factor that makes it easier and more pleasant; he also noted that with humor people become more honest and open. As a leader he noticed that humor has a positive effect on his employees, meaning that they enjoy the atmosphere and are willing to work that extra hour and deliver good results for the company’s benefit. When asked about the situations where he uses humor the most important case was coaching, however intentionally he applies humor in order to get acceptance on his suggestions and ideas when delegating tasks.
Deadlines: Humor was one of the options in dealing with stress linked with deadlines. Roger experienced that joking about missed deadline allows employees to understand that they will not be beheaded for that.

“If you will be beheaded then you do not dare to accept a project with a deadline”(19)

However, he also stressed that reasons to delay should always be investigated. 

Crisis: Even though joking was assumed to be a bit wrong during a crisis situation, Roger still considered humor’s ability to get a broader view of the situation and shift the focus to deal with crisis and find solutions.

Newcomer: As experienced by Roger when there are some common topics he and a newcomer can both laugh at, it breaks the tension of the first meeting. Moreover, these common topics give the feeling that they know each other better.

Conflict: In the situations of conflict, Roger prefers to get to the source of the problem and find solutions. Humor, however, is assumed to have an ability to highlight the ridiculous side of the conflict in aftermath discussion by providing with a different perspective.

Daily interaction: For Roger it is more pleasant and easier to communicate with the employees who are smiling and naturally funny in daily interaction, than with those who never smile.

Trust: For humor to be helpful in achieving trust, it should be used in the right way. It was experienced by Roger that when finishing the conversation in a humorous mood people could laugh at what had been discussed which makes it easier for Roger to get acceptance on his decisions. When he got acceptance he got trust.

Change: Roger did not think that there are any specific quality humor could help with in communicating the change, instead he sees detailed explanation about why change is going to happen as important.

Boredom: Roger considers humor to contribute to better time at work, thus making employees less bored. However, humor here would be a short-term solution, while investigating the causes would be a more appropriate method.

Low Motivation: Again, in handling this concern, Roger would not use humor as a long–term solution, rather it was stressed that discussion about reasons and sources of lowered motivation should be initiated.

“It is more fun to work with a person who has fun and who likes his or her job but it is not a long-term solution”(20)

Ineffective problem solving: The only application of humor was considered in meetings where solutions to problems are discussed. It was reasoned that if it is pleasant and fun for employees to have discussions, they would gladly participate in them knowing that there will be a lot of laughing at the end.

Establishing relationships: When meeting a person for the first time, humor was experienced by Roger to help in establishing the relationship, so that it is nice to have a coffee break together the next time. However, the ability of a leader to be able to share with employees, to play with open cards, was believed to be more effective in establishing relationships.

Control: In exercising control, Roger feels that numbers speak a more clear language than humor. However, it can still be used to play down the situation a little, when heavy critique is given to the whole group. At the end the most important thing is to deliver the message of the critique, despite what method is applied.
Additionally, it was remarked that the situations of high workload are not suited for humor application; rather sensitivity and listening are more appropriate, meaning that humor there is not an easy way out. Moreover, language, age and individuality were named to be the factors that can influence the appropriateness and effectiveness of humor, implying that humor should be adjusted to each individual. Finally after all the prepared situations were commented on, Roger complemented the list of situations where humor can be helpful with the one of difficult economical times for organization. There humor was assumed to be a loadstar which stimulates employees to work despite the difficulties. As a final word about intentional humor, Roger emphasized that humor should be natural to personality and leadership since it is easy to spot when a person is fake.

“If you do not have humor and it is not your leadership style or your way to be, then you cannot read a book about humor and then use it in your leadership. The most important thing is to be the person that you are in your leadership because it will shine through.” (21)

Humor styles: Self-enhancing humor was not assumed, by Roger to be appropriate for any organizational outcome, rather to serve as a tool for a leader in problematic situations to show that there is no need to worry and I am in control of the situation. Affiliative humor was a universal humor style, appropriate for all our organizational outcomes. Self-defeating humor style was the one Roger was most excited about and considered it appropriate for creativity as well as playing down the situation. However, at the same time he would never use it at the first customer meeting, to avoid leaving a bad impression of unserious behavior. Finally, aggressive humor was experienced to be effective achieving group cohesiveness, when used in the group to discuss the competitors.

4.8 Ingrid

Ingrid is currently working as a leader in the insurance industry. As a leader she is responsible for the fulfillment of the organization’s objectives and to ensure that everybody is onboard on the train, something that is not obvious with so many employees. Ingrid is to a 100 % sure that engagement yields results and thinks that the creation of as much participation and engagement as possible, as far out in the organization as possible is very important. These people meet the customers on a daily basis and notice what is wrong and right with the processes and therefore the leader’s continuous dialogue with them is crucial.

Humor to Ingrid is to look at things a bit with a glimmer in the eye, to have that kind of attitude to life and to challenges. She experiences humor to have many advantages, not the least in the interaction with other people. Although there are many difficult challenges for an organization and its employees, if the leader brings a bit of humor it would help play down the situation and create some distance to it all. Ingrid feels that humor makes a leader appear less of an inspector and provide the feeling that we are all here for the same objective.

“With engagement and a positive approach I think that we can develop year after year whereas if I would use a whip then people will develop for six months and then they stop.”(22)

She uses humor as a conscious part of the communication with the subordinates in order to create a sense of “us”, create a good atmosphere, a collective drive and to defuse different situations. Ingrid has not read or otherwise learnt about any advantages of humor but is only
acting according her own experiences. She reasons that there are no any situations or topics when the use of humor would be a taboo, however, it is important to have a feeling for how to use humor and to be aware of the relationship that you have with people so that you understand each other. Hierarchy and organizational structures might affect the appropriateness of using humor; however, Ingrid does not perceive gender, age or ethnicity to affect the appropriateness of using humor at her workplace as she works in a modern organization.

**Deadline:** Ingrid is not using humor in a situation of a deadline to decrease the stress of the employees but rather to ensure that each person understands his or her role in the context and that they are important in order to succeed. However, she does not see any taboo with using humor in such a situation and reasons that humor could be useful when building up a sense of belonging for the organization.

**Crisis:** Ingrid cannot see any taboo in using humor in a crisis situation neither although it is important to have a feeling of what is appropriate. In a grave crisis situation the leader should not of course be joking around.

**Newcomer:** When dealing with a newcomer in the group Ingrid uses quite a bit of humor. The team has two newcomers at the moment and humor plays an important role in defusing and creating a sense of belonging in order to integrate the newcomer and improve group cohesiveness.

**Conflict:** Ingrid experiences that humor could be beneficial to the leader in a conflict situation to play down the problem and say “so what?” in order to move on. With that said, a leader should not ridicule something that deserves to be noticed.

“I do not see humor as a method, it is not a method that I have learnt to use but it is definitely an important ingredient” (23)

**Daily interaction:** When it comes to handling manager concerns such as the employee’s daily interaction Ingrid believes that humor can be used to defuse, create a sense of belonging and to steer the commitment in the same direction.

**Trust and change:** Regarding communication that can create trust or facilitate change Ingrid strives to always inform the subordinates as early as possible in order to give them an opportunity to come along and contribute and to always keep a rather open door for the employees to come and exchange thoughts.

**Boredom, low motivation and ineffective problem solving:** When it comes to bored employees, unmotivated employees and employees with an ineffective problem solving Ingrid perceives these concerns to be somewhat similar. Creativity, engagement and motivation and on the other hand comes boredom and low energy. It is important that she as a leader is close and authentic with employees. She should highlight good examples and thus encourage the individual in the necessary way for increased creativity.

**Establishing Relationships:** Ingrid experiences humor to be an important ingredient to establish relationships.

“It is of course possible to build relationships without humor, it is just not as fun.” (24)

She reasons that humor is useful for both establishing and maintaining relationships.

**Control:** In a control situation, when a leader must deliver constructive feedback, Ingrid feels that leaders should avoid joking. It is already hard as it is to deliver a sensitive message and people tend to not want to hear less positive feedback and then they should be presented as clear as possible.
Humor styles: Ingrid realizes that she often uses both self-enhancing humor and affiliative humor and identifies these humor styles as useful to reach all the organizational outcomes. She uses self-enhancing humor and “how hard can it be?” as a way of highlighting what we can do instead of what we cannot do. Ingrid does not obviously see the usefulness of aggressive humor. She admits to using it sometimes but one must then be very careful when using it. Ingrid would avoid using self-defeating humor too often as she believes it actually can weaken you as a leader.

In order to facilitate the reader’s comprehension of the extensive data presented in this chapter we have designed an empirical grid with the most significant findings concerning humor. This grid can be found included in appendix 4.
5. Analysis

This chapter will introduce the reader to the analysis that we produced by combining the empirical data and analyzing it with the help of existing theory

5.1 Leadership

Leadership theory suggests that a sense of humor is a personality trait that contributes to successful leadership and that the effective use of humor plays an important part in the work of a leader (DuBrin, 2007, p. 34). The empirical findings from our study on the other hand, indicate that humor is not an obvious ingredient that comes to mind for the majority of our respondents when they spontaneously reflect over their leadership. Irina is one respondent who constitutes an exception to the overall findings as she states that she steers her co-workers after the motto FAW - fun at work. She reasons that it is important that people are allowed to laugh at work. The other respondent that stands out is Fredrik who mentions humor as an important aspect of his leadership reasoning that humor can be helpful in a variety of situations for a leader.

We believe that these empirical findings somewhat reflect the attitude towards humor as a management tool in Sweden. There is, to our knowledge, currently no existing research on the subject of humor and management and our findings reinforce that notion by indicating that although humor is used by our Swedish managers as a support in their leadership, its importance gains limited attention. We therefore draw the conclusion that humor cannot be seen among the most obvious ingredients in our respondents’ leadership.

5.2 Humor Definition

We asked our respondents what humor was to them with a wish to analyze how our respondents in general treat the concept of humor and what definitions they give to humor as a phenomenon. Our findings indicate that to the majority of our respondents humor has to do with the way one communicates. Among the humor definitions there were also the perceptions of humor as a way of looking at things, with a glimmer in the eyes or regarding humor simply as a common laughter that is mutually enjoyable. Although more common way of describing humor was through adjectives like soft, honest and positive, one respondent had an opposite feeling about humor as a concept. For her humor was more of a bad joke or a stand up comedy that is not always enjoyed by the majority. In order to be able to conduct our interview further we explained what we meant with the concept humor thus allowing her to see humor from our perspective. To remind the reader, in our research we regard humor as "amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individuals, groups or organization" (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006, p. 58).

We think that our respondents’ attitude towards humor is interesting to study more closely. Their attitudes towards humor will reflect and allow us to see whether they will ever see
humor as a management tool. If someone has the impression that humor is nothing but bad jokes, it is not likely that they would consider humor as serious business and even less as a management tool. The majority of our respondents mentioned functions of humor when describing the phenomenon, which can be seen in the empirical cases, and we think that this shows that our respondents could possibly consider humor as a tool.

5.3 The effects of humor

When being able to conclude that humor is present in our respondents’ daily interaction at work, we further wish to know whether leaders are aware of the effects their humor has on their subordinates. The empirical cases indicate that leaders are watching closely what effects their humor has on employees, since all of them were freely able to reflect on the basis of their own experiences from the worklife. Rebecca and Fredrik experienced humor to have a relaxing effect which would make employees become happier and more open. Barbara had noticed that humor allows her to be liked and accepted easier among their employees and customers. Irina, Ingrid and Anna all perceived the effects of humor to lead to eased perception of the leader, feeling of a closer relationship with the leader and increased group solidarity. To conclude, we were able to see that our respondent managers were aware of the effects their humor has on their employees. Interestingly, some of the managers further described how they use humor repetitively to keep the effect lasting or achieve aims, as with the increased group solidarity or relaxing the mood of employees.

5.4 Natural /deliberate use of humor

Finally, in analyzing humor as a phenomenon we want to understand whether humor comes natural to our respondents. Do they actually use humor on purpose knowing that it can be helpful in certain situations? We have also looked at their opinions on the possibility to learn about humor.

Our findings show that our respondents were absolutely positive about assessing their own humor to be natural element in their personalities. Only three of our respondents admitted that apart from humor being natural to them, they deliberately utilize the benefits of humor and thus use intentional humor to get acceptance of employees and customers (Roger) or when holding a speech to ease the tension in the beginning (Barbara). One respondent, Rebecca, expressed that she had learnt of benefits of humor in other ways than only through own experiences. She admitted that she had visited a lecture on the positive effects of humor on the human body, from where she got some inspiration as well as confirmation on her already established understandings about humor effects. The remaining respondents, however, stressed that they did not learn about humor effects in any other way than through own experiences.

To conclude, we noticed that leaders tend to attribute humor to their natural skills and rarely use humor on purpose. They rather reason that humor comes naturally into conversations or situations when it feels appropriate. This indicates that leaders often subconsciously implement humor, without maybe realizing what potential effects it has on the situation or employees. Interestingly, however is the divergence of conclusions drawn from this section and the previous one, where we analyzed the effects of humor on employees. There we concluded that humor is supposed to be taken seriously, since effects of humor are monitored...
and utilized, while here we see that humor is rarely put into practice on purpose. We assume that this inconsistency arose from the fact that our respondents mostly use humor subconsciously, being led by their instincts in different situations rather than calculating and planning for humor. It is also possible that it is difficult to be aware of the implementation of humor in practice as humor is, as stated by the majority of our respondents, simply a part of their personality.

5.5 Situations/managerial concerns analysis

5.5.1 Stress reduction

a) Deadline

Deadline as a stressful situation was familiar to all our respondents and the approaches they utilize to deal with it are various. Humor, however, was mentioned among the ways to handle the stress induced by deadlines, but not as a method rather as a possible help. In other words, humor was not among the first things that came to mind when our respondents have to deal with stressful deadlines.

Rebecca and Roger were most positive about humor in dealing with stressful deadlines; both see the benefits of humor, despite different ways of using humor, thus their reasoning is interesting for our study. Rebecca, as a leader, recognizes the necessity to lead the employees out of the stress associated with deadlines, thus she initiates coffee breaks, which are always accompanied with humor and laughter. She experienced the effectiveness of humor in this instance observing that it allows employees to have a good time with humor and when returning to the tasks the work usually flows more efficiently. The reasoning of Rebecca contributes to the existing knowledge that humor allows individuals to shift perspectives and look at stressful situations in a less threatening way (Martin et al. 1993) by exemplifying how it can be done when coping with deadline’s stress. Roger also clearly understands the positive functions that humor can serve by utilizing humor when discussing the upcoming deadline with employees. He reasons that if he as a leader approaches the deadline with humor, it would serve as an example for employees to not be afraid to take assignments with the deadline and perform against it. With this example Roger contributes to the understanding of humor as a coping mechanism which Kuiper & Martin (1998) consider helpful in making stressful situations more manageable.

Rebecca and Roger illustrate conscious use of humor in situations with deadline and allow us to better understand how Swedish managers reason when using humor as a management tool, however, there are also other opinions expressed by our respondents.

All other respondents have a difficult time recognizing humor as a tool and exemplify how they would apply it. However, Fredrik, Betty and Barbara assume that humor can be helpful in motivating employees to give an extra effort to complete the task, but do not see humor as a solution. These observations allow us to understand that these managers know about the benefits and functions humor serves, but do not see the whole potential humor has as a tool that can be used consciously.
With a different perception of humor contributed Anna, Irina and Ingrid. All agreed that humor was not useful in dealing with stressful deadlines, but at the same time some noticed that even though humor would not reduce stress, it could indirectly and positively contribute to the comfort at work and make the way to the task completion more positive. A warning that Anna and Fredrik also wanted to share is that employees at stressful times may become irritated by the humorous approach of a leader, thus humor should be used very cautiously. This perspective is valuable for our research, since it provides us with a view some Swedish managers have on humor having an indirect effect on the stress reduction associated with deadlines as well as identifying the negative effects of humor.

To conclude we see that there are managers who do utilize humor as a management tool along with the other crucial instruments that a leader utilizes to fulfill the role of a leader, such as attentive listening and resource allocation. However, there are also those who only know about the benefits of humor, but do not see it as a solution to the stressful situations of deadline. Interestingly, we discovered the negative effects humor can have on stressed employees by making them irritated about the humorous approach of a leader.

b) Crisis

In reasoning how humor would be helpful in the situations of crisis, our respondents substantially contributed to the exiting knowledge on humor in stressful situations of crisis. The main contribution is that our empirical findings contradict our theoretical developments, thus extending it, because our theory was conceptually developed.

Existing humor research suggests that humor is an effective coping mechanism when dealing with threatening and stressful situations (Abel, 2002; Kuiper et al., 1995) as humor is shown to provide perspective as well as reduce stress and anxiety (Yovetich et al.1990; Lefcourt et al.1995; Kuiper & Martin, 1998). However, the majority of our respondents did not think of humor as a coping mechanism during the crisis situation, rather that a leader should take the responsibility in order to offer the support to the employees in difficult and serious times. At the same time all of these leaders acknowledged the benefits of humor in processing the crisis situation when it was already over by providing the means of returning back to normal work flow. These findings allow us to contribute to the understanding on whether our respondents utilize humor in the workplace, by demonstrating that crisis is not one of the situations that can be unconditionally ruled out or remedied with humor. As well as highlighting that it is the aftermath of crisis where humor can be a tool at leaders’ disposal. With this we conclude that humor as a management tool could be valuable after crisis not during.

However, the experiences of some of the respondents were in favor of Martin’s et al (1993) findings that humor allows individuals to shift the focus from the stressful situation and perceive it as less threatening. Thus, Rebecca, Fredrik and Roger agreed with Martin’s et al (1993) findings believing that humor could be useful in dealing with crisis even if the problem remained unsolved. Interestingly, however, is that humor was only hypothetically assumed to be helpful, and the potential of humor as a tool was still underestimated.
Thus, our findings provide us with the knowledge that managers in our sample would rather take a lead in the situations of crisis and support their employees with other means than humor. Humor, however, was approved as a tool for returning back to the normal work atmosphere after the crisis, and with this contributing to our theory. Despite the fact that a few of our managers would allow themselves using humor during crisis, humor still was not considered to be a tool, rather a “maybe” option.

5.5.2 Group Cohesiveness

a) Newcomer

All of our respondents utilized the benefits of humor when dealing with a newcomer even though the forms of implementation were different. Roger experienced that humor assists in creating bonds between employees and a leader, when he and a newcomer can have a laugh together, thus echoing the findings by Vinton (1989). Another argument in favor of humor was expressed by Rebecca and supported by Fredrik and Ingrid, where they shared that humor is important in integrating a newcomer. Since humor would provide a positive atmosphere where a new member would feel more relaxed and welcomed it would also create a sense of us, thus contributing to more cohesive group which is in line with the findings by Kaplan & Boyd (1965). Leaders’ role was exemplified to present the new group to a newcomer in a funny way, thus relieving the tension in the room or during a team building exercise initiating funny moments to help everyone else to join. These findings show us that leaders in our study do utilize humor and apply it to help the group achieve cohesiveness. Thus, these findings will also contribute to our understanding of how humor can be used as a management tool.

Finally, Rebecca, Betty and Irina all emphasized that it is exactly the leader who has to show that we like to have fun here and with the own example illustrate what is an acceptable behavior in this workplace, reasoning that fun at work contributes to better results of employees. The perspective of a leader setting the example expands our theory and contributes with an interesting insight into how a leader can use humor as a tool.

Thus, our study confirms the findings in humor theory that humor is beneficial for the creation of group cohesiveness. In addition, our study further develop the existing theory by suggesting that the leader’s use of humor is beneficial for group cohesiveness as it sets the example for the rest of the group to follow.

b) Conflict

Our empirical case illustrates that humor indeed can be beneficial in a conflict situation since humor would allow people to get some perspective to things and help create an understanding for other people’s opinions. This reasoning is in line with Forester (2004) who argues that a sense of humor in a conflict situation is not about being funny but to be able to respond to others with understanding and imagination. Moreover, as a new perspective on a conflict Rebecca and Roger highlighted the possibility of showing the silliness of a conflict with humor when it was already resolved and the parties were not so vulnerable. Additionally, humor was perceived as a tool for breaking the deadlock and encouraging the discussion
between the parties involved in the conflict. However, as it was emphasized by Anna, humor is a delicate thing and the leader should really be careful to not target one of the parties with irony.

Despite the common approval of appropriateness of humor for playing down the situation of conflict and getting a perspective there were still respondents doubtful of the benefits of humor in the exact conflict moment. They reasoned that a serious conflict instead must be met with objectivity and in a correct manner so that a serious problem that deserved attention would not disappear in all the humor.

Both opinions in favor and against the humor in conflict resolution, allow us better understand if humor can be used as a management tool and how. Since many of our respondents reason that humor reduces the tension, provides with the new perspective and more, it allows us to suggest that humor is used as a tool, being aware of the functions it serves. Even the negative experiences of humor in conflict resolution provided us with the knowledge that humor can be a double edged sword in this situation.

5.5.3 Improved Communication

a) Daily interaction

Leaders in our study recognize the importance of their role in ensuring the good communication throughout the organization and daily interaction is a part of this communication. Humor in daily interaction was rather considered as an ingredient than a tool serving some purpose, since leaders in their majority were convinced that the leader should show the employees the limits of humor at work. Moreover, Betty highlighted that laughter and humorous atmosphere at work serve as indicators for economical well being of the organization. Fredrik, however, reflected on the issues that are supported by Greathatch & Clark (2002), when indicating that the presence of humor in daily interaction fosters communication in a way that employees feel safe in the group and as a result dare asking questions and ask for help, thus performing the tasks with much better precision. A bit different perception of humor in daily interaction was provided by Ingrid when she reasoned that humor creates a sense of belonging thus steering the commitment of the group in the same direction. The reasoning of Ingrid supports the findings of Decker & Rotondo (2001) when they argue that humor is a significant for the work environment and positively affects the mood and communication channels. These findings provide us with broader understanding than our theory could give us on how managers could utilize humor at work and with their subordinates. Even more important for us is the reasoning our leaders apply when favoring humor as a tool.

Other leaders did not consider humor to be a tool that can be used to improve communication in the daily interaction, emphasizing other important aspects. Anna, for example, experienced that open door policy throughout the organization work very good in ensuring the quality of communication. Barbara as well, was convinced that it is the atmosphere in the office that fosters communication. The value of these findings is in understanding that humor probably is an indirect factor that would contribute to the atmosphere in the office and foster the communication.
From the existing data we can conclude that some managers in our study do see humor as a tool, by realizing the benefits it brings to the group, while also stressing that it is their responsibility, as leaders, to show that fun is allowed at work. The others, however, pay attention to other things in the organization, believing that they have better impact on communication.

b) Trust

The issue of trust provided us with various reflections from our respondents. Very positive attitude towards humor in establishing trust were encountered at Rebecca, Barbara, Irina and Roger, however, they all see how humor functions in a bit different way. Since we are interested in reasoning why a leader would use humor in this situation, we wish to examine them. Rebecca had experienced that when she and employees can laugh together, they create a bond that allows them to share many other things as well. To take it further and see the connection to the communication, it would mean that the established bond would allow the communication between these two people to flow much smoother, which corresponds with the findings provided by Decker & Rotondo (2001). They argue that humor positively affects the mood and channels of communication. Similarly, Irina found humor to be useful in establishing a good atmosphere when joining a group as a new leader. She reasoned that a positive atmosphere in the beginning would foster the trust among her and employees. Barbara, contributes our understanding on humor as a management tool by noting that humor at her own expense helped her in decreasing the distance from employees which led to more obvious trust from the employees. Finally, Roger had a very simple logic, where humor resulted in better acceptance and acceptance meant trust. All these reasoning are important for us in understanding how humor could be used as a management tool. Moreover, the variety of ways to apply humor in achieving trust, contributes to the knowledge on how humor can be applied by managers to achieve organizational outcomes.

The other part of the respondents was convinced that there are other important aspects to consider in achieving trust among employees, which has nothing to do with humor. Fredrik experienced that it is his quality as a leader to back up his employees that helped him to establish trust. Ingrid applied an open door policy to foster employees’ openness and contribution with the ideas. By keeping her door open she wished to show that every idea is welcome just share with it. Finally, Betty was the only one to point out that humor in establishing trust should be used only if it is natural part of personality; otherwise it would be transparent that the person is not behaving naturally and even have the opposite result. These findings show us that humor in establishing trust is not perceived positively by all our leaders, and that some see the value in other approaches when fostering the communication, by establishing trust.

To conclude, we observed that in our study we have leaders who use humor to assist them in establishing trust with employees therefore humor can be seen as a useful tool at managers’ disposal in the concern of establishing trust. At the same time we noticed that other, more conventional approaches as being a support for employees and having an open door to the office were favored by other leaders, since they fulfilled the aim they were used for.

c) Change
Change by the majority of the leaders in our study was considered as a serious event where they find it difficult to consider any function of humor as beneficial. In communicating change to the employees, extensive and clear information, discussion on implementation and explanation why the change is necessary were chosen to deliver the message about the upcoming change. Humor however, was a natural choice for Fredrik and Irina, where they reason that humor is helpful in playing down the seriousness of a situation that would allow employees to see that it is no evil and take it easier in. Their reasoning supports the findings by Kahn (1989), where it was suggested that humor softens the resistance and facilitates organizational change.

These findings allow us to understand that leaders in our study naturally would rather use conventional management approaches then utilizing humor as a help in delivering the message about change. However, the examples of humor facilitating a more positive attitude towards change, suggest that it is still possible to use humor as a tool. Additionally, the findings extracted from this analysis are contributing to our understanding if and how humor can be used as a management tool, by illustrating the reasoning behind the choices made.

5.5.4 Creativity

a) Boredom

Barbara, Irina, Roger and Betty were most positive about using humor when dealing with bored employees. Whenever Barbara is dealing with bored employees she sees the need to initiate a kick off. She recognized the effectiveness of humor in such a concern as she has learnt that it is important that the employees experience that also fun things happen in their workplace. Barbara’s reasoning contributes to the existing theory that through humor managers would initiate or encourage a break from routines which would help to switch the mood and allow new perspectives (Roy, 1960), by exemplifying how she handles bored employees. Irina also recognized the positive functions that humor brings and she utilizes humor on a more regular basis, not the least during the winter months. She has learnt that in November, when it is dark outside and the creativity is far from being on top, then humor is a useful means of boosting the creativity. With her example Irina contributes to the understanding of humor as a tool at manager’s disposal that has the ability to arouse the work environment of employees (Fisher, 1993 p.399). Roger also recognized the benefits of humor as he has observed that humor contributes to a better time at work, which thus makes employee less bored. However, Roger also contributed with an additional perception of humor as he reasoned that despite humor’s positive effects he looked at humor as more of a short-term solution and to instead investigate the reasoning behind the boredom would be the more appropriate method to deal with bored employees. Betty recognized humor to be beneficial for handling bored employees and even if she did not see humor as an obvious tool she did reason that if you can laugh at work you will have more fun and you will do a better job.

Barbara, Irina and to a more limited extent also Roger and Betty illustrate the deliberate use of humor in concerns of boredom, which allow us to better understand how managers in Sweden reason about using humor as a management tool.
All the remaining respondents have a harder time recognizing humor as a management tool. Fredrik thought that humor was less appropriate to use with bored employees and he reasoned that boredom is more of a leader’s concern for the wellbeing of the employees and that the leader should therefore investigate the reason to boredom in order to offer support. Anna supported the idea of leader support mentioned by Fredrik by reasoning that instead of using humor the leader should encourage the employee to dare to step out of the comfort zone. These observations allowed us to understand how these managers reason around any benefits and functions of humor and to see that they do not see the potential of humor as a useful management tool for dealing with bored employees.

To conclude we argue that there are managers in our research who utilizes humor as a management tool while other managers more perceive humor as an asset. Some managers do not at all see the potential of humor as a useful tool to them but instead they consider other methods such as finding out the source of the boredom and offer support as more appropriate.

b) Low motivation

Irina was the only respondent that recognized the benefits of humor when dealing with unmotivated employees as she experienced humor as helpful to make the employees experience of different work tasks more fun in order to increase their motivation. Her reasoning contributes to the idea that people with high levels of humor are more likely to perceive challenges in a positive manner and show high motivation for tasks (Kuiper et al, 1995). However, Irina further developed her reasoning of the use of humor when dealing with low motivation among the employees by adding that there can be many reasons why an employee is not motivated and therefore it can often be more appropriate for the leader to listen than to joke.

The remaining respondents did not recognize the benefits of humor when dealing with low motivation. The majority of our respondent reasoned that when dealing with unmotivated employees, the leader must go to the bottom of the problem and figure out why the employee is not motivated in order to offer support and thus do something about the low motivation. These findings allowed us to understand how the majority of the managers reason around the appropriateness of using humor when dealing with low motivation among the employees. We detect that the majority of managers seem to consider low motivation as a more serious concern than boredom which would require that the leader find the problem and solution to low motivation. They do not experience humor as an appropriate management tool for the concern of low motivation.

To conclude we can note that one manager identifies humor as an asset to increase the motivation among the employees rather than a management tool. However, the majority of the managers did not consider humor as a useful management tool for dealing with low motivation among the employees.

c) Ineffective problem solving
Rebecca and Roger most clearly recognized the benefits of humor as useful when dealing with ineffective problem solving skills among their subordinates. Rebecca described that she uses humor to make people more relaxed and more willing to share their ideas. She thinks that an open sharing of ideas and thoughts can enable problem solving in a group. Her reasoning contributes to the existing theory that individuals exposed to humor are likely to solve problems more efficiently (Edwards & Gibbons, 1992 in Raoch et al, 2006) by exemplifying how she handles ineffective problem solving. Similarly to Rebecca, Roger also considered humor to affect the atmosphere of the group which in turn would facilitate the problem solving skills. He argued that when humor is a part of a discussion then employees are more willing to participate in them which can result in more effective problem solving with the help of each other. Roger’s reasoning contributed to the theory that suggest that humor is an effective tool that is likely to lead to divergent thinking and increased creativity (Isen et al., 1987) by exemplifying how humor can be useful also for the problem solving abilities in a group. Both Roger’s and Rebecca’s reasoning illustrates conscious use of humor when dealing with ineffective problem solving and allow us to better understand how Swedish managers reason when using humor as a management tool. Rebecca and Roger also further contributed to the suggested usefulness of humor by additionally explaining how humor can affect the openness and willingness to share ideas in a group, which in turn would be beneficial for the collective problem solving. Interestingly, we noted a pattern given that the two respondent most positive to using humor to deal with ineffective problem solving are Roger and Rebecca, who both work in the recruitment industry.

Betty and Irina contributed with a similar perception. Though less clearly convinced of the usefulness of humor than Roger and Rebecca, they reasoned that humor might be useful when dealing with ineffective problem solving by easing the atmosphere and through that boost creativity. All the remaining respondents had a more difficult time recognizing humor as beneficial and even less as a management tool for the concern in question. They reasoned that the way to deal with an employee who is having troubles with problem solving skills is to offer support or education and through active coaching help the employee in question.

To conclude we argue that there are managers in our research who utilizes humor as a management tool while other managers more perceive humor as an asset that could be useful. Some managers do not at all see the potential of humor as a useful tool to them but instead they consider other methods such as offer support and coaching as a more appropriate means of dealing with ineffective problem solving.

5.5.5 Leadership effectiveness

a) Establishing relationships

Ingrid and Anna were most positive to the use of humor in establishing relationships. Ingrid thought of humor as a very useful for both establishing and maintaining relationships. She added that it would be possible to build a relationship without humor but not as much fun. Her reasoning on the use of humor to build and maintain relationships contributes to the theory of humor as a tool to initiate social interactions and maintain relationships as suggested by Martineau (1972). Anna also clearly understands the positive functions that humor can serve. She experience that humor is useful in the establishment of relationships as humor can increase the presence and availability of the leader which will encourage other employees to
share their experiences and anecdotes as well. The reasoning of Anna contributes to the existing knowledge that humor breaks down the power structures that can separate managers and employees while improving their communication as suggested by Crawford (1994).

All of the remaining respondents also utilize the benefits of humor when establishing relationships. However, they all see humor as one important ingredient of building relationships rather than as a management tool. Roger, Betty and Rebecca reasoned that humor allows the leader to come closer to the subordinate which support the findings of Vinton (1989) who suggests that humor can lower status differences and make people more equal and of Romero and Cruthirds (2006) who suggest that sharing of humor would make the employees perceive the leader as part of the group. Irina interestingly contributed to this theory by reasoning that although humor is useful for establishing relationship it is not always desirable for the leader to come too close to the subordinate. She argued that the leader and the subordinated are not buddies and there are situations when the leader must simply steer with the whole hand and therefore it is important that the subordinates do not forget who is in charge. The reasoning of Barbara also contributed to the theory that humor is a great tool to initiate social interaction and maintaining relationships (Martineau, 1972). Although Barbara more experienced humor to be an important ingredient rather than a tool she supported the findings of Martineau by reasoning that it is difficult to build a relationship if you cannot laugh together.

To conclude all our findings allow us better understand if humor can be used as a management tool and how. All of the managers recognize benefits with humor that can be used in the establishment of relationships. We can state that some managers do utilize humor as a management tool while the majority rather consider humor as one important ingredient instead of the more individual tool.

b) Control

Control related situations usually include criticism, reflections over person’s inappropriate behavior as well as delivering instructions by a leader.

Barbara and Rebecca are most positive towards using humor in a control situation. Rebecca thought that humor is useful in a control situation as her humor ease the tension while she still gets what she wants from her employees. Her reasoning support the findings of Romero & Pescosolido (2008) who suggest that humor can make persuasion easier by creating an instance of agreement. Barbara also though humor to be useful as humor would allow her to deliver a sensitive message in a more positive manner. She explained that as a leader you have nothing to win on crushing a coworker. Her reasoning support the findings of Holmes and Marra (2006) who suggest that humor would sugar the pill of a negative comment and deliver it in a socially acceptable package.

The majority of our respondent was critical towards the idea of humor to deliver a sensitive message in a more acceptable package. All of the remaining respondents agreed that a humor would not be appropriate for a leader in delivering a sensitive and constructive message. Their reasoning did thus not support the theory that humor can be useful in facilitating the delivery of a negative message as suggested by Homes and Marra (2006) Our respondents interestingly
rather identified the use of humor as negative since they reasoned that a constructive message already is sensitive to the deliver and people tend to not want to listen to critique. Therefore it was experienced that these types of messages should be delivered as clear cut as possible to avoid misunderstandings. Roger, Anna, Fredrik and Betty however, mentioned that even though a sensitive message is not delivered with humor the leader should still try to keep the ambiance positive in order not to diminish the employees.

To conclude, these findings allow us to better understand how our respondents reason around the use of humor as a management tool when dealing with control issues. Our findings indicate that none of our respondents experience humor to be a useful management tool when dealing with control issues. We detected that two of the respondents did recognize humor to be helpful when dealing with the management concern of control. However, the majority of the respondents instead perceived humor to have a negative effect on delivering a sensitive message as they reasoned that such a message should be presented as clear as possible without misunderstandings.

5.6 When/when not to use humor

Before presenting our predefined situations to our respondents we asked them when they would chose to use humor. Roger and Irina reasoned that humor is very useful to the leader when it is time to present tasks in a more approachable way. Ingrid, Betty and Rebecca all recognized humor as beneficial in order for the leader to approach his or her subordinates. Betty reasons that by joking about herself she shows her subordinates that she is just like them, which in turn would encourage them to share as well. Fredrik very clearly describes humor as a management tool that he often uses and find useful for most situations. With that said he continues that there are still situations where humor would not be the appropriate tool but that situation would instead require a completely different tool. Some additional situations that our respondents define where the use of humor would be appropriate are on job interviews, performance reviews and in communication with new clients where humor would serve as an icebreaker (Fredrik & Rebecca). Both Anna and Barbara recognize humor to be useful in presentations, especially in the beginning where a joke could contribute to better atmosphere in the room.

All our respondent managers believe that properly used humor can serve as a tool to enhance the managerial process. We find this interesting as we in the beginning of our study perceived a different attitude from our managers regarding humor as a management tool. However, as mentioned earlier, it might be difficult to realize the possibility of deliberately using humor as a tool at one’s disposal when the majority of the respondents see humor as a natural part of their personality.

The personality, and more specifically a person’s sensitivity and intuition, was also clearly observed when listening to our respondents reasoning on when it would be less effective or less appropriate to use humor. Some managers reasoned that the appropriateness of humor depends so much on the situation. Anna mentioned that humor is not appropriate when handling a private conversation where the employee wants to share something sensitive with the leader. Roger mentioned that when the workload is high, then it is better as a leader to avoid humor. Several of our respondents mentioned that the most important things for using
humor as a leader is to have the feeling of when and with whom it would be appropriate. Although we agree to this we reason that this is not something unique for humor, but rather something that leaders always have to keep in mind when dealing with their employees, and all other human beings for that matter. We think that humor has received a bit of an undeserved bad reputation. Although not properly used humor can get very negative consequences so can many other phenomenon and management tools if they are not properly used either. We think that sensitivity and a general feeling for what is appropriate are important qualities for to bring into any situation which requires any form of human interaction.

5.7 Humor styles

The aim of humor styles in this study is to serve as an instrument to elaborate on the existing knowledge about humor.

The pattern we observed for self-enhancing humor suggests that leaders would either avoid using it or use it to increase the trust in the leader, by setting the example of a positive attitude. Also when self-enhancing humor’s benefits were recognized, they were used to achieve better cohesiveness, to improve communication, reduce stress and be more effective in leadership. The fact that many leaders chose to not use this humor style at all, contributes to our understanding of what style of humor is considered inappropriate in achieving organizational outcomes. The findings also partly supporting the existing theory in Romero & Cruthirds (2006), suggesting that self-enhancing humor is beneficial in achieving group cohesiveness, better communication and more effective leadership.

Affiliative humor style was favored by all the leaders and in many cases even for all organizational outcomes; however some distinguished that only group cohesiveness or communication could be targeted by this humor style. Since in the theory affiliative humor is also widely recognized, our findings support the findings by Romero & Cruthirds (2006), where they suggest using affiliative humor for improved group cohesiveness and communication.

In theory, aggressive humor is suggested to be avoided by leaders. In our findings we find the support for the theory, since six out of eight respondents never used or never even considered using aggressive humor in communication with their employees, assuming that it is dangerous for a leader in the position of power as well as it could be considered as bullying. On the other side, however, Rebecca and Roger, recognized that aggressive humor is a possible choice when provoking to boost creativity and when sarcastically talking about competitors, respectively. These findings are important because they contribute to our understanding how leaders reason when choosing to still utilize aggressive humor to achieve some objective.

Finally, self-defeating humor style is where our respondents provide us with variety of choices when to use this humor style. Some respondents agreed that this style is appropriate for effective leadership, communication, cohesiveness and stress, thus supporting the conceptual developments provided in Romero & Cruthirds (2006). Roger and Ingrid suggested to be more careful with this humor style, thus they would not use too much of this style and especially not during the first meeting with new customers. The concern Roger shared was that self-defeating humor at the first meeting would not make a good reputation.
for him as a leader, this also supporting the theory that too much of self-defeating humor would be counterproductive for leaders (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006 p.63). These findings allow us to better understand how and how not self-defeating humor can be used by leaders to achieve organizational outcomes as well as function in other situations.

The findings for all the humor styles highlight that humor is a complicated and a multi-dimensional phenomenon where choice of style can either benefit the user or put him/her at disadvantage, depending on the situation.

5.8 Humor moderators

When inquiring our respondents about possible factors that might influence the effect of their humor, our theoretically suggested factors as gender and ethnicity were absolutely not their first choice. Concerning gender, it was rarely a factor considered by our leaders when thinking about humor effectiveness. In only two cases, gender was acknowledged to be one of the factors worth mentioning to influence the appropriateness of using humor. Rebecca experienced that jokes about gender at a coffee break can have a positive effect of being provocative and sometimes healthy if used appropriately. Betty reflected over the appropriateness of using humor around different gender and she reasoned that it is easier for women to joke about men than the other way around as it can be seen as less appropriate for men to joke about women.

Both of these respondents were women, and even though they both perceive the relationship between humor and gender differently, their awareness about the issue can probably be explained by the frequent encounter of such situations. Considering the theoretical concepts about humor and gender that we were trying to analyze in our study, only one respondent expressed the concern about male humor directed at female coworkers. Therefore we cannot conclude that our findings strongly support the findings from the previous researches.

Furthermore, considering ethnicity and cultural background as a humor moderator we observed that similarly with gender, awareness of this factor is quite low. Only two respondents (Betty and Fredrik) commented on ethnical issues in relation to humor, emphasizing that it is vital for a leader to think when, how and what kind of humor to use. Low awareness about the potential of humor to offend or jeopardize the relationships at work in connection to ethnicity might be caused by high levels of integration of foreign employees into the society by not taking offence on joke about his/her culture. If we consider this phenomenon from another angle, rare comments on ethnicity as humor moderator could be explained by no negative experiences to reflect upon, just like with the gender. Theoretically, we can not contribute to the body of knowledge about ethnicity as a humor moderator, due to lack of data. The only conclusion we can afford to make is to notice that neither gender nor ethnicity have been experienced to greatly influence the effectiveness of humor that Ingrid argued could be due to modern organization without rooted structures.

However, we can extend the body of knowledge about humor moderators in terms of other concerns. There was no absolute majority reflecting on the same issue, rather variety as a reflection of the experience. One consideration, however, was clear throughout the reasoning of all the respondents. They noted that the use of humor at work has a lot to do with how well you know each other and how comfortable you are with the employees, so that you can joke about everything if all are aware how you think and know that you do not mean to humiliate
anyone. Moreover, our respondents shared that as a leader, you should be especially cautious with humor and need to find the balance and thus not go overboard by turning humor into teasing. Finally, language, age, religion and hierarchy were additional factors attributed to have the function of humor moderators.
6. Conclusions

In this final section of our research we will attempt to provide the reader with the most significant findings that we were able to derive by combining theoretical developments and empirical investigation. We will start this chapter by answering our research questions. Thereafter we will discuss whether we have fulfilled our purpose. Finally we will present the contributions we make with thus study as well as discuss what we as researchers have really learnt with this study.

6.1 Research questions

With the intension of fulfilling the purpose of our research the following research questions were designed:

1. Is the benefit of humor in the workplace utilized by managers in Swedish organizations?

2. How could humor be applied by Swedish managers to achieve various organizational outcomes?

1. The intention of the first question was to establish whether managers regard humor as a serious business and thus contributing to the little knowledge of using humor as a management tool in a Swedish work context. By serious business we mean that leaders know that humor has benefits that can assist him/her in their functions, thus treating humor as a management tool.

The initial questions during our interviews, which were more explorative with the aim to observe our respondents spontaneous attitude to humor in combination in their leadership showed that humor was not an obvious ingredient when reflecting over their own leadership. When asked to describe their leadership only two respondents admitted that humor is a part of how they manage their workplace while others were focusing on more widely accepted practices of empowerment or participation. All of our respondents could clearly recognize the benefits of humor as a phenomenon; however, the majority of them also reasoned that they rarely deliberately use humor to reach specific organizational outcomes. Interestingly, when instead reasoning around their experience of utilizing humor to facilitate their work as leader in different situations or concerns to reach specific organizational outcomes then the respondents often confirmed that they used humor. Our findings thus show that our responding managers use humor as a management tool to a much greater extent than what they initially stated that they do. This indicates that managers might not always be aware of how often they actually use humor and how big of a part humor does play in their leadership. However, later in our research after they had reasoned around how they manage different situations they all concluded that the properly used humor can be considered a management tool. We can conclude that our research shows that humor is used as a management tool among our respondents even if humor might not always receive much attention in either contemporary research or in our respondents consciousness. Finally, since any leader has a
choice in how to communicate with his or her subordinates, our research suggests that humor can be one of the choices and thus one of the management tools at a leaders’ disposal.

2. The intent with the second research question was to contribute to the body of knowledge on how managers could use humor to achieve various organizational outcomes and whether they utilize humor consciously or if it occurs naturally without any deliberate purpose that can benefit the organization.

The findings of this research suggest that managers often do realize the benefits of using humor and even consider it as a management tool. Our findings furthermore illustrate that the utility of humor to achieve the organizational outcomes of reduced stress, group cohesiveness, improved communication, creativity and leadership effectiveness is in fact very situation dependent.

To answer the research question, humor is considered useful for several of the mentioned organizational outcomes and the situations that represent them. Concerning stress reduction some of our managers suggested that humor can be a management tool as it allows the leader to shift perspective and use humor as a coping mechanism in situations of a deadline. It was however also noted that other managers did not consider humor appropriate and even less a management tool and instead they reasoned that it was more important that the leader offers support to the employees in the situation of a stressful deadline. We also indentified an additional view of humor as directly negative when dealing with a deadline as stressed people might get very irritated if joked with when they have to focus to deliver. In a crisis situation on the other hand, our respondents agreed that humor would not be an appropriate management tool since they reasoned that a crisis situation rather need the leader to take responsibility and offer support. Nevertheless, the majority of the leaders identify humor as an important ingredient when processing the crisis afterwards. When it comes to group cohesiveness our findings also suggest that humor can be used as a management tool. In a situation of a newcomer humor was considered a useful management tool to avoid rupturing the group cohesiveness. Some of our managers specifically highlighted the leader’s use of humor as important since the leader in setting an example for how the group should behave. In a conflict situation our managers on one hand reasoned that the functions of humor could be used as a management tool since humor allows perspective and create understanding between people. On the other hand some of the managers instead reasoned that conflict situations instead should be met in a more correct manner and thus give the conflict the attention it deserves without playing it down. For achieving the desired organizational outcome of improved communication our responding managers also saw humor as a useful tool. In the managerial concern of the employees’ daily interaction humor was partly considered as a useful management tool because of how it allows the leader to set an example and show the subordinates that it is ok to have fun at work. Some managers, however, did not consider humor as tool at managers’ disposal to improve the employees’ daily interaction but instead they believed that other things, such as an open door policy would be more important. When it comes to the managerial concern of trust some our responding managers considered humor to be a useful tool to establish trust among their employees. They reason that humor decreases the distance between the leader and the subordinate and help create a band. Other managers did not recognize humor as a useful management tool but instead they believed in being present and having an open door policy in order to facilitate trust. When it comes to the managerial concern of change, two of the respondents think that humor can be a useful tool to facilitate change as they experience humor to play down a serious instruction and thus make people feel more positive about the change. However, it was further noted that the majority of the respondents did not see humor as a helpful tool at all. Instead they reasoned that it was
important to deliver a clear message and to make sure that the employees understand why the change is important. Considering creativity it was noted that the beneficial functions of humor could be used as a management tool but the overall attitude to humor as a management tool to increase creativity was rather skeptical. Our responding managers were most positive to humor as a management tool for dealing with the managerial concern of boredom. Some managers recognized and implemented the benefits of humor and thus considered humor as a useful tool to deal with boredom. Other managers also recognized the benefits of humor, however, more as an asset to managers rather than a tool. Some managers finally did not see any appropriateness of using humor when dealing with bored employees. Instead they reasoned that it is more important that the leader find the source to the boredom in order to find a solution. When dealing with the managerial concern of low motivation among the employees humor was not recognized as a useful management tool. One respondent expressed the opinion of humor as an asset to the leader in such a concern, however, the majority of the respondent thought that humor was not useful in dealing with bored employees. They reasoned that low motivation is a serious problem and that a leader must find the reason behind the boredom in order to find a solution to it. Regarding the managerial concern of ineffective problem solving skills among the employees half of the respondents recognized the benefits of humor as useful. Some managers considered humor as a useful tool from ineffective problem solving skills in a group as humor would make people more relaxed and willing to share their ideas. Some managers more thought of humor as an asset that could be useful in creating a good atmosphere which in turn could help boost creativity. Half of our responding managers however did not consider humor as useful for dealing with the ineffective problem solving skills of the employees. Instead they reasoned that these employees needed support, education and active coaching in order to overcome their problems. The organizational outcome of effective leadership received different reasoning on the usefulness of humor as a management tool. Our responding managers were all positive to the beneficial functions of humor when establishing relationships. A few of our respondents considered humor as a useful tool when establishing relationships, reasoning that without humor it is hard to get close to people. The majority of our respondents instead thought of humor as one important ingredient when establishing relationships. One respondent in addition argued that the use of humor in establishing relationships as a leader can have negative effects as it is not good to come too close to the subordinates so that they forget who is in charge. Last but not least, a few of our respondents considered humor to be a useful tool when dealing with the managerial concern of control. They reasoned that it is very useful for a leader to be able to deliver a sensitive message in a socially acceptable package. The majority of our respondents however reasoned that leaders should not use humor when in the concern of control. Instead they reasoned that since people in general do not want to listen to constructive messages, the leader must get the message through in a clear way in order to avoid misunderstandings. Our respondents furthermore identified additional situations where humor can be useful such as during presentations, job interviews, performance reviews and in communication with new clients.

These findings suggest how humor can be used as a management tool to achieve various organizational outcomes represented by situations and concerns. Furthermore we detect that our respondents tend to attribute the use of humor to their natural skills as they reason that they rarely use humor on purpose. This would indicate that managers actually use humor subconsciously without maybe realizing what potential effects it has on the situation or employees. Interestingly though, our findings suggest that managers are both aware of the effects of humor and that they often utilize the benefits of humor as a useful management tool.
We argue that humor thus instead often is consciously used as the managers often clearly are aware of the beneficial effects that humor brings. However, we do believe that it could be difficult to state to what extent one implements the benefits of humor in practice since humor is, as mentioned by the majority of our respondents, simply a part of their personality.

Finally, the use of humor by manager, as shown in our research, can have significant benefits in playing down situations, creating openness and closeness; provide perspective as well as contributing to a positive ambience. Even though humor may not be a universal tool for all situations, we believe that managers need to be aware of humor and its benefits as it could often be a means to an end, even if it is not always the end itself and that the consideration of humor as a management tool would make the use of humor more likely to be successful.

6.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study was to attempt to understand Swedish managers’ reasoning around if and how humor can be used as a management tool.

We think that with our findings we have fulfilled the purpose of this study. The Swedish managers that we have talked to through their reasoning confirm that humor can and is used by them as a management tool. Our respondents’ thoughts on how managers can use humor to achieve various organizational outcomes, represented by situations, allows us to further follow their reasoning on humor as a management tool. We think that the reader in this study is allowed to follow the suggestions to why humor as a management tool is useful in certain situations and when and why it also could be less appropriate for a leader to use humor those situations. Even though it could be problematic for the respondents to reflect on the use of humor which is might usually just be thought of as part of their personality, we believe that they were often able to reason around what we could detect as a deliberate use of humor to achieve various outcomes. This further allowed us to understand their reasoning on how humor can be used as a management tool.

6.3 Contributions

We feel that with our study we were able to contribute theoretically and empirically to the field of humor research. We also believe that we have contributed to the field of management by extending the knowledge about humor as a management tool both from theoretical and practical perspectives.

**Theoretical contribution:** Although research on humor is quite extensive and researchers have already touched upon many important and interesting issues about humor qualities, humor in combination with leadership has received little attention. When it comes to humor as a management tool, theory consists of conceptual developments with rare empirical underpinnings. Thus, we consider that our study has theoretically contributed to the field of humor research as we with empirical underpinnings have further extended the existing theory on humor as a management tool. Our findings allowed us to alter the existing theoretical developments by deducing that the theory rarely include the negative aspects that humor can bring into the situations, instead of purely advantages. Our respondents furthermore identified additional situations where humor can be useful such as during presentations, job interviews, performance reviews and in communication with new clients.
Empirical contribution: While theoretical contribution of our study is significant, we still believe that mostly we are contributing empirically. Not only did we contribute to the field of knowledge about humor as a management tool but we also shed some light on the humor in the context of Swedish organizations. We think of our study as a pilot study of humor as a management tool in the Swedish context. Moreover, since the topic of our study has mostly theoretical developments, our empirical observations provide a useful additional material for further theoretical development.

Managerial contributions: Theoretical and empirical contributions together constitute a contribution made by our study in the field of management. First, by considering humor as a management tool, and secondly, by breaking down organizational outcomes into smaller and easier manageable situations we contributed with knowledge on why humor as a management tool is useful in certain situations and when and why it also could be less appropriate for a leader to use humor those situations.

6.4 Reflections

Finally we as researchers reflect upon what we have really learnt during this study. While working with this study we have experienced that there exists prejudices on humor and its effects in Sweden. When discussing the topic of this study to people that we have met, the majority have had positive reactions and thought that it is great that we are studying such an unusual and interesting topic. Others however, have questioned the seriousness of studying humor as a management tool, and been skeptical about the appropriateness of our topic for a master thesis. We feel that our study speaks for itself and clearly shows that the advantages with humor for a leader are numerous. We think that humor often receives an underserved bad reputation as being everything but serious business. We hope that our study provided the reader with some insights into the world of humor and its effects. We think that our study illustrates how information and reflection upon the advantages of humor can change attitude to humor and its usefulness. In the end of our interview all our respondents reflected upon the fact that they really use humor quite often even though many of them had never even thought about humor in the terms of a management tool. Many of our respondents told us that after the interview they would look differently upon humor and several of our respondent truly thought that the topic deserved attention as they asked us if they could take part of the findings of this study in order to use in leadership development. We think that one of the most important things that this study can contribute with would be to inform the reader that it is acceptable and OK to use humor also as a manager or a leader. People do not have to be less serious or effective because they have fun at work. On the contrary there are instead many benefits with humor that we believe, if implemented, could make the workplace more pleasant which in turn could affect the well-being of all working people.

6.5 Future research

Our research is unique and there are many possible aspects of the topic that could be explored. However, we would suggest other researchers to investigate the same topic of humor as a management tool with a quantitative approach. Quantitative approach would allow the study to be generalizable and find the patterns of how managers use humor to achieve aims or
maybe even construct a manual for managers on how to use humor as a management tool. The usefulness of that manual would be in educating many other managers who do not know about the benefits humor can bring to the organization.
7. Trustworthiness of our study

The validity of qualitative studies is often questioned as the qualitative study is considered too reliable on the researcher’s personal involvement and interpretations (Kvale, 2007). Reliability and validity are important criteria for establishing the quality of a quantitative research, however, many writers have suggested alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.410) Gruba & Lincoln (1994) propose the criteria of trustworthiness, which in turn is made up by the four criteria credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, for assessing a qualitative study (in Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.411).

7.1 Credibility

To establish the credibility of findings of a qualitative study the researcher should both ensure that the research is carried out according to good practice and submitting the research findings to the individuals studied for confirmation that the researcher has correctly understood the data (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.411.). In this study we have followed the literature of qualitative research in an attempt to ensure that our study is carried out according to good practice. As mentioned in our method chapter, all of our interviews were recorded and transcribed within the following couple of days. In addition notes were also taken during the interviews in order to really ensure that no opinion was overlooked that would affect the interpretation of the findings. We thereafter send the transcribed interviews to our respondents for respondent validation, which gives the respondent a chance to approve the transcribed material and ensures that the researcher has collected accurate data from the respondents (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.411). In our method chapter we have mentioned that all respondents except two contacted us and confirmed that the transcribed interviews represented what they had said during the interview. The fact that all respondents but two, despite busy schedules, contacted us to confirm the correctness of our transcribed interviews ensures the credibility of our findings. We have also chosen to include an extensive presentation of our empirical data believing that it will facilitate the reader’s comprehension of our respondents reasoning. With this we will also improve the credibility of this study.

7.2 Transferability

A qualitative study tend to concern the intensive study of a small group or of individuals with similar characteristics since the qualitative study is more about depth than breadth, which usually characterizes a quantitative study. The transferability of a qualitative study refers to whether the findings are oriented to a contextual uniqueness of if the findings would hold in another context (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.413) The purpose of this study is to understand Swedish managers’ reasoning around if and how humor can be used as a management tool and it is our wish that other future or current managers can learn something from this study. According to Merriam (1994) “It is the reader that has to ask himself/herself what in the research that could be applicable in his/her situation and what does not apply” (1994, p.187) We think that human interaction takes place in all workplaces to a certain extent, and
therefore we hope that our findings in this research can at least partly be transferred also to other industries and organizations

7.3 Dependability

Dependability of a qualitative study ensures that complete records are kept of all the phases of the research process in order to inform the reader that proper procedures have been followed (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.414). To ensure a dependable study we have thoroughly described each phase of the research process in the method chapter for the reader to follow. In addition our 8 transcribed interviews are documented and available for audit. We consider these records to increase the dependability of our research.

7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability of a study refers to the idea that the researcher should not allow personal values or theoretical preferences affect the manner through which the research is carried out and the findings derived from it. Although complete objectivity is impossible in business research, the researcher should show that he or she has acted in good faith. (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.414). Our transcribed and confirmed interviews that we propose readers to audit on request are one means for us to try to show the readers that we have acted in good faith and tried to prevent our subjective thoughts from influencing the findings of this research. The original quotations included in the appendix of this study is another attempt to show the reader how we have tried to not affect the own words of our respondents. In order to also stay open to data outside our theoretical framework we have also offered the respondents the opportunity to indentify additional situations when humor could be beneficial as a management tool.
References

Scientific Articles


Books


**Internet sources**


Appendix 1

Intervjumall: Humor som ledarskapsverktyg

1. Kan du berätta lite om din bakgrund på den här arbetsplatsen? (exempelvis år i tjänsten, tidigare tjänster, uppgifter och ansvar)

2. Ditt ledarskap:
   - Vad innebär din roll som ledare?
   - Vad behöver du för att vara en effektiv ledare?
   - Hur vet du att ditt ledarskap är effektivt?
   - Använder du dig i dagsläget av någon särskild metod eller modell som stöd för dig i ditt ledarskap? Om så är fallet, vad är det för metod/modell och vad innebär den? Varför just den metoden/modellen och ingen annan metod/modell?

3. Vad är humor för dig?
   - Tycker du att det finns fördelar med humor?
   - Tycker du att humor är ett viktigt inslag i kommunikationen med andra människor?
   - Tycker du att humor är en del av din dagliga kommunikation med dina underordnade/medarbetare?
   - Kommer humor naturligt för dig?
   - Vilken effekt kan du se att din humor har på dina underordnade/medarbetare?
   - När använder du dig av humor på arbetsplatsen? (exempelvis för att lättare uppnå vissa mål)
   - Använder du dig avsiktligt utan humor? Om så är fallet, vad tror du har lett till ditt användande av humor? (exempelvis, har du kanske läst om humorns fördelar i interaktion med andra?)
   - Finns det några situationer på arbetsplatsen då du känner att humor skulle vara passande att använda sig av? Varför?
   - Finns det några faktorer som kan påverka effektiviteten/lämpligheten av att använda humor som ledarskapsverktyg?

Vi kommer nu att presentera några ledarskaps situationer eller angelägenheter som kan påverka önskvärda mål för organisationer. Vi skulle vilja veta lite närmare hur du skulle resonera runt dessa angelägenheter och möjligheten att använda humor för att underlätta att nå målen.


-Tänk dig grupp sammanhållning som ett önskvärt mål för er organisation som påverkas av ledarskaps angelägenheter som nykomlingar i gruppen eller konflikt situationer..
Hur hanterar du dessa angelägenheter/situationer? 
Enligt dina erfarenheter, kan man använda humor till att klara av liknande angelägenheter eller situationer för att förbättra grupp sammanhållningen? Varför eller varför inte?

-Tänk dig förbättrad kommunikation som ett önskvärt mål för er organisation som påverkas av ledarskaps angelägenheter som de anställdas dagliga interaktion, skapandet av förtroende eller förändring i organisationer. Hur hanterar du dessa angelägenheter?
Enligt dina erfarenheter, kan man använda humor till att klara av liknande angelägenheter för att förbättra kommunikationen? Varför eller varför inte?

-Tänk dig ökad kreativitet som ett önskvärt mål för er organisation som påverkas och påverkas av ledarskaps angelägenheter som uttråkade anställda, låg motivation bland de anställda och ineffektiv problemlösningsförmåga bland de anställda. Hur hanterar du dessa angelägenheter?
Enligt dina erfarenheter, kan man använda humor till att klara av liknande angelägenheter för att öka kreativiteten i organisationen? Varför eller varför inte?

-Tänk dig effektivt ledarskap som ett önskvärt mål i er organisation som påverkas av ledarskaps angelägenheter som skapandet av relationer och kontroll (kontroll kan exemplifiera innebära att under kontrollerade former ge instruktioner för vad som är passande beteende eller att ge kritik) Hur hanterar du dessa angelägenheter?
Enligt dina erfarenheter, kan man använda humor till att klara av liknande angelägenheter för att effektiviteten av ledarskapet? Varför eller varför inte?

-Kan du komma på någon annan situation eller angelägenhet som skulle kunna få betydelse för dessa önskvärda mål i en organisation där just humor skulle kunna vara en tillgång för dig som ledare?

-Anser du att väl avvägd humor skulle kunna användas av chefer och ledare för att underlätta i deras arbete?

Slutligen under intervjun kommer vi att presentera och förklara några olika humorstilar som vi skulle vilja att ni försöker bedöma passande för att uppnå de tidigare nämnda önskvärda mål som kan finnas inom en organisation.

Tack för din tid!
Appendix 2

Interview guide

1. Can you tell us a little bit about your background at this workplace? (years in position, previous positions, responsibilities etc.)

2. Your leadership:
   - What does your role as a leader contain?
   - What do you need to be an effective leader?
   - How do you know that your leadership is effective?
   - Do you currently use any management tool to support you in your work? Please develop, why that tool, how does it work, why not any other tool?

3. What is humor to you?
   - Do you think there are advantages with humor?
   - Do you think humor is an important part in communicating with other people?
   - Would you say that humor is a part of your everyday communication with your subordinates?
   - Does humor come naturally to you?
   - According to your observations, what effects do you see that your humor has on your subordinates?

   When would you use humor in the workplace (i.e., to achieve certain organizational outcomes)?
   - Would you deliberately use humor? If so, how was your use of humor developed? (i.e., intentionally learned about benefits of humor?)
   - Are there situations in which the use of humor is inappropriate? Why/why not?
   - Are there any moderators apart from situations, which affect the effectiveness/appropriateness of using humor as management tool? (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity)

We will now present some managerial concerns and situations that can affect desired organizational outcomes. We would like to know more about how you would reason around these concerns and the possible use of humor to ease the desired outcomes from these concerns.

- Considering stress reduction as a desired organizational outcome that is affected by situations of *deadline* and *crisis*, how do you handle these situations?
  - According to your experiences can you use humor to deal with this situation in order to reduce stress? Why/Why not?

- Considering group cohesiveness as a desired organizational outcome that is affected by the managerial concern of dealing with a *newcomer* and a situation of *conflict*, how do you handle this concern/situation?
- According to your experiences can you use humor to deal with this concern and situation in order to enhance group cohesiveness? Why/Why not?

- Considering improved communication as a desired organizational outcome that is affected by the managerial concerns of improved daily interaction, trust establishment and organizational change, how do you handle these concerns?

- According to your experiences can you use humor to deal with these concerns in order to enhance group cohesiveness? Why/Why not?

- Considering creativity as a desired organizational outcome that is affected by the managerial concern of alleviating employee boredom, boosting employee motivation and making problem-solving processes more efficient, how do you handle these concerns?

- According to your experiences can you use humor to deal with these concerns in order to facilitate creativity? Why/Why not?

- Considering leadership effectiveness as a desired organizational outcome that is affected by the managerial concern of relationship establishments and control execution, how do you handle these concerns?

- According to your experiences can you use humor to deal with these concerns in order to be an effective leader? Why/Why not?

- Can you think of any additional situations/concerns for these organizational outcomes or other organizational outcomes in which the use of humor could be beneficial and enhance your managerial process?

- Do you think that humor, properly used, can serve as a tool to enhance the managerial process?

Finally we will present and explain to you different humor styles and we would like you to reason around when they are useful in order to fulfill the previous mentioned desired organizational outcomes.

Thank you for your time!
Appendix 3

Translation quotations


2. Kan du gå härifrån och återkomma imorgon med dina skämt för nu ska jag leverera.

3. Jag tror absolut att det förstärker men det krävs att man kom från någonting som byggdes upp av någonting annat än humor i första skedet.


5. För mig är det väldigt stor skillnad på att ha roligt på jobbet och att slamsa på jobbet. Man kan ha jätteroligt hela dagarna och ändå vara jätteeffektiv, det är jag helt övertygad om.

6. Allt handlar ju naturligtvis inte bara om humor, humor är ju ett inslag. Ja är ju ingen bra ledare bara för att jag får folk att skratta och ha kul på jobbet men jag tycker att det är en viktig del.

7. Det är inte ett sådant verktyg som ligger längst ner som man aldrig använder utan i min verktygslåda så är det nog det här multiverktyget som jag tar upp och använder ganska ofta.

8. Det man måste komma ihåg, oavsett om man jobbar i grupp på ett företag eller om man är ute och träffar kunder, så är det inte företagen som gör affärer med varandra utan det är människor som gör affärer med människor.

9. Så humor med lyhördhet och intuition, det måste man ha tror jag.

10. Känner man varandra så vågar man ju skämta om allt men jag skulle nog akta mig för det som chef.

11. Själva kritiken kan ju missuppfattas och det är ju inte det du är ute efter.


17. Jag tror att alla kan dra nytta av humor men det gäller att respektera människor för den dem är.

18. Jag tror att det är viktigt att det inte går så långt att man tappar förtroendet för ledaren eller glömmer vem det är som egentligen styr och ställer.

19. Om du blir halshuggen då vågar du ju inte ta dig an ett projekt som har en deadline.

20. Det är ju roligare att jobba med en person som har roligt och som tycker om sitt jobb men det är ingen hållbar lösning


22. Med engagemang och det positiva synsättet så tror jag att vi kan utvecklas år efter år efter år, skulle jag springa med en piska så kanske vi håller i ett halvår och sedan är det liksom slut.

23. Jag ser inte humor som en metod, det är ingen metod som jag har lärt mig tillämpa men det är definitivt en viktig ingrediens.

24. Det går ju att bygga relationer ändå, det är inte lika roligt bara
## Appendix 4

### Empirical Grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Rebecca</th>
<th>Fredrik</th>
<th>Betty</th>
<th>Barbara</th>
<th>Irina</th>
<th>Roger</th>
<th>Ingrid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Info</strong></td>
<td>Accountancy, female</td>
<td>Recruitment, female</td>
<td>Financial services, male</td>
<td>Banking, female</td>
<td>Banking, female</td>
<td>Insurance, female</td>
<td>Recruitment, male</td>
<td>Insurance, female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
<td>support employees, be present, be sensitive</td>
<td>coach, delegate; own personality; follow-up</td>
<td>value is in employees’ experiences, ideas; create wellbeing, humor is helpful</td>
<td>lead employees; follow centrally developed directives</td>
<td>Office atmosphere reflects her effectiveness; sets norms of behavior</td>
<td>Develop employees; structure and planning; FAW(fun at work)</td>
<td>Situational leadership; motivate and delegate; structure, time planning</td>
<td>Lean culture, engagement; all on board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humor:</strong></td>
<td>On the one hand humor is joy, on the other – teasing or bullying</td>
<td>What makes people laugh</td>
<td>Something warm, amusement, leads to comfort; glimmer in the eye</td>
<td>Way of looking at things</td>
<td>When people can recognize themselves in what is funny in a subtle way</td>
<td>Joy; should be soft, honest; not too much, work is no playground</td>
<td>Laughter, fun; glimmer in the eyes; helps get perspective; not an easy way out</td>
<td>Glimmer in the eyes; attitude to life; not a method, rather an ingredient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comes naturally?</strong></td>
<td>No, does not see herself as funny person</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Yes, positive person by nature</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effects on employees</strong></td>
<td>Closer relationship with employee</td>
<td>More relaxed and sharing</td>
<td>Humor brings relationships on another level</td>
<td>Depends on the subject</td>
<td>Easier to become popular as a leader</td>
<td>Jokes on own behalf encourage same behavior</td>
<td>deliver good results for few people; willing to work extra</td>
<td>Humor makes leader less of an inspector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When use humor</td>
<td>Different situations, spontaneously</td>
<td>Gladly jokes about herself, encouraging others to share as well</td>
<td>Humor a multi-task tool, depends on situation</td>
<td>Jokes about herself to show that she is just like others, never jokes at others expense</td>
<td>To take the edge of a situation</td>
<td>Presenting objectives; at info heavy meetings use a picture to initiate a good laugh</td>
<td>Coaching; when presenting tasks in approachable way</td>
<td>Consciously, to create “we” feeling and good atmosphere and drive</td>
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<td>Anna</td>
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<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Irina</td>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>Ingrid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberate humor</td>
<td>No advantages if takes a lot of space</td>
<td>Does not plan for humor</td>
<td>No; learnt from experience that humor works</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Rarely, rather humor feels natural to the situation</td>
<td>Has not thought of it; learnt from work experience to be positively charged</td>
<td>to get acceptance; no books;</td>
<td>Natural way to do things; no books; from experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor is inappropriate</td>
<td>Private development conversation</td>
<td>Personal disasters</td>
<td>Need to find the limits of humor relationships</td>
<td>Cautious with humor, due to power position</td>
<td>When the situation requires support and to listen</td>
<td>Need to think how and when to use humor</td>
<td>High workload</td>
<td>Need to think how and with whom to use humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors</td>
<td>No factors</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>Ethnicity, relationship</td>
<td>Situations</td>
<td>Religion, ethnicity, kind of humor</td>
<td>Language, age, interests</td>
<td>Hierarchy, structure; not age, not gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Fredrik</td>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>Barbara</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deadline</td>
<td>Humor would not eliminate the stress, but contribute to joy and comfort at work</td>
<td>Initiate a break, have humor there so people are more effective when they go back to the task completion</td>
<td>Humor can be helpful in stimulating employees to give extra effort, but is not the solution</td>
<td>Humor is useful in motivating people to finish the task, but is not the solution</td>
<td>Humor is useful in motivating people to give that extra something to the task</td>
<td>Humor partly useful, but can make the road to the goal positive</td>
<td>Approach deadline with humor so that employees dare to take on tasks with deadline</td>
<td>Humor not useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis</td>
<td>Humor not helpful, rather support programs</td>
<td>Humor helpful in distracting employees form crisis, which is good</td>
<td>Humor can make employees feel better even if the problem remains</td>
<td>Humor in processing the crisis after, not during</td>
<td>Humor in dealing with the crisis after, not during</td>
<td>Humor very useful when dealing with the crisis after, leaders firm hand</td>
<td>Humor is useful to provide a different perspective, but no joking during</td>
<td>Humor is not really appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newcomer</td>
<td>Kick-offs to integrate</td>
<td>Humor to integrate: leader sets the example on joking appropriateness</td>
<td>Use real and honest humor to make people comfortable in the group</td>
<td>Humor to integrate newcomer: leader sets the example on joking appropriateness</td>
<td>Humor is used to have fun together and build a group</td>
<td>Leader sets the example on joking appropriateness</td>
<td>Humor helpful in integrating and finding something in common</td>
<td>Humor creates a sense of “us” and helps to integrate newcomers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Careful with humor, not to hurt someone with the irony</td>
<td>Humor used to exaggerate the silliness of a conflict</td>
<td>Humor can play down the situation, break the deadlock – open discussion</td>
<td>Humor to ease the tension after the conflict resolution</td>
<td>Humor useful in taking the edge of a conflict, but is not a solution</td>
<td>Humor to rule out a shallow conflict, while deeper conflict requires investigation</td>
<td>Humor highlights the ridiculous side of the conflict in aftermath</td>
<td>Humor to play down the situation and move on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily interaction</td>
<td>Fostered by open office landscape</td>
<td>Humor comes naturally, leader as an example of conduct when making fun of herself</td>
<td>Humor as an important ingredient that allows employees feel safe in the group and dare ask</td>
<td>Leaders needs to be a role model; laughing is an indicator for work environment and economical situation of organization</td>
<td>Good atmosphere in the workplace fosters communication</td>
<td>Workplace is no playground, rather leader shows that humor is allowed</td>
<td>Smiling employees are more pleasant to communicate with</td>
<td>Humor creates a sense of belonging and steers the commitment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Humor can strengthen relationships, but not only humor is important</td>
<td>When leader and employees can laugh together there is a trust, many things can be shared</td>
<td>Trust needs to be earned, thus backing up employees is more crucial than humor; humor creates an atmosphere of comfort</td>
<td>Use humor only if it is a natural part of your personality</td>
<td>Joking at own mistakes helps leaders in decreasing the distance from employees</td>
<td>When entering a new group, leader can use humor in creating positive atmosphere – establish trust</td>
<td>With humor easier to get acceptance, when accepted got the trust</td>
<td>Keep the door open to allow employees to contribute with their thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>No humor, rather clear message</td>
<td>Clear information about change, humor suggested appropriate</td>
<td>Humor to show that situation is not evil</td>
<td>No humor, rather clear discussion on implementation</td>
<td>No humor, rather clear information on why the change is needed</td>
<td>Humor to play down the seriousness of change and take it easier in</td>
<td>No humor, rather clear explanation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>No humor</td>
<td>Organizational climate</td>
<td>Find the reason</td>
<td>If laugh – less bored</td>
<td>Kick-off, experience fun</td>
<td>Humor to get things going</td>
<td>Laugh together, humor-short term solution</td>
<td>Be close and authentic with employees to encourage creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low motivation</td>
<td>No humor</td>
<td>Have a break, change the focus</td>
<td>Wrong to use humor, find the reason</td>
<td>Wrong to use humor, have a dialogue</td>
<td>Wrong to use humor, find the source</td>
<td>Humor to experience that the task is fun</td>
<td>Wrong place to use humor, discuss the reason</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>Group advice, coffee break to have fun</td>
<td>Provide needed conditions</td>
<td>Believe in employees, they know the answer, appraise</td>
<td>Find the reason</td>
<td>With humor, cheer up the mood</td>
<td>Delegate, have humor at the meetings</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing relationships</td>
<td>Be there for employees, use humor in small talk</td>
<td>Show employees that I am just like you, humor an important element, but is not all</td>
<td>Humor super important, spice for life if used appropriately</td>
<td>Humor as means</td>
<td>Humor an important part, hard to have relationships without laughing together</td>
<td>Keep distance as a leader, have balance with humor</td>
<td>Laugh at first meeting is good</td>
<td>It is more fun to build relationships with humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>No humor, can be misinterpreted</td>
<td>Joking at own control need, while delivering the message</td>
<td>No humor when firing, giving feedback</td>
<td>No humor, criticism can be misinterpreted</td>
<td>Possible humor when beginning the feedback, not to crush a person</td>
<td>No humor, message is not clear</td>
<td>Some humor, but numbers speak for themselves</td>
<td>No humor, feedback is a sensitive issue already</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other situations for humor</td>
<td>In a presentation with a negative message</td>
<td>Performance reviews, in learning, first customer meeting - as ice-breaker</td>
<td>On job interviews; communicating with new clients – as ice-breaker</td>
<td>Information meeting and with new customers</td>
<td>In the beginning of presentations for better atmosphere</td>
<td>In kick-offs</td>
<td>In difficult economical times when humor stimulates work</td>
<td>Cannot think of any</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-enhancing humor</td>
<td>Not too much of this humor can help cohesiveness, communication, leadership</td>
<td>Stress reduction</td>
<td>Not used</td>
<td>Not for leader</td>
<td>Not used, maybe with customers</td>
<td>Effective leadership</td>
<td>To increase trust in the leader</td>
<td>For all outcomes, to highlight that we can do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliative humor</td>
<td>Group cohesiveness</td>
<td>Communicatio n, cohesiveness</td>
<td>For all outcomes</td>
<td>For all outcomes</td>
<td>All objective improving the atmosphere in the office</td>
<td>All but leadership effectiveness</td>
<td>For all outcomes</td>
<td>For all outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive humor</td>
<td>Not used</td>
<td>Use cautiously, but can be beneficial for creativity by provoking</td>
<td>Not used, considered as bullying</td>
<td>Dangerous for a leader with power position</td>
<td>Not in this industry; was more appropriate in male dominant groups</td>
<td>Never used</td>
<td>In a group when sarcastically talking about competitors to solidify the group</td>
<td>Not useful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-defeating humor</td>
<td>Communication, cohesiveness, leadership</td>
<td>Communicatio n, stress</td>
<td>For all outcomes</td>
<td>Often used, for leadership effectiveness, cohesiveness and communication</td>
<td>For all outcomes; as a defense</td>
<td>Effective leadership</td>
<td>To play down the situation, for creativity; not in the first customer meeting; need to know each other well to use it</td>
<td>Not too often</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>