Edinburgh Research Explorer

Using verbal irony to move on with controversial issues

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Organization Science

OPEN ACCESS

Using Verbal Irony to Move on with Controversial Issues

Winston Kwon*
Chancellors' Fellow, University of
Edinburgh Business School, UK

Ian Clarke
Professor of Strategy, University of
Edinburgh Business School, UK

Eero Vaara
Professor of Organization and
Management, Aalto University School of
Business, Helsinki, Finland

Rowan Mackay
Former Postdoctoral Fellow, University
of Edinburgh Business School, UK

and

Ruth Wodak
Emeritus Distinguished Professor,
Department of Linguistics and English
Language, Lancaster University, UK

*Corresponding author: winston.kwon@ed.ac.uk

Paper for publication in ***Organizational Science***

3rd Revision
Submitted 10th April 2019, conditionally accepted 16th July 2019
2nd Revision
Submitted 24th March 2018, decision 23rd August 2018
1st Revision
Submitted 31st January 2017, decision 29th June 2017
Original manuscript
Submitted January 2016, decision 24th April 2016

Using Verbal Irony to Move on with Controversial Issues

Abstract

Irony is an effective means of dealing with controversy in organizations, but there is a paucity of knowledge of the various ways in which irony helps managers to do so without necessarily 'solving' those issues. By drawing on discursive incongruity theory, we examine the use of irony when managers are confronted with controversial issues in a multinational company. As a result, we identify and elaborate four distinctively different pathways through which irony helps participants to move on: 'acquiescing' (framing understanding as having no alternative because of environmental constraints), 'empowering' (synthesizing a view through broad inputs from different individuals), 'channelling' (subsuming other interpretations under a single and often dominant view) and 'dismissing' (rejecting alternative interpretations and often reinforcing the status quo). On this basis, we develop a theoretical model that elucidates the process dynamics in dealing with and moving on with controversial issues and elaborates the specific characteristics of each of these four pathways. Our analysis also leads to further understanding of the discursive underpinnings and intersubjective dynamics in irony use in organizations.

Introduction

Organizational members have to make sense of controversial issues, which are those issues characterized by equivocality, discrepancy or outright contradiction (Maitlis and Christianson 2014; Putnam et al. 2016; Schad et al. 2016; Weick et al. 2005). Organizational life is riven with such issues: managers often have differing views on the strategy of the organization; organizational members may be given directions to do things that go against the core values of the organization or what they themselves believe in; there may be contradictory needs to simultaneously invest and cut costs; and managers may face conflicting pressures in promotion and recruitment, etc. Thus, organizational members must deal with controversy on an ongoing basis, and one of the ways of doing this is through ironic humor (Hatch and Ehrlich 1993; Jarzabkowski and Lê 2017; Romero and Pescosolido 2008). While there are ways of confronting controversy head-on (Meyerson and Scully 1995), humor allows one to approach difficult issues in an indirect manner; for instance, without immediately revealing one's stance or as a way of saving face (Goffman 1967; Patriotta and Spedale 2009). However, our understanding of the various ways in which humor, and especially irony, help to process controversy in organizations is still limited. In particular, there is a dearth of knowledge of the concrete ways in which irony

helps managers to deal with controversy – without necessarily 'solving' those controversial issues – and to move on with the issue.

To address this research problem, we focus on how organizational members use irony to deal with controversy. Although still an under-explored topic in organization research, irony provides ways to help individuals cope with complicated and contradictory experiences (Gylfe et al. 2019; Hatch 1997; Hatch and Ehrlich 1993; Lynch 2009; Sillince and Barker 2012; Sillince and Golant 2017; Tracy et al. 2006). In this paper, we elaborate upon the ways in which irony helps individuals to practically deal with controversial issues that are not necessarily 'solvable.' This is important as most research still assumes that managers or organization members have to 'solve' contradictions and/or develop new joint understanding – or has only started to specify theoretical or empirical ways in which irony can help people to cope with controversy (Hatch 1997; Sillince and Barker 2012; Sillince and Golant 2017). In particular, we draw on discursive incongruity theory (Attardo 2010; Meyer 2000; Swabey 1962) to allow us to conceptualize how irony can juxtapose an observed reality with an incongruous situation or explanation, and how engagement with this incongruity can help managers to deal with controversy and ultimately move on.

Our empirical analysis is based on a longitudinal analysis of real-time conversations in the monthly strategy meetings of a management team within an aerospace firm, Defense Systems International[1], as its executive team dealt with major changes in the Company's competitive environment. Through an analysis of 93 episodes where the senior managers discussed key issues, we explore how verbal irony is used to deal with controversy and its effects. This led us to identify and elaborate on four distinctively different pathways: 'acquiescing' (framing understanding as having no alternative because of environmental constraints), 'empowering' (synthesizing a view through broad inputs from different individuals), 'channelling' (subsuming other interpretations under a dominant view) and 'dismissing' (rejecting alternative interpretations and reinforcing the status quo). On this basis, we develop a theoretical model that elucidates the process dynamics in dealing with and moving on with controversial issues and elaborates the specific characteristics of each of these four pathways.

Thus, our paper makes two contributions. First, our analysis helps to significantly advance research on how organizations engage with controversial issues. Rather than conventional views that assume managers or

---

[1] This is a pseudonym with all participants and other identifiers anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

organizational members must solve controversies and create new understanding (Maitlis and Christianson 2014; Putnam et al. 2016; Schad et al. 2016; Weick et al. 2005), we extend prior research on irony (Hatch 1997; Hatch and Ehrlich 1993; Jarzabkowski and Lê 2017; Sillince and Barker 2012; Sillince and Golant 2017) by elucidating how organizations can move on in an 'efficient' way without getting stuck in controversies that may not be effectively solvable. Furthermore, we demonstrate how this takes place in and through different pathways, leading to a fuller understanding of the ways in which irony may be used. Second, by extending the incongruity perspective, our analysis also advances understanding of the discursive underpinnings and intersubjective dynamics of irony in organizations more generally (Gylfe et al. 2019; Hatch 1997; Hatch and Ehrlich 1993; Jarzabkowski and Lê 2017; Sillince and Barker 2012; Sillince and Golant 2017).

The paper has five sections, beginning with an overview of the literature on irony in organization studies leading to the introduction of the discursive incongruity perspective. Section two describes the case setting and methodology, from data collection to abductive analysis and theory-building. Section three summarizes our findings using four detailed examples drawn from our data. We then conclude with a conceptual model that illuminates the process dynamics of how irony helps move on with issues. Finally, we discuss the contributions of our paper, and identify its limitations as well as implications for further research.

Theoretical Approach

Etymologically, irony has its origins in the Greek term 'eironeia' (ειρωνεία) which means 'simulated ignorance' (Hoad 1993). Taking inspiration from Socrates, who simulated ignorance to draw others into making statements that could then be challenged, Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard 1841/1965) saw irony as a means to destabilize the 'arrogance of certainty,' by forcing individuals to think for themselves and take responsibility for their claims of epistemic knowledge and moral values. Traditionally, verbal irony[2] [henceforth 'irony] along with other types of figurative language such as metaphor, were generally conceived of as ornamental flourishes to rhetorical text (Quintilian 1920), but more recently, the study of irony has become an object of study of its own. This effort however is still hindered by definitional issues (Holmes 2000) with irony, humor and a number of overlapping and related terms, many of which originate from imprecise colloquial and folk usage (Attardo 2010). Whilst humor and irony are often confused, they are linguistically distinct with not all

---

[2] Although there are several types of irony including dramatic, situational and verbal, in this paper we refer specifically to *verbal* irony (Teague et al. 1993).

3

verbal irony being humorous (Veale et al. 2006). Irony operates through a process of negation in which the literally meaning of what is *said* is intentionally nullified by another *implied* meaning (Attardo 2002).

Irony in organization studies

Organization scholars broadly agree that irony is a device that can be used in different ways with manifold effects (see Cooper 2008; Westwood and Johnston 2013). By voicing how an issue might be read differently, irony can help the listener acknowledge some equivocality between what the ironist *said*, and what they *meant* (Weick and Browning 1986), thus precipitating participants' simultaneous acknowledgement and processing of, a gap in understanding (Kotthoff 2003). Arguably, irony has two 'faces': as an endemic feature of organizational life, reflecting the paradoxes and challenges the latter throws up; and also as a pragmatic means for organizational actors to engage in and deploy as a means of coping with those same challenges (Hoyle and Wallace 2008). For instance, irony can help individuals cope with highly emotional contexts (Charman 2013; Scott 2007; Tangherlini 2000), deal with face-threatening situations (Holmes 2000; Kotthoff 2006; Pizzini 1991), and make sense of contradictions or paradoxes (Gylfe et al. 2019; Hatch 1997; Hatch and Ehrlich 1993; Jarzabkowski and Lê 2017) that may themselves be endemic.

There are however, few explicit theoretical or empirical explorations into how irony can be used to understand how organizational members make sense of and respond to controversial issues. In an ethnography of a senior management team, Hatch and Ehrlich (1993) observed that irony often coincided with organizational contradictions, inconsistencies and incoherencies, and as such a 'marker' for the presence of issues that are in some way controversial, around which managers discursively construct and organize responses to their cognitive and emotional experiences. Hatch (1997) further suggested that paradox and irony are by definition, inherently contradictory forms of speech that "inspire and are constituted in reflexivity" with the former framed as a logical question, and the latter as an aesthetic or poetic construction, thus calling for a more "contradiction-centered view of organization that is both context-sensitive and process-focused" (p. 286) in which irony served as a means of revealing of the cognitive, emotional and aesthetic dimensions of organizational issues.

Cooren et al. (2013) proposed that irony can be understood as form of 'ventriloquism' where the speakers can disassociate themselves from their utterances, thus enabling them to make sense of paradoxes and tensions (see also Cooren 2010, 2012). It is precisely this equivocal quality of irony that helps to manage

4

these organizational paradoxes by both reducing and maintaining ambiguity (Menz 1999; Wodak 1996, 2011). More recently, Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017) found that humor, and especially ironic humor, could be used to identify and bring attention to the small multiple incidences of paradox found in everyday work, leading to either a reinforcement of an existing response or a reframed view and a shift in response. In their analysis of the role of tropes in institutionalization, Sillince and Barker (2012) argued that irony, depending on how it is used, can have the overall effect of enacting internal agency ambiguously by enabling the speaker to either take an attitudinal stance against powerful actors, or alternatively to support them. In a theoretical analysis of the use of metaphor and irony in dealing with paradox, Sillince and Golant (2017) proposed that irony can play a unique role in organizational change initiatives by enabling employees to identify the dissonance between what is promised by the inflated claims of the official story and the disappointment of what is actually delivered. For instance, an ironic critique by employees can enable the legitimation of further work to close the gap between central authority and empowered employees.

While these and other explorations into the linkages between contradiction, paradox and irony have revealed important aspects of the role of irony in organizations, there remains a lack of systematic understanding of the specific ways in which irony can enable or impede managers to engage with controversial issues and to move on – a challenge which we address by drawing on discursive incongruity theory.

Irony as incongruity

There are at least three distinctive discursive theories of ironic humor: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory (Tracy et al. 2006). Relief theory suggests individuals engage in ironic humor as a form of emotional and physiological relief when they are stressed or bored (Freud 1950; Lynch 2002). Superiority theory contends individuals use ironic humor to ridicule others and gain control, as a means to express power (LaFave et al. 1976) and build solidarity (Morreall 1983). In this paper, we focus on the third perspective which views ironic humor as the frisson arising from the realization of incongruity between what we expect to happen and what actually takes place (Attardo 2010; Descartes 1728; Kant 1987).

The core premise of incongruity theory is that it explains the basis for, and effect of, creating and juxtaposing seemingly incompatible views of a situation (i.e. a congruous reality with an alternate incongruous situation or explanation) (Swabey 1962), which is the approach to controversy that we draw on in this paper. However, while certain situations can be controversial, their innate nature can mean the application of irony

5

would arguably be less appropriate and socially unacceptable, as might occur, for instance, in a serious case of sexual misconduct. Such exceptions aside, irony can create an alternate or extreme view of an issue and therefore provide a basis for controversy through the violation of a socially accepted pattern (Meyer 2000) because it allows for an event to be simultaneously associated with two fundamentally different views, the ambiguity of which is apparent at the same time to those listening or watching (Bergson 1914). From the perspective of incongruity theory, therefore, laughter is often a response from individuals when irony pleasantly surprises them and reveals the unexpected (Berger 1976; McGhee and Pistolesi 1979).

In this article, we argue for an understanding of irony as a stylistic device, which can be realized in many context-dependent ways, and that it can be used to highlight controversy that already exists and construct alternative viewpoints. Irony leads to the juxtaposing of ill-fitting interpretations, thus creating immediate cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), such as between an existing group level idea or initiative and a new view from an individual. The 'gap' between the two views produced by irony constructs a natural incongruity

that requires participants to contend with two or more simultaneous but incompatible interpretations of a controversial issue. Faced with the tension between the ironic and non-ironic interpretations, the incongruity triggers a moment of reflexivity to enable participants to reflect upon and question their current understanding of the issue, thus paving the way for a reassessment.

As related work in linguistics and communications studies have observed, this incongruity enables irony to function as an 'off-record' speech strategy in which enables speakers to voice criticism and negative comment in a way that reduces the possibility for interpretation as a face threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987; Culpeper 2011). It therefore plays a key role in mediating and resolving organizational conflict (King 1988; Smith et al. 2000). Irony can also have powerful social bonding effects by promoting a positive mental state (Romero 2005) and helping to generate and sustain group solidarity (Duncan 1982, 1984; Duncan et al. 1990; Lynch 2009) through a sense of belonging (Holmes 2000). By 'bonding' and 'biting' (Kotthoff 2003) through jocular banter (Plester and Sayers 2007) such as 'piss-taking' (terms commonly used in the UK and Australia where we conducted our empirical investigation to describe good natured but aggressive teasing ironic humor), irony therefore serves as a face saving strategy to communicate otherwise difficult sentiments (Brown and Levinson 1987; Culpeper 2016) such as expressing a sense of closeness (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006) and allow subordinates to gently mock superiors, thus enabling a release of tensions inherent in unequal

power relations (Pizzini 1991; Richie 2014).

Incongruity theory then, offers means to examine the ways in which the juxtaposition of two alternative and/or seemingly incompatible views can help to deal with controversial issues. This may be very different from conventional models or assumptions in organization studies that expect such sensemaking to lead to the solving of controversy in the form of compromise, new consensus, or the creation of new shared understanding. This leads us to formulate our research questions as follows: (1) How does irony enable organization members to deal with controversial issues and to move on?, and (2) What are the specific ways through which this happens?

Case Setting and Methods

These two research questions were applied to data from our longitudinal ethnographic study of Defense Systems International (DSI), a multinational aerospace firm which was challenged by a rapidly shifting competitive environment. This organization was appropriate to our questions in two respects. First, the defense sector was facing a challenging and unstable competitive environment that typically involves controversy. DSI was one of several companies responding to these major cuts in defense expenditure by government customers worldwide, thus requiring managers to maintain vigilance around a number of key issues. Second, we were able to negotiate access to carry out an in-depth longitudinal investigation at this critical stage of strategic change. This access provided an opportunity to investigate the micro-processes of an executive team perceiving and responding to issues emerging from changing operational and strategic imperatives (also see Bourgeois and Eisenhardt 1988; Kaplan 2008).

Data collection

Data was collected through 12 months of intensive fieldwork across each of DSI's Australian and British subsidiaries. Two of the authors engaged in an organizational ethnography, spending a week each month within the organization to develop a deeper contextual understanding of the key issues and interpersonal relationships that characterized the senior executive team meetings as the focus of the study. In this process, we learned that the teams had to deal with numerous difficult issues in a pragmatic manner, which required an 'efficient' approach to decision-making. In both business units, we observed full-day monthly strategy meetings over a six-month period in each site, providing approximately 96 hours of interactive discussion, and supported by notes of our observations of the same meetings. Each senior management team had approximately 10 regular

7

members, whom we interviewed twice (at the beginning and then the end of the ethnography), for around two hours in each case, providing a further 40 hours of data. Although the meetings and interview data amounted to c.150 hours in total, our emphasis was on the six days of monthly strategy meetings of each business unit, although in this paper we focus on analyzing the data from the Australian subsidiary. In numerous informal conversations with team members and other meeting participants before and after the meetings, we also asked individuals to interpret the agendas and outcomes of these events. While we did not record these informal conversations due to their spontaneous nature, we did make contemporaneous notes of our observations after each formal meeting and informal conversation.

We also collated secondary data through public and confidential company documents which included meeting agendas and minutes, reports and slides used in these meetings, as well as company orientation and training documents. These additional sources helped us to understand the organization's structure and its strategic challenges, including the imperatives of DSI's UK-based head office and the market dynamic between DSI, its competitors and primary customers, which in this case was the Australian Government (sometimes officially referred to as 'the Commonwealth of Australia' or 'the Commonwealth'). Through interviews and informal encounters, we fed our interpretations back to each of the senior team members to strengthen our emerging interpretations and rule out alternative interpretations (Lee 1999). This contextual data also enabled a richer understanding of the personalities, and interpersonal dynamics between each of the team members, their superiors and their subordinates, and was particularly valuable in interpreting potentially multiple meanings contained in the ironic utterances that were our analytical focus. Given the unique challenges of the Australian market, we focused our analysis on the strategy meetings at the Australian business unit. Table 1 lists the organizational role of each member of the senior management team and invited participants who were present in the illustrative episodes referred to later in this paper.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data analysis

Our analysis was inspired by a critical discursive approach that allowed us to examine these conversations and practices of interaction within their intertextual, interpersonal and socio-historical contexts (Clarke et al. 2012; Fairclough 2003; Kwon et al. 2009, 2014; Reisigl and Wodak 2015; Wodak 2013), which is crucial to comprehending irony. The analysis focused on the role of language in how individuals dealt with controversy

as well as processes of social interaction that allowed the group to move on within meetings. Thus, our analysis is not conducted within the constraints of the Conversation Analytic approach, as a focus upon context was essential to understanding the influences within which discussions occurred, and is crucial for comprehending the effects of irony in conversation.

Rather, we followed an abductive approach where our empirical analysis was linked iteratively with increasing theoretical understanding (Wodak 2014). Abduction as a reflexive mode of inquiry, uses anomalies or surprises to generate explanations by iterating between theory and method (Van Maanen et al. 2007). Whereas deduction proves that something *must* be and induction shows that something actually *is*, abduction suggests instead that something *may* be (Peirce 1998) by engendering and entertaining "hunches, explanatory positions, ideas, and theoretical elements" (Locke et al. 2008, p.207-8). We followed Locke et al.'s (2008) advice to avoid the exclusion of less definitive data to encourage a more exploratory discovery process that could better illuminate the 'empirical conundrum' surrounding the role of irony in the development of understanding (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Van Maanen et al. 2007; Weick 2007). Accordingly, we iterated between various forms of data and phases of inquiry to explore potential patterns of interaction (Krzyanowski 2011; Wodak et al. 2011) through a five-stage analytical process, outlined below.

Step 1: Association of controversy and irony. Our initial interest was to better understand how the managers make sense of difficult or controversial issues, which led us to conduct preliminary analyses focusing on such parts of the conversations in their management team meetings. Having pursued some other topics, we found that dealing with these issues was often, if not always, linked with irony. In particular, we noticed that the managers and organizational members often made ironic observations that suggested something was the *opposite* of, or incompatible with, what others were saying, and that these ironic interjections seemed to have a subtle effect on how discussion progressed. Closer examination of such conversations revealed the tendency to use irony, sometimes funnily and sometimes dryly, was near ubiquitous across these team conversations. Although initially we saw this witty banter as jocular 'piss-taking' for the purposes of social bonding, it occurred to us that irony might also have another albeit latent purpose: to provoke, or alternatively resist, the development of understanding around the issue.

Step 2: Episode identification. After having focused on parts of conversations that dealt with controversial issues, we proceeded to give particular attention to the use of irony in specific episodes within this material. While there are different ways of defining episodes in meetings (Seidl and Guérard 2015), we

focused on parts of conversations that included a relatively clearly identifiable beginning, middle and end. The duration of these episodes ranged from one minute to tens of minutes in a specific meeting. Following Kreuz and Roberts (1995), we reviewed the recordings of the meetings for instances of an ironic tone of voice (e.g. heavy stress, a nasal tone and a slower speaking rate) and hyperbole (i.e. exaggerated or extreme descriptions), which we identified for further analysis. We then examined the text that preceded and followed discussion around these potential incidences to identify discrete episodes of irony. In some cases this involved only a few short turns, where an ironic utterance was followed by laughter, whereas in others, episodes were longer and contained multiple instances of irony as retorts or contributions to fantasy scenarios and humorous narratives.

In coding for irony, we initially identified a total of 93 episodes and then delineated each by determining when the discussion of a topic or aspect of an issue was discussed, and with reference to two or more incongruous meanings. We then examined these 93 episodes for the interplay of ironic and 'straight' utterances and their potential effects on the understanding of issues, in order to comprehend why irony was used implicitly or explicitly. Scholars in linguistics prefer to focus on the surface meanings of ironic utterances and their apparent intentions, whereas researchers in psychology and cognition have arguably tended to over-emphasize the properties of irony that allow them to be interpreted *as* ironic (Utsumi 2000). Therefore, we followed Utsumi's (ibid) implicit display theory of ironic environments, which proposes that an utterance will be understood as ironic if the ironic environment reveals that it is *implicitly* displayed, based on three conditions concerning how the utterance: (a) alludes to a speakers' expectations; (b) displays pragmatic insincerity of how the surface meaning of their utterance is in violation of norms associated with that contextual environment; and (c) reveals how speakers linguistically display negative emotional attitudes (e.g. mock disappointment, anger, reproach, envy) towards the discovery of incongruity between what they *expect* and what is actually the *case*. Of the 93 episodes identified where irony was present within the discussion of an issue, we differentiated between 84 that met all three conditions for implicit display, and nine episodes where two out of the three criteria were met.[3]

Through our detailed analysis of a variety of episodes however, we also found that the successful use of irony in conversation not only meets the three conditions specified by Utsumi (i.e. alluded expectations, violated norms, and discovered incongruity), but also, depending on *how* they are performed by speakers,

---

[3]The analysis of the 93 episodes was further supplemented by an analysis of 11 additional 'straight' or non-ironic episodic discussions of controversial issues, which we describe further in Step 4.

could lead to different outcomes. We noted multiple ways by which irony could be used to move on the conversation in the episodes studied. By contrast, in the episodes where irony was present but 'failed,' not only were all three criteria not met, but they were often marked by the absence of laughter or other explicit or implicit reactions to the ironic utterance. It therefore appears that a key difference between successful and unsuccessful use of irony is also closely linked with the skills of 'doing irony' (as we explain at the end of the Findings section).

Step 3: Episode interpretation and initial coding. Consistent with our critical discursive approach, we then drew upon our layered contextual knowledge of the industry, specific organizational issues, and a more detailed understanding of the individual directors and their interpersonal dynamics derived from the ethnography, to understand and interpret the discussions around each issue. We evaluated how irony was constructed and used along various dimensions of interaction, to assess the understanding of an issue prior to and at the end of each episode. In particular, we noted differences in the tone of interaction when irony was used for self-deprecation, versus attempts to ridicule others. We then reviewed each episode in its respective context, to adapt and refine our initial interpretations. This approach, summarized for all 93 episodes in the Appendix, allowed us to identify the effects of irony upon the development of the issue.

Our analysis of each episode began by summarizing the context for discussion to aid reader understanding of why the issue was contentious and the specifics of who and what were behind the differing positions on that issue. In particular, we drew upon the meeting texts and our broader knowledge of the organization to focus on several 'levels of context': i) the co-text – utterances immediately around the episode in question; ii) the immediate context – presentations, reports and discussions from other formal and informal meetings beyond the meeting in question; and iii) the social and historical context – the tendencies and pressures created by the broader interpersonal, organizational and industry dynamics.

We then analyzed the dynamic of each episode to determine how the issue was approached, coding for the means by which irony was affected, and whether it was through a humorous quip, oblique reference or an extended narrative or fantasy scenario. We then coded for the role of irony within that dynamic, noting that irony was a multi-purpose tool that could be used in various ways throughout the episode to move the issue forward, such as by introducing as an agenda item; shifting the conversation towards the controversial issue; breaking the tension when the discussion seemed to reach an awkward impasse; or by injecting levity into discussion that had gone flat.

11

Finally, we examined how irony helped the group to engage with the issue. For each episode, we noticed that the response to ironic comments triggered a conversational dynamic that tended towards either confrontation (characterized by face-threatening irony), or construction (characterized by jocular face-building irony). Within this dynamic of positioning, irony could be used to variously: create a new position where none had previously existed, reinforce an existing position, or help shift the consensus to a new position on that issue. We also noted that the imperative of the group to respond to the issue in each case was either strong (i.e. something could and should be done) or weak (i.e. inaction is preferable or action is futile). This led us to develop a coding for face-building vs. face-threatening irony, how positioning on the issue was established, and the determining of the modality of action.

Step 4: Counterfactual analysis. At this point, we then engaged in counterfactual thinking to ask what might have happened if participants had communicated the same intentions in a 'straight' fashion, without resorting to irony. To help us build theory at a micro-level to generate novel ways of thinking by "involv[ing] researchers imagining alternatives to existing theoretical assumptions, constructs, and models of causality through contrasting questioning – we asked the typical 'what if' question – as a way of modifying or challenging the existing theoretical base" (Cornelissen and Durand 2014) . In other words, we asked how might participants have used straight talk instead of irony to understand and respond to the issue differently as a "foil to a received or orthodox theory" (Tsang and Elsaesser 2011)? Based on our focus on context, we developed these counterfactual scenarios for each of the 93 episodes so we could better understand the primary effects of irony on the trajectory of each discussion. We have included these counterfactual scenarios in each of the four illustrative vignettes in the following Findings section and also for all episodes in the Appendix to the paper.

To further understand the effect of irony, we returned to the transcripts to focus on additional episodes where irony was *not* used. We identified and focused on 11 episodes where controversial issues were discussed and irony was largely absent. In comparing the dynamic of these episodes with the other 84 episodes of successful irony, we noted from this small sample that the conversation was characterized by greater politeness and other indirect language with speakers tending to lightly tread to avoid confrontation over the issue. Furthermore, given the reluctance of speakers to move directly to the point and reveal their true intentions towards the issue, these 'straight' discussions tended to be longer and more drawn out. This limited sample suggests that in our case the use of irony was an integral part of the team's conversational repertoire to expediently move the conversation on.

12

Step 5: Development of a process model. As a final step, we looked across all of the episodes within each pathway for similarities and differences between the salient and common features of the 84 episodes of irony. From this, we synthesized a conceptualization of the effect of irony on the development of controversial issues as consisting of four unique pathways, which were differentiated by: whether the irony and the ensuing exchange developed as a face-building or face-threatening dynamic, where the collective position and modality of action towards the issue was determined, as well as the way by which the issue was moved on from. From this we developed a process model, which is presented in Figure 5 in the Discussion section.

Findings: Four pathways of using irony to deal with controversial issues

Based on our empirical analysis, we identified and elaborated four pathways of irony use through which the actors could deal with controversial issues and move on. The key characteristics of these four pathways – acquiescing, empowering, channeling and dismissing – are summarized in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

As Table 2 shows, incongruity can be established in different ways, and it happens by enabling an expression of opinions and emotions that would otherwise be difficult to communicate through non-ironic 'straight' talk. The subsequent engagement with irony can involve a face-building or face-threatening dynamic. In acquiescing, face-building irony is used to establish a basis for a constructive engagement between group members. Such a positive face-building dynamic also characterizes empowering, with a focus on the interactions between the group members, allowing new inputs to arise and develop. In channelling and dismissing, this engagement with irony is face-threatening in that frustrations are vented towards the listener – a group member or outsider – to enable participants to express their views.

Our analysis also highlights two key aspects of the ensuing processing of incongruity: establishing position and modality of action. As to establishing position, in acquiescing, there is collective retreat from an existing position towards a diminished position that is more realistic and thus aligned with the current context. With empowering, the engagement creates a safe space within which the group can collectively contribute to the development of new position in response to the issue. In channelling, irony serves to delegitimate and thus subsume alternate positions by imposing the speaker's, usually dominant, position on the issue. Finally, in dismissing, irony is used to question the legitimacy and delegitimate the position of, the listener.

In our empirical material, the modality of action was typically, but not always, expressed through

13

speaker evaluations or judgements of the real nature of the issue (i.e. epistemic modality) as a basis for intended actions, and at other times involving statements about their duty and obligation to act upon that issue according to certain norms or expectations (i.e. deontic modality) as a justification for intended actions. In acquiescing, there was an emerging sense in participants that little could be done because control over or obligation for the issue lay external to the group. In empowering, a sense emerged that action should be taken, given that the group has the obligation and the ability to act upon the issue. With channelling, a sense that something can and should be done because the group possesses an ability or obligation to act upon the issue was imposed. In dismissing however, there was an imposed sense that little should be done because the group has no obligation or ability to act upon the issue.

Thus, the four pathways lead to specific ways of moving on with controversy. In acquiescing, as the view is that there is little that can be done, the discussion turns towards the mitigation of damage to develop the capacity for preventative measures for the future. In empowering, the discussion focuses on developing a synthetic view and then detailing and elaborating on how to bring that about. In channelling, the discussion shifts towards further legitimating a single and generally dominant view[4], which can involve reinforcing this view by subsuming alternative interpretations as subordinate to that dominant view and the existing course of action. With dismissing however, the discussion shifts the focus towards further reinforcing the single and generally dominant view and denigrating alternative views such that no action is needed.

In what follows, we elaborate on each of these pathways through four illustrative vignettes. In each vignette, we show the effect of irony through a description of: i) context – the organizational background to that issue and the dynamic of the immediately preceding discussion; ii) irony – the way in which irony was used in the conversation and its immediate effect; and iii) outcome – an analysis of how the organizational members were then able to process the issue (positioning and establishing modality) and to move on..

Acquiescing

Acquiescing means framing understanding as having no alternative because of environmental constraints. In acquiescing episodes, irony is used to create the impression of distance and objectivity towards the issue and

---

[4] This single view is generally reflective of the positions of dominant individuals and of the organizational status quo in the case of channelling and dismissing pathways. While channelling and dismissing pathways could be appropriated by less powerful individuals to subvert their superiors, we did not observe any occurrences of this in our dataset.

thus exaggerate a situation and suggest it is far worse or better than the actual non-ironic meaning of that same utterance would suggest. These interventions result in a collective positioning around the issue as one where the scope and capacity for organizational response is circumscribed and pushed into the tentative future.

Vignette 1: 'Wooden Dollars'

Context. In the discussion preceding this episode (Appendix, Episodes 2-4), COO Bradley established the context for this issue by recounting negotiations between Nick of DSI and John from the Commonwealth and their joint efforts to nudge Commonwealth decisions-makers towards ordering a larger and more advanced A\$400m Level 9000 avionics system upgrade rather than a more modest Level 8000 order. From previous meetings and interviews, we knew this to be a major project whose negotiations had already spanned several years.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Irony: The episode begins on a positive and non-ironic tone, with COO Bradley commenting on how "this was the most constructive negotiation I've ever had" (1), before broaching a difficult issue (see Figure 1). The problem in this otherwise successful negotiation however is that the jointly negotiated liability matrix for pensions and other long-term liabilities in the transfer of Commonwealth (government) employees to DSI employment at one of the main air bases could threaten the projected profit margin on an otherwise major commercial win. In this episode, ironic under- and over-statement is used by Bradley, Mike and Harris to report information and to give voice to frustration and anger in a non-threatening way.

Bradley introduces the problem by calmly explaining that Nick and Paul (the Commonwealth Air Services HR and Services Directors respectively) have not yet signed-off on the contract, saying "Last week, Paul Atkinson sent us an email saying, basically he's…" (3), and Mike interrupts to complete Bradley's sentence with the rhetorical and sarcastic question – "he's changing his mind?" (4). Bradley emphasizes this contrast, saying "he [Paul] was standing away from all those [liability matrix] obligations" and walking away from his agreement with DSI. Mike's remark that Nick and Paul's justification for reneging upon a major contractual point as simply a 'change of mind' also understates the extent to which this is a violation of industry norms of practice. Collectively, Bradley and Mike's understatements are an explicit ironic contrast to the implicit non-ironic meaning that the project is now 'at risk.' The news thus builds further tension among the team members, who know that the following discussion will likely steer the team towards a 'post-mortem' on

how things went wrong.

At this point, Mike unexpectedly adds, "you tosser?!" (6), which is met with loud laughter. Mike's interjection of the expletive 'tosser', slang for someone who masturbates, allows for a cathartic release for Mike and his audience to voice their frustrations that Paul (the Commonwealth Director) had made 'promises' earlier in the negotiation to cover the pension obligations of transferred employees that he never intended to 'consummate.' Bradley continues with understatement, adding "Something like that, and I've prefaced it with an email, which some of you are copied in [to]" (7), referring to an email that he sent to Nick and Paul with very sharp and pointed language. Harris acknowledges the sudden and unfortunate turn of events and expresses sympathy by asking "Confused Bradley?" (8) eliciting laugher from the team. Bradley signals his resignation with a brief "Yeah", which is met with even more laughter. Finally, the CEO Mike said the previous Commonwealth promises had been "wooden dollars" (10) – slang for counterfeit money – and thus an empty promise that Bradley acknowledges is "going to be the reality" (11) with the implication that DSI would eventually have to write-off this unforeseen liability. Following this excerpt, the remaining conversation turned to a broadly participative discussion among the team of how that liability might be taken-on by DSI's UK parent to mitigate DSI Australia's risk and thus improve their profitability.

Outcome: In this episode, irony is used to broach a difficult piece of news indirectly through a congenial and face-building interaction by externalizing blame on to the Commonwealth Government and downplaying the viability of any immediate response. Irony enabled Bradley, Mike and Harris to enact a measure of agency by voicing their resistance to the Commonwealth, within the safe confines of the boardroom, and with the other team members to develop future-oriented agency by discussing actions to avoid similar situations in the future. Ultimately, the laughter and continued broad engagement that followed this excerpt enabled cathartic release over what was a troubling organizational issue.

Based on our understanding of this team's dynamic arising from observations of similar interactions, we can evaluate the veracity of this interpretation through counterfactual thinking. Without resort to irony, Bradley and Mike would have had to recount the events to the team in a non-ironic way. If done in a way that insinuated internal blame, then some team members might quickly become defensive, thereby cutting short or preventing the productive discussion on future mitigating measures. Certain individuals might have been implicated as scapegoats as people would have likely asked *who* was to blame, *why* the original agreement was reached, and *why* they had not seen the warning signs of things changing. Even if this was done in a more

16

neutral manner, with Bradley or Mike explicitly saying 'no one is to blame,' it might come across as patronizing, with other team members speculating on the sincerity of that assertion – 'if no one is to blame, then why are they saying that?' On balance then, the incongruity between the double meanings of irony, is arguably more effective at externalizing the cause of the issue and absolving the team of responsibility than compared to a non-ironic 'straight' approach. In a face-building context then, irony allows for an easier interpretation of events because their respective standings are not threatened since the situation was unforeseen and there was little that the team could do about it.

Empowering

We observed another type of intervention when jocular face-building irony enabled opinions to be more freely expressed under the cover of over- or under-statement. We call this pathway 'empowering,' which means enabling a new view to be synthesized through inputs from two or more individuals. In this pathway, ironic risky humor enables the issue to be explored, without individuals being put down or silenced, and ultimately leads to actionable discussion.

Vignette 2: 'Wee Bit of a Challenge'

Context: The preceding discussion relates to a presentation by graduate representatives Emily and Larissa to the executive team on feedback from the current DSI graduate trainee cohort. Several issues were highlighted, including a lack of structure in the training programme; unclear expectations of the personal development process, and poor guidance on mentoring. Also joining the meeting is Margaret, a DSI Manager of Corporate Communications. Somewhat aware that there were ongoing issues with graduate trainee satisfaction, prior to this meeting CEO Mike had offered Margaret the additional responsibility of Graduate Liaison so as to enable the graduates a clear line of communication to the executive team on current and future issues. In the discussion immediately before, the team for the most part listened quietly to the presentation, only interjecting a few times to ask for clarification on certain points.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Irony: This episode (see Figure 2) begins at the concluding point in the presentation, with Emily saying "the final thing" (1), "is an involvement with an elective… So that's something that's outside your role." (1) Confused by the terminology, DoE Larry asks "what do you mean by an 'elective'? (2). Emily hesitantly responded "Well, um – for example, they're involved in the graduate forum…" (3). She continues by saying,

"I mean, *we're* [emphasis added] not going to be here forever…" (3) to remind the executive team that they would like to see action on this issue is required as the graduate trainee programme for this cohort in now entering its final few months. COO Bradley says "Extracurricular activity" (4) for clarification. Larissa and Emily respectively add "Kind of like uni" (6) and "something outside your role" (7). With the term 'elective' explained an additional activity outside the formal graduate trainee programme, Emily describes an elective that was especially popular with graduate trainees, "So the concept and creation program, so that's the High School Robotics program" that involves "taking some time out to work with the high school kids" (9).

Mike interrupts Emily with an aside to Margaret, who had hitherto been silent during the presentation, saying "I mean, a lot of that's about communication in organizations, Marg" (10), and then adding, "I think you've got a wee bit of a challenge. We would really like to give you those sort of scenarios!" (10). In the space of one turn, Mike encourages Margaret to take on the role of Graduate Liaison, and implies that she is ideal for the role given her background in communications, hence he asks her to take on this and other similar challenges. Also notable is how Mike uses the diminutive 'Marg' to imply a degree of closeness and thus temporarily put aside his role as her superior. With this provocation, over the next five turns (11-15), Mike and Margaret rapidly exchange ripostes against a background of increasingly raucous laughter. Margaret counters Mike's explicit 'offer' of the additional responsibility of Graduate Liaison by feigning hesitance and dramatically pausing three times for effect, saying "Yeah – brilliant – this meeting – so far!" (11). And, as if on cue, Mike comes back adding, "It's also heading in your direction!" (12), to which Margaret responds, "Think I'll stay in Comms!" (13). Finally, Mike 'checkmates' her by 'pulling rank' with the rejoinder, "That option's no longer open to you!" (14) to which Margaret concludes with a resigned "Yeah" (15).

Outcome: Mike interrupts Emily and Larissa's presentation and points to the High School Robotics Programme as an exemplar of the value that someone with Margaret's experience could bring. This implicit positioning of Margaret as the preferred candidate for the role of Graduate Liaison, establishes the basis for a spontaneous ironic intervention between Mike and Margaret in which Mike appears to convince and then coerce Margaret to accept the role. Although we know that this exchange is 'staged' because Margaret had already accepted the role prior to the meeting, this 'negotiation' serves to build face and establish the legitimacy of Margaret and her new role in front of the Graduate Representatives and the senior executives by implying her credentials and the strength of her relations with the senior management team. Beginning with Mike's interruption (10), followed by 5 lines of riposte (11-15), Margaret is given the opportunity to voice

reluctance about taking on this role, and allay concerns that she might be an expedient but inappropriate choice. With Margaret's legitimacy established and the junior participants suitably empowered, the meeting continues with a productive and inclusive discussion between Margaret, Emily and Larissa to develop a joint plan of action.

The full effect of this ironic intervention can be better understood through a counterfactual scenario. Without irony, Mike could have formally introduced Margaret in her new capacity to the Graduate Representatives and the Executive Directors, and would likely have provided justification for the appointment by listing Margaret's qualifications. This non-ironic approach however, would likely have led to the problem of others second guessing the sincerity of the speakers. Emily and Larissa might wonder if Margaret really *is* the best candidate for this role, or simply someone who was assigned to this job because they were too junior to refuse, and that no one else wanted the role. This in turn would have led to yet further questioning about how serious the DSI executive is about responding to graduate trainee concerns. The other directors might also question in the same way, whether Margaret was simply the most expedient choice for the role, rather than being the most experienced and best qualified. Margaret herself might also still have been reluctant to take on this additional role as she was concerned about whether the Graduate Representatives and the Executive Directors were, in fact, taking her seriously or not.

Channelling

In contrast to acquiescing, we found that sometimes speakers used irony in conversation to press others into accepting their own particular perspective on an issue. We call this effect 'channelling,' meaning imposing a dominant view that is argued as factually or morally superior to other interpretations. Thus, given uncertainty over the non-ironic meaning, here the recipient of the irony offers little or no resistance, thereby allowing the group to be forcefully 'channelled' into accepting the ironist's position as the best alternative.

Vignette 3: 'Friggin' Mystical Conversation'

Context: This episode takes place in the afternoon of a full-day budget review meeting (Figure 3) when the Osprey (aircraft) Programme is being discussed. Preceding this, and extending to two earlier episodes (Appendix, episodes 81-82), Will (Osprey Programme Director) and Cary (Senior Finance Manager) described several issues with the Osprey Programme that will result in a significant shortfall – nearly A$20m – in projected profits. Just prior to the start of the episode, Mike suggests that the anticipated late payment by the

Singapore Government could result in a drop in revenues recorded this fiscal year, and thus be the cause of the projected shortfall for their business unit.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Irony: The episode begins with Will saying "Osprey stuff [expenses]" has "gone up" for 2009-2010 (1), and that is why they were missing their budget target by around a million Australian dollars. Cary then backs Will adding that "head count and labor costs" look to rise significantly for 2008 (2). Here Will and Cary argue that the shortfall is due to increasing costs, rather than a delay in recognizing sales, which Mike had asserted. CEO Mike interrupts Cary with the dismissive retort "I'm not even listening to this" (3), which is met by loud laughter from the team. Cary once again attempts to defend his and Will's position by responding and saying "That [Will's assumption] is reasonable in terms of where we've been before in other years" because costs have "been up 20-odd points" (4). Mike once again interrupts Cary's turn by dismissively stating, "I guarantee you it's [the costs] going to stay where it is," adding "it's a friggin' mystical conversation dreamed up by accountants [of which Cary is one] to scare us every year" (5), which is acknowledged by others through further laughter. After a momentary pause, Mike adds "It's like bloody Al Qaeda or something." In the discussion immediately following this episode, we observed laughter as the team members engaged in jocular banter, bringing the meeting to a temporary pause. With a line of incongruity established through irony being used to suggest that the problem was either explained by rising costs or a drop in sales revenues, CEO Mike then pushed his own view: that Will must take responsibility for the revenue shortfall and Cary must accept responsibility for the overstated cost projections.

Outcome: In the preceding discussion, Mike was generally patient in his questioning of various assumptions that underpin Will and Cary's new projections. Just prior to the start of this episode however, we noted that the tone of Mike's responses became sharper, culminating in the dismissive tone of his ironic interventions in lines (3) and (5). By metaphorically comparing how accountants might use rising costs as a false justification for lowering profit targets to how politicians might invoke a mystical terrorist threat such as 'Al Qaeda or something' to justify increasing military expenditures or tougher border controls, Mike succeeds in not only dismissing, but also discrediting Will and Cary's position. While Cary twice attempted to push back on Mike's assertions by further defending his projections in lines (2) and (4), the laughter from the rest of the team serves to implicitly endorse Mike's position. In previous interviews, Mike and Bradley told us of their concern over poor cost management processes on the Osprey Programme due to Will's 'command and control' style of

20

leadership and failure to delegate authority. Through this prism, Mike's impatient and dismissive response is an implicit yet blunt message that responsibility for any profit shortfall outside of delayed revenue recognition is down to Will and Cary's own failure to control costs, rather than exogenous factors. Mike uses irony to insinuate this point and exaggerate by analogizing the claim of rising costs with that of a terrorist threat. Will and Cary, having exhausted their talking points and their own standing undermined by the implicit critique, quietly concede to Mike's position.

Based on our understanding of this team's dynamic arising from observations of similar interactions, we are able to test the veracity of our insights through counterfactual thinking. What if Mike had challenged Will without irony? He might have challenged him outright, or expressed severe doubts about his argument, which would have left him with a loss of face and thus in a difficult position for the remainder of a still very lengthy discussion. As CEO, Mike might have contested Will's assumptions directly and at length to justify his own stance or he might have tried to justify his own position over the draft budget. Yet, if he had done so, the expression of doubt would likely have increased ambiguity and the issue of Osprey targets might have remained unresolved. Compared with these counterfactuals, irony provided an economical means of dispatching the Osprey targets and providing the CEO Mike with a vehicle to challenge others and direct them towards his interpretation of sales being the main issue, not costs, which *was* something they could address. In a face-threatening context like this, irony therefore allows for a venting of frustration towards the listener or outside members and an expressions of true feeling in a way that 'straight' discourse could not.

Dismissing

We also observed the team engaging in ironic intervention to resist the arguments of others through face-threatening irony which served to discourage and discredit further resistance. We call this pathway 'dismissing,' and it essentially means reframing existing interpretations as wrong or inadequate without promoting a new view.

Vignette 4: 'You Need Drugs'

Context: Prior to the episode in this vignette, the team is listening to a lengthy and detailed presentation by an HR consultant named Anna, of Telford Associates, on the DSI-specific findings of the Telford Survey. The Telford Survey is an annual nationwide survey of employee satisfaction within Australia's top employers. Preceding this episode, Anna slowly and meticulously built a narrative to convey the complexity of the issues

indicated by the survey's results – in part to convince DSI of the value of Telford's insights so as to hire them for advice on how to improve employee satisfaction. The Telford survey is notable for its detail and granularity and Anna's presentation slides suggest variable results across the breadth of DSI Australia's operations. This in turn, creates a sense of anticipation and defensiveness among the directors as she outlines the key indicators of their respective operations while all the time trying to remain constructive rather than be overly critical. CEO Mike also displays defensiveness as the overall leadership indicators from Telford's survey are not that positive and overall, worse than expected. The immediately preceding discussion is interspersed with joking and sometimes nervous banter between team members about various aspects of the survey results.

Insert Figure 4 about here

Irony: This episode begins (see Figure 4) with Anna progressing to slide 18 of her presentation, announcing loudly, "Connecting to the Company Strategy" (1). Then, from the perspective of a DSI employee filling in the Telford Survey, she asks "do I understand the overall business strategy… how I fit into that big puzzle…."? Bradley and Mike then interrupt this utterance with several lines of banter in which Bradley laughingly praises Mike, saying "You've cracked it, Mike!" (2) to which Mike responds with false modesty "What have I done now?" (3) to which Bradley simply responds "Strategy" (4) – that Mike has actually developed a strategy that DSI Australia employees seem to comprehend, a statement which in turn generates more laughter. Anna then attempts to recover her lead in the discussion asserting "Okay", raising her voice to emphasize the point (5). With the team members still chuckling, she attempts to engage with the emerging mood, interspersing her utterances with self-conscious laughs and continuing to explain that DSI employees are "no doubt pretty clear on the strategic direction of the company," again raising her voice mid-sentence for emphasis (5). She is again interrupted by further ironic exchange between Bradley, Adam, Mike and Harris (6-13) in which they collectively use the single most positive finding to portray what they see as a resoundingly positive picture in which the employees *all* have a good understanding of DSI's strategy because "they bloody well should be!" (6). HRD Adam exaggerates that "Mike's sacked people for not knowing [the strategy]" (7).

In her third attempt to recover her lead in the discussion, Anna acknowledges, "Ah – okay" (8). But before she continues, she is cut off, this time by Mike, explaining that DSI's good score is the result of a policy of improving strategic communications (9), saying, "we've made it a bit of a focus" with enforcing the policy (with "some stick") and incentivizing understanding (with "some carrot"). Harris sarcastically says that now

22

that the employees have successfully understood and responded to this policy and understand the strategy, "It's time to change it again" (10). Without hesitating, Mike cuts in on Harris with the punchline "[and] You get beat with the carrot if you don't" (11). Collectively this nonsensical explanation of an incentive system where employees are rewarded for compliance with 'carrots' but beaten with 'sticks' and 'carrots' when they do not, combined with the team's lack of seriousness reinforces a mockingly dismissive tone in their responses to Anna and the findings of the Telford Survey.

Anna however, continues to resist with her explanation of the incongruity. When Harris talks over her suggesting "it [the strategy] probably hasn't been explained properly…" to employees, she continues to resist and talks about "taking it [improvements] to the next level" (12). Again, playing the role of a DSI employee completing the survey, she says: "So I'm Anna, and I sit in Ops [Operations], and how, and how that overall company direction and how that plays out for me is in what I do in my day to day role… and how it aligns with what I do on a day to day basis and how it fits with the bigger pie." Her further suggestions as for how to improve employee engagement however, are dismissed by Bradley saying "Larry?" and having grabbed his attention, posing a question for him to answer: "How can you get an engineer to say "our leader" – and continuing, "your leaders fill me with excitement," to which Larry retorts "You need drugs Bradley. You might try the rack or something" (14). This exchange again questions the validity of the Telford methodology by playing up a stereotype of 'logical and unemotional' engineers, who would never utter such a line without being drugged or tortured. The conversation following the excerpt continues with further mocking as the team discusses how SalesForce's results – as the highest ranking employer in the Telford survey – is incomparable to those of DSI. Mike concludes the meeting with the conciliatory comment, "A woeful score," but without proposing the need for any concrete discussion of a plan of action.

Outcome: Prior to this episode, we can see a build-up in nervous tension among the senior executive team as Anna delivers negative news on DSI's employee morale, as measured by the survey. The frequent ironic interventions – before, during and after the episode – provide the team with some degree of cathartic relief as they vent their frustrations about the issue. The mocking and aggressive tone of these ironic comments highlight the directors' frustration with the result and their attempts to undermine the validity of, and ultimately dismiss, the narrative that Anna is creating.

We might consider counterfactually what might have happened in an alternative situation where the team attempts to dismiss Anna and the Telford findings without irony. The team members might have flatly

disagreed with, or politely raised concerns about, Anna's assertions from the survey. On the one hand, outright disagreement with a face-threatening challenge would have likely damaged DSI's relationship with Telford in other areas such as executive recruitment, and perhaps portrayed the senior management team as being inclined to 'quibble' and make excuses about their performance. On the other, a polite expression of doubt would have entailed a long discussion between Anna and the team over underlying assumptions, and the team would have had to silence their concerns and refrain from expressing their opinions about the survey, risking their own face by so doing. Instead, irony gave licence to a group of middle-aged male executives to engage in the condescending and sexist mocking of a junior female consultant. Furthermore, it not only allowed the team to pay lip service to the 'woeful score', but it also let the team 'kick the can farther down the road' by avoiding discussion on how to actually address the issue.

Skills of doing irony

Over and above the generalized nature of the pathways identified, we must also consider how and why irony may fail to work in the ways we have described. In particular, we maintain that the relative power of speakers and their individual skills in deploying irony is central to its success. This is largely due to how irony is used in relation to either the speaker's own power and position, or that of others. In some episodes, for example, we found the CEO and COO aggressively dismissing others' interpretations or channelling understanding to their own preferred views, thus reinforcing their authority as the first- and second-in-command respectively. By contrast, we also saw in one of our vignettes how junior graduate trainees Emily and Larissa were themselves able to successfully deploy irony rhetorically to resist the power of key speakers on the executive team and hold the floor to open-up discussion in a different way. We observed too, how speakers' use of irony could embolden their voice over time if the context was conducive – as was the case for Emily and Larissa over a series of episodes around the graduate trainees.

At a more micro-level, we found that failed instances of irony were characterized by the indifference of others' to the utterance as marked by a lack of backchannelling – for example the absence of laughter, sniggers or acknowledgement with implicit references and ironic retorts. While each episode used irony to simultaneously convey *and* mask insincerity, it appears that a key difference between successful and unsuccessful ironic interventions is the skill of the speaker in articulating two or more incongruous interpretations, and in the acknowledgement of others' that they 'get it.'

Our study therefore brings nuances to extant research that has observed how even the intonation and timing of utterances within conversation can affect the orientation of others towards the speaker by stimulating expectations about how a situation might develop (Cunliffe and Coupland 2012; Yakhlef and Essén 2013). What we have shown is that, well performed, irony can reinforce the power and authority of already powerful participants, or give those with less authority a stronger footing in the conversation so they can be heard and have influence. Irony is therefore a 'sword that cuts both ways' with regard to the exercise of, or resistance to, power in conversation.

Discussion

Our paper has been motivated by the need to understand how irony can be used to deal with and ultimately move on with controversial issues. On the basis of our empirical analysis, our paper makes two contributions: it advances research on controversial issues by offering a process model that elucidates the various ways in which irony can be used to move on, and it adds to studies of irony in organizations more generally by elucidating the discursive underpinnings and intersubjective dynamics of irony use.

A process model to understand the dynamics in using irony to move on with controversial issues

Controversy is an important part of several strands of organization research. In particular, research has placed equivocality or discrepancy in the front-and-center of sensemaking (Maitlis and Christianson 2014; Weick et al. 2005); research on ambiguity or ambivalence has highlighted its key role in organizational life (Abdallah and Langley 2014; Eisenberg 1984; Sillince et al. 2012); and studies on paradox have argued that controversy in its different forms is an inherent part of organizations as expressed in tensions, contradictions, or paradoxes (Putnam et al. 2016; Schad et al. 2016; Smith and Lewis 2011). As part of this body of work, humor and irony have been identified as key means to deal with controversy (Gylfe et al. 2019; Hatch 1997; Hatch and Ehrlich 1993; Sillince and Barker 2012; Sillince and Golant 2017). While scholars have made significant advances in explaining how humor in general and irony in particular can be used in organizations (Cooren 2010; Jarzabkowski and Lê 2017; Romero and Pescosolido 2008), what has been lacking is a nuanced understanding of the ways by which irony can be employed to deal with and move on with controversial issues – without necessarily 'solving' them.

Our analysis of the patterns of similarities and differences in the four pathways leads us to offer a process model of the use of irony to deal with controversial issues. This process involves six entwined phases: (1) issue

emergence, (2) constructing incongruity, (3) engaging with irony, (4) establishing position, (5) determining modality of action; and finally (6) moving on. Although these phases identified are usually temporally overlapping facets of the actual discussions, nonetheless this analytical distinction helps elucidate the key dynamics and their effects when using irony to deal with controversial issues and to ultimately move on. These six phases form a process model which is illustrated in Figure 5 and develop as follows:

(1) **Issue emergence**. The emergence of an issue from the context of an organisational discussion. As noted in our analysis of non-ironic episodes and expanded upon through counterfactual analysis of ironic episodes, when controversial issues are raised without recourse to irony, this conversation is often characterized by terse, indirect, polite and lengthy conversation in which the difficult points are obliquely addressed.

(2) **Constructing incongruity.** If the initial discussion is met with an ironic utterance and if all three conditions of an implicit display of irony are met, the utterance is perceived as ironic. This leads to verbal and/or non-verbal backchannelling that creates cognitive dissonance which then reinforces further engagement in phase (3). If the utterance is not sufficiently ironic or the attempt to use irony fails, the conversation typically reverts to straight non-ironic conversation (1).

(3) **Engaging with irony.** Following this initial ironic utterance, the interaction can develop in way that is characterized by face-building or face-threatening irony. If it is face-building, a constructive dynamic typically follows in which collective ideas are vented and intent expressed to the benefit of others participants. If it is face-threatening, however, a confrontational dynamic often develops in which one side vents ideas and intent at the expense of other participants.

(4) **Establishing position.** In the case of face-building irony, this dynamic typically leads to an emotional catharsis and retreat to either an existing position or the synthesis of a new position. In the case of face-threatening irony, however, this dynamic often leads to the imposing of dominant position or the rejection of alternative interpretations in favor of the status quo.

(5) **Modality of action.** In this phase, overlapping with (4) but conceptually distinct, a sense that the cause of the issue is either exogenous or endogenous to the participants may develop. If seen as exogenous, the participants typically conclude that a direct response is not possible, and this often leads to deferring action (acquiescing) or continuing the action of the status quo (dismissing). If it is viewed as endogenous, what typically follows is identifying new actions (empowering) or the redirecting of alternative actions

(channelling).

(6) **Moving on**. Initially triggered by incongruity, participants now move on from the controversial issue in one of four ways: acquiescing (i.e. reframing that there is no alternative), empowering (i.e. a new consensus formed through synthesis), channelling (i.e. subsuming alternatives under a single view) and dismissing (i.e. reinforcement of the status quo by rejecting alternatives).

Insert Figure 5 about here

We maintain that pinning down these entwined phases are necessary to advance our understanding of the use of irony at the level of conversations beyond what has been established in prior research. This is also crucial to better comprehend how the use of irony differs from other forms and practices in organizational conversations (Cooren et al. 2011; Ford and Ford 1995). Three things stand out as key findings in this respect. First, it is essential to understand how incongruity is constructed to reveal tensions between alternative views because this forms the basis for the ensuing ironic conversation. As elaborated in our findings section, how irony is constructed leads to engagement with the irony in a face-building or face-threatening manner, which impacts the development of the subsequent discussion.

Second, the processing of the incongruity involves two key aspects: establishing position and modality of action. While both of these aspects may be found in other types and forms of discussions about controversial issues, we maintain that they are crucial specifically in terms of processing incongruity. In fact, we contend that some kind of positioning vis-à-vis the tensions is needed for the conversation to proceed because of the cognitive dissonance introduced by the incongruity. Some sense of modality of action is required for a group to know how to proceed. Interestingly, as our vignettes show, both these aspects may be tractable to the linguistic forms used in the conversation, thus linked with the discursive means used in the first phase.

Third, as a result of all this, but usually not in a linear fashion, emerges the ability to move on with the issue at hand. Our key argument is that this dealing with, and moving on with the controversial issue, can take several forms, which we have highlighted in the four pathways. The essential point is that the issues may not be solved – as we tend to think of in conversations – but rather, that they are specific ways of using irony that allows the participants to move on, even if underlying tensions around the issues remain. Thus irony can be seen as more as a coping device than a reconciliation mechanism when dealing with controversy.

This model however is only one framework for gauging the way in which irony can be used to deal with

controversial issues. By definition, our model is stripped of the rich context in which irony is used in each specific conversation and provides a 'resource' for speakers to use to good or bad effect. For example, while 'good-natured' face-building irony tends to be used by the less powerful individuals towards dominant persons and individuals, and 'caustic' face-threatening irony by the powerful towards those in subservient positions, the use of face-threatening irony by the subservient might also be possible under certain conditions. Our conceptual approach is based on observed tendencies and we do not wish to imply claims of lawlike causality. Rather, this model is meant to provide a greater appreciation of the elusiveness and limited tractability of how irony works in conversation. In other words, constructing new perspectives through the use of irony is not a one-way process that depends only on the speaker. Rather, as we have shown, irony tends to be effective when the skillful deployment of irony is met with positive reaction by the listener. Thus, what we might see as context-dependency, can also be conceived of as context providing a resource for speakers to draw upon (van Dijk 2008), but only if speakers hear and are sensitive to, what others are saying in their utterances. Therefore, while irony can be used provocatively to construct incongruity, the extent to which this works, depends on the conditions within which it occurs, the discursive skills of speakers, and their sensitivity towards the context in which it is performed.

Understanding the linguistic underpinnings and intersubjective dynamics of irony use

In addition, our analysis has implications for research on irony in organizations more generally (Hatch 1997; Hatch and Ehrlich 1993; Jarzabkowski and Lê 2017; Sillince and Barker 2012; Sillince and Golant 2017). Our model highlights the overall dynamics in using irony, but – as illustrated by our pathways – our study underscores the distinctively different ways in which irony can be employed. This multiplicity and richness in the types and forms of irony is not a trivial finding. On the contrary, it shows that research in this area should move beyond the idea that there is one form of irony towards an appreciation of its multiple manifestations. Thus far, research on irony in organizations has mostly explored how irony can be used (Hatch 1997; Hatch and Ehrlich 1993) and how it differs from other tropes (Sillince and Barker 2012; Sillince and Golant 2017). Our analysis adds to this body of work by identifying distinctively different forms of irony use and by elucidating their discursive underpinnings and the intersubjective dynamics associated with them.

What our study specifically highlights is the subtle way that irony develops with a face-threatening or face-building dynamic, and how this works through the construction of incongruity in each of the four

pathways. Our four vignettes each display a contrasting myriad of context-dependent discursive means of using and engaging with irony – and to different effect. In the 'Wooden Dollars' vignette, irony was deftly used by Bradley to humorously exaggerate or understate various aspects of situation. By insinuating that blame for the problem lay elsewhere, he comforted the rest of the team, enabling the ensuing discussion to focus on accepting that the alignment of external factors has made the current predicament inevitable and to developing future mitigating actions (i.e. acquiescing). In the 'Wee Bit of a Challenge' vignette, Mike and Marg engaged in witty repartee to play the roles of coercive boss and reluctant employee, thereby constructing a greater sense of legitimacy around Marg's appointment. This face-building exchange in turn enables the collective construction of a new plan for graduate engagement (i.e. empowerment). In the 'Friggin' Mystical Conversation' vignette, Mike wielded irony to quickly impose his interpretation while sarcastically undermining Will and Ashley (i.e. channelling). Finally, in 'You Need Drugs' episode, the team deployed irony to deflect attention from the issue using in-jokes to exclude Maria from the in-group. Here the conversation swung towards rejecting of the alternative views of Maria and the Telford Survey in favor of continuing the status quo (i.e. dismissing). These findings point to important patterns in language use, which help to better understand why we in specific situations can see organizational actors using irony in particular ways, with implications that can be radically different. While our findings point to interesting patterns, future research could take this forward and elaborate on the role of various discursive means in face-building versus face-threatening process dynamics.

Importantly, our analysis also highlights the intersubjective dynamics in irony use. While research in this area has often focused on specific utterances or tropes, our analysis helps to connect them to the broader conversational dynamic in context. By so doing, our analysis extends the way incongruity theory has conventionally been used (Attardo 2010; Meyer 2000; Swabey 1962). In particular, our analysis shows how the processing of incongruity is likely to involve both establishing position and a sense of modality of action. While these dynamics may be specific to dealing with controversial issues, we can also think that similar or analogous ones may characterize ironic conversations in other settings. In these intersubjective dynamics, emotional and political aspects seem to be play a key role. As to emotions, the language used in our vignettes is emotion-laden and one can interpret the conversations as processes where a mix of emotions may eventually lead to 'emotional closure.'[5] While our discursive analysis has not been able to focus on the collective level of

---

[5] We are grateful for our anonymous reviewer for offering this point to us.

29

emotions, our findings do suggest that future work on the emotional aspects could significantly add to discursive incongruity theory. Similarly, power and politics are an inherent part of the intersubjective dynamics. In particular, the tensions expressed as incongruity are manifestations of political divides in the organization. Going deeper into power and politics is beyond the scope of our analysis, but offers an important area for a further extension of incongruity theory.

Furthermore, our analysis also adds to research into the role of humor and irony in complex environments (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Holmes 2000; Lynch 2009; Pizzini 1991) by showing how irony can create 'safe spaces' for organizational members. Thus, our findings resonate with Cooren's (2010, 2012) concept of 'ventriloquism' where irony allows the actors to use voices that are not their own but colored with humor and exaggeration. As our observations illustrate, laughter provoked by irony often signals that the conversation has entered a state of play, disarming individuals in a way that 'straight' non-ironic discussion cannot. Thus, although not necessary in irony, laughter may serve not only as a marker of successful use of humor but also serve as a sign for the participants to move to the safe space of irony use. Having said that, we maintain that not all irony use is characterized by positive, emotional and harmonious interaction, but that ironic conversations may also include aggressive face-work and negative emotions.

Conclusion

Our paper has focused on the undertheorized and underexplored issue of how irony can help organizational members to deal with controversy and to move on. We have drawn on the discursive incongruity theory to apply that to organizations coping with controversy. On this basis, we offer a theoretical model which elucidates four distinctive pathways in which irony is used and how it affects the intersubjective dynamics involved. Thus our analysis significantly advances understanding of how organizations deal with controversy and is an important step in increasing our comprehension of the use of irony in organization.

Our analysis nonetheless has boundary conditions and limitations that should be taken seriously. In particular, we underline the context-dependent use of irony. For example, our ethnography revealed the executive team of DSI Australia, particularly its leader Mike, to be relatively jocular and witty individuals relative to other teams we had observed, both in DSI and elsewhere. In such a context, less witty subordinates might potentially have been less inclined to use verbal irony to challenge colleagues and their superiors than in this case, thus leading to different sensemaking pathways and alternative outcomes. Although we had

multiple episodes of a unit of analysis, we nonetheless recognize that our insights are only derived from a single organization, DSI. In other situations and settings where the cycles of change are less acute, it may be that the use of verbal irony is less prevalent or used differently. Thus, there is a need to study the use of irony in other organizational, cultural and institutional settings and to compare the findings. In particular, there is a need to recognize that the use of irony evolves in specific communities of practice (such as the Engineering profession in Australia), and thus it would be fascinating to examine differences in its character and use between communities (e.g. the engineering profession in Australia, compared to the same profession in the UK and USA), even within a single organization, like DSI, as well as the effects of any differences. It would also be interesting to examine the competence of different participants in their use of humor and irony, as some are either not able to do so, or are less skillful in its deployment.

Our analysis has also mostly dealt with the 'successful' use of irony. Thus, future research could benefit from focusing more on failed attempts of irony use and their implications. Furthermore, it would be important to more systematically examine how the processes where irony is used differ from other cases where the actors might use other discursive means or tropes (Sillince and Barker 2012; Sillince and Golant 2017). Our analysis points to the key role of emotions and affect in the use of irony and reactions to it; and focuses on these emotional aspects and dynamics is a major challenge for future research, in terms of the role of collective shared emotions in ironic conversations (Zietsma et al. 2018). There is also a need to elucidate the role of power and politics in irony use in different settings. This can include analysis of the positions and roles of people when dealing with controversial issues – ranging from 'tempered radicals' (Meyerson and Scully 1995) to masters of dry wit or sarcasm. In addition to analysis of various forms of verbal irony, we suggest that the expression and effects of irony might also be observed from non-verbal cues such as facial expressions or body language. Further research might use video to better capture how individuals in different roles and positions of seniority, utilize irony in their sensemaking interactions.

By focusing on how verbal irony develops alternate perspectives that help construct incongruity around existing understanding of issues and the effects, our study therefore underlines the performative nature of irony, the imperative to act that it provides, and how it can help actors to move on. Just as Kierkegaard (1841/1965) drew attention to how irony can provide a stimulus to thought that can 'quicken' conversation when it becomes lethargic, and 'discipline' it when it degenerates, in the specific context of senior management team meetings, our study shows how alternate logics emerging from irony can prevent participants from

becoming entrapped in incidental understandings. To that extent, we hope this paper will encourage more organization and management scholars to focus on this important topic and encourage practitioners to be more aware of, and to practice, verbal irony as a sensemaking skill.

References

Abdallah, C., A. Langley. 2014. The double edge of ambiguity in strategic planning. *J Management Stud* **51**(2) 235-264.

Ackroyd, S., P. Thompson. 1999. *Organisational Misbehaviour*. Sage, London.

Alvesson, M., D. Kärreman. 2007. Constructing mystery: Empirical matters in theory development. *Acad Management Rev* **32**(4) 1265-1281.

Attardo, S. 2002. Humor and irony in interaction: From mode adoption to failure of detection. *Emerging communication* **3** 159-180.

Attardo, S. 2010. *Linguistic theories of humor*. Walter de Gruyter.

Berger, A.A. 1976. Anatomy of a joke. *J Comm* **26**(1) 113-115.

Bergson, H. 1914. *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic*. Macmillan, London.

Bourgeois, L.J.I., K.M. Eisenhardt. 1988. Strategic decision processes in high velocity environments: four cases in the microcomputer industry. *Management Sci* **34**(7) 816-835.

Brown, P., S.C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Charman, S. 2013. Sharing a laugh: The role of humour in relationships between police officers and ambulance staff. *Internat J Sociol Social Policy* **33**(3/4) 152-166.

Clarke, I., W. Kwon, R. Wodak. 2012. A context-sensitive approach to analysing talk in strategy meetings. *British Journal of Management* **23**(4) 455-473.

Cooper, C. 2008. Elucidating the bonds of workplace humor: A relational process model. *Human Relations* **61**(8) 1087-1115.

Cooren, F. 2010. *Action and agency in dialogue: Passion, incarnation and ventriloquism*. John Benjamins Publishing.

Cooren, F. 2012. Communication theory at the center: Ventriloquism and the communicative constitution of reality. *J Comm* **62**(1) 1-20.

Cooren, F., T. Kuhn, J. Cornelissen, T. Clark. 2011. Communication, Organizing and Organization: An Overview and Introduction to the Special Issue. *Organ Stud* **32**(9) 1149-1170.

Cooren, F., F. Matte, C. Benoit-Barné, B.H. Brummans. 2013. Communication as ventriloquism: A grounded-in-action approach to the study of organizational tensions. *Comm Monographs* **80**(3) 255-277.

Cornelissen, J.P., R. Durand. 2014. Moving forward: Developing theoretical contributions in management studies. *J Management Stud* **51**(6) 995-1022.

Culpeper, J. 2011. *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Culpeper, J. 2016. Impoliteness strategies *Interdisciplinary studies in pragmatics, culture and society*. Springer, 421-445.

Cunliffe, A., C. Coupland. 2012. From hero to villain to hero: Making experience sensible through embodied narrative sensemaking. *Human Relations* **65**(1) 63-88.

Descartes, R. 1728. *Les passions de l'âme*.

Duncan, J.W. 1982. Humor in management: Prospects for administrative practice and research. *Acad Management Rev* **7**(1) 136-142.

Duncan, J.W. 1984. Perceived humor and social network patterns in a sample of task oriented groups: A re-examination of prior research. *Human Relations* **37**(11) 895-907.

Duncan, J.W., L.R. Smeltzer, T.L. Leap. 1990. Humor and work: Application of joking behavior to management. *J Management* **16**(2) 255-278.

Eisenberg, E.M. 1984. *Strategic Ambiguities: Essays on Communication, Organization, and Identity*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Fairclough, N. 2003. *Analyzing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge, London.

Festinger, L. 1957. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press.

Ford, J.D., L.W. Ford. 1995. The role of conversations in producing intentional change in organizations. *Acad Management Rev* **20**(3) 541-570.

Freud, S. 1950. Humour. J. Strachey, ed. *Collected papers: Miscellaneous Papers, 1888-1938*. Hogarth and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London.

Goffman, E. 1967. *Interaction ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*. Penguin, Harmondsworth.

Gylfe, P., H. Franck, E. Vaara. 2019. Living with paradox through irony. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

Hatch, M.J. 1997. Irony and the social construction of contradiction in the humour of a management team. *Organ Sci* **8**(3) 275-288.

Hatch, M.J., S.B. Ehrlich. 1993. Spontaneous humour as an indicator of paradox and ambiquity in organizations. *Organ Stud* **14**(4) 505-526.

Hoad, T.F., ed. 1993. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Holmes, J. 2000. Politeness, power and provocation: how humour functions in the workplace. *Discourse Stud* **2**(2) 159-185.

Hoyle, E., M. Wallace. 2008. Two faces of organizational irony: Endemic and pragmatic. *Organ Stud* **29**(11) 1427-1447.

Jarzabkowski, P., J. Lê. 2017. We have to do this and that? You must be joking: Constructing and responding to paradox through humor. *Organ Stud* **28**(3-4) 433-462.

Kant, I. 1987. Critique of Judgment. 1790. *Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett* **987**.

Kaplan, S. 2008. Framing contests: Strategy making under uncertainty. *Organ Sci* **19**(5) 729-752.

Kierkegaard, S. 1841/1965. *The Concept of Irony*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.

King, K.N. 1988. The Use of Humor in Dispute Resolution. *Negotiation J* **4**(2) 119-123.

Kotthoff, H. 2003. Responding to irony in different contexts: on cognition in conversation. *J Pragmatics* **35** 1387-1411.

Kotthoff, H. 2006. Gender and humor: The state of the art. *J Pragmatics* **38**(1) 4-25.

Kreuz, R.J., R.M. Roberts. 1995. Two cues for verbal irony: Hyperbole and the ironic tone of voice. *Metaphor and symbol* **10**(1) 21-31.

Krzyanowski, M. 2011. Ethnography and critical discourse analysis. *Critical Discourse Stud* **SI 8**(4).

Kwon, W., I. Clarke, R. Wodak. 2009. Organizational decision-making, discourse, and power: Integrating across contexts and scales. *Discourse & Comm* **3**(3) 273-302.

Kwon, W., I. Clarke, R. Wodak. 2014. Micro-level discursive strategies for constructing shared views around strategic issues in team meetings. *J Management Stud* **51**(2) 265-290.

LaFave, L., J. Haddad, W.A. Maeson. 1976. Superiority, enhanced self-esteem and perceived incongruity humor theory. A.J. Chapman, H.C. Foot, eds. *Humor and laughter: Theory, research and applications*. Wiley, New York, 63-91.

Lampert, M.D., S.M. Ervin-Tripp. 2006. Risky laughter: teasing and self-directed joking among male and female friends. *J Pragmatics* **38**(1) 51-72.

Lee, T.W. 1999. *Using Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*. Sage.

Locke, K., K. Golden-Biddle, M.S. Feldman. 2008. Making Doubt Generative: Rethinking the Role of Doubt in the Research Process. *Organ Sci* **19**(6) 907-918.

Lynch, O.H. 2002. Humorous communication: Finding a place for humor in communication research. *Comm Theory* **12**(4) 423-445.

Lynch, O.H. 2009. Kitchen antics: The importance of humour and maintaining professionalism at work. *J Appl Comm Res* **37** 444-464.

Maitlis, S., M.K. Christianson. 2014. Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward. *Acad Management Ann* **8**(1) 57-125.

McGhee, P.E., E. Pistolesi. 1979. *Humor: Its origin and development*. WH Freeman San Francisco.

Menz, F. 1999. 'Who am I gonna do this with?': Self-organization, ambiguity and decision-making in a business enterprise. *Discourse & Society* **10**(1) 101-128.

Meyer, J.C. 2000. Humor as a double-edged sword: Four functions of humor in communication. *Comm Theory* **10**(3) 310-331.

Meyerson, D.E., M.A. Scully. 1995. Crossroads tempered radicalism and the politics of ambivalence and change. *Organ Sci* **6**(5) 585-600.

Morreall, J. 1983. *Taking laughter seriously*. SUNY Press.

Patriotta, G., S. Spedale. 2009. Making sense through face: Identity and social interaction in a consultancy task force. *Organ Stud* **30**(11) 1227-1248.

Peirce, C.S. 1998. Pragmatism as the Logic of Abduction. P.E. Project, ed. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 2 (1893-1913)*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 226-241.

Pizzini, F. 1991. Communication hierarchies in humour: Gender differences in the obstetrical / gynaecological setting. *Discourse & Society* **2**(4) 477-488.

Plester, B., J. Sayers. 2007. 'Taking the piss': Functions of banter in the IT industry. *Humor* **20** 157-187.

Putnam, L.L., G.T. Fairhurst, S. Banghart. 2016. Contradictions, dialectics, and paradoxes in organizations: A constitutive approach. *Acad Management Ann* **10**(1) 65-171.

Quintilian. 1920. *The Institutio oratoria of Quintilian (Original work written first century A.D.)*. Heinemann, London.

Reisigl, M., R. Wodak. 2015. The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). R. Wodak, M. Meyer, eds. *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies, 3rd revised edition*. Sage, London, 24-57.

Richie, C. 2014. 'Taking the piss': Mockery as a form of communications. *Comedy Stud* **5**(1) 33-40.

Romero, E., A. Pescosolido. 2008. Humor and group effectiveness. *Human Relations* **61**(3) 395-418.

Romero, E.J. 2005. The effect of humour on mental state and work effort. *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion* **1**(2) 137-149.

Schad, J., M.W. Lewis, S. Raisch, W.K. Smith. 2016. Paradox research in management science: Looking back to move forward. *Acad Management Ann* **10**(1) 5-64.

Scott, T. 2007. Expression of humour by emergency personnel involved in sudden deathwork. *Mortality* **12**(4) 350-364.

Seidl, D., S. Guérard. 2015. Meetings and workshops as strategy practices. D. Golsorkhi, L. Rouleau, D. Seidl, E. Vaara, eds. *The Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 564-581.

Sillince, J., P. Jarzabkowski, D. Shaw. 2012. Shaping strategic action through the rhetorical construction and exploitation of ambiguity. *Organ Sci* **23**(3) 630-650.

Sillince, J.A., J.R. Barker. 2012. A tropological theory of institutionalization. *Organ Stud* **33**(1) 7-38.

Sillince, J.A., B.D. Golant. 2017. The Role of Irony and Metaphor in Working through Paradox during Organizational Change. *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Paradox* 260.

Smith, W.J., K. Vernard Harrington, C.P. Neck. 2000. Resolving conflict with humor in a diversity context. *J Managerial Psych* **15**(6) 606-625.

Smith, W.K., M.W. Lewis. 2011. Toward a theory of paradox: A dynamic equilibrium model of organizing. *Acad Management Rev* **36**(2) 381-403.

Swabey, M.C. 1962. Comic Laughter: A Philosophical Essay. *Journal of Philosophy* **59**(14) 376-384.

Tangherlini, T.R. 2000. Heroes and lies: Storytelling tactics among paramedics. *Folklore* **111**(1) 43-66.

Teague, F., A. Preminger, T. Brogan. 1993. *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton University Press.

Tracy, S.J., K.K. Myers, C.W. Scott. 2006. Cracking jokes and crafting selves: Sensemaking and identity management among human service workers. *Comm Monographs* **73**(3) 283-308.

Tsang, E.W.K., F. Elsaesser. 2011. How contrastive explanation facilitates theory building. *Acad Management Rev* **36** 401-419.

Utsumi, A. 2000. Verbal irony as implicit display of ironic environment: Distinguishing ironic utterances from nonirony. *J Pragmatics* **32**(12) 1777-1806.

van Dijk, T.A. 2008. *Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Van Maanen, J., J.B. Sørensen, T.R. Mitchell. 2007. The interplay between theory and method. *Acad Management Rev* **32**(4) 1145-1154.

Veale, T., K. Feyaerts, G. Brône. 2006. The cognitive mechanisms of adversarial humor. Walter de Gruyter.

Weick, K.E. 2007. The generative properties of richness. *Acad Management J* **50**(1) 14-19.

Weick, K.E., L.D. Browning. 1986. Argument and narration in organizational communication. *J Management* **12**(2) 243-259.

Weick, K.E., K.M. Sutcliffe, D. Obstfeld. 2005. Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking. *Organ Sci* **16**(4) 409-421.

Westwood, R.I., A. Johnston. 2013. Humor in organization: From function to resistance. *Humor* **26**(2) 219-247.

Wodak, R. 1996. *Disorders of discourse*. Longman, London.

Wodak, R. 2011. *The Discourse of Politics in Action: 'Politics as Usual', 2nd Edition*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Wodak, R. 2013. Analyzing meetings in political and business contexts. Different genres – similar strategies? P. Cap, O. Okulska, eds. *Genres in Political Discourse*. Benjamins, Amsterdam, 187-221.

Wodak, R. 2014. Perspectives from Critical Discourse Studies and the Discourse-Historical Approach. F. Cooren, E. Vaara, A. Langley, H. Tsoukas, eds. *Language and Communication at Work: Discourse, Narrativity, and Organizing*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 39-70.

Wodak, R., M. Krzyànowski, B. Forchtener. 2011. The interplay of language ideologies and contextual cues in multilingual interactions: Language choice and code-switching in European Union institutions. *Language & Society* **41**(2) 157-186.

Yakhlef, A., A. Essén. 2013. Practice innovation as bodily skills: The example of elderly home care service delivery. *Organization* **20**(6) 881-903.

Zietsma, C., M. Toubiana, M. Voronov, A. Roberts. 2018. *Emotions in organization theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Table 1 – Regular and invited meeting participants

DSI Executive Board Members	Invited Meeting Participants
Mike – Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Cary – Senior Finance Manager
Bradley – Chief Operating Officer (COO)	Anna – HR Consultant, Telford Consulting (external guest)
Harris – Director of Finance (DoF)	Emily – Graduate Training Program Representative
Adam – Director of HR (DHR)	Larissa – Graduate Training Program Representative
Larry – Director of Engineering (DoE)	Margaret – Corporate Communications Manager
Will – Osprey Program Director (DoO)	

Figure 1 – Acquiescing Pathway: The 'Wooden Dollars' Vignette

1	Bradley:	The only other thing I wanted to mention was – so I think we've – I just – before I move to our shareholder, comment was made by Peter McRae to me on Friday that he and Eric agreed that this was the most constructive negotiation I'd ever had. So I think that's quite /
2	Mike:	/ good /
3	Bradley:	/ so I think we've learned a few things in the process of getting to this position. Um – we have a problem, however, with our shareholder, in that, as most will know, we agreed the liabilities with respect to the acquisition contract, and the overhang from the acquisition contract, on a liability matrix, which was signed off by Nick and Paul Atkinson. Last week, Paul Atkinson sent us an email saying, basically he's /
4	Mike:	/ he's changing his mind? /
5	Bradley:	/ he's changed his mind, he was standing away from all of those obligations, in brief. There was a conversation between myself and Paul, which was reasonably forthright –
6	Mike:	'You tosser'!? [laughter]
7	Bradley:	Something like that, and I've prefaced it with an email, which some of you are copied.
8	Harris:	Confused Bradley?
9	Bradley:	Yeah. [laughter]
10	Mike:	Well, we just need to work on it – as I said, in the end, it would be wooden dollars for the collaboration, but, you know, we don't want to be holding all those wooden dollars, when it comes to having the airplane built.
11	Bradley:	I think we are going to end up holding most of those. That's going to be the reality.

Figure 2 – Empowering Pathway: The 'Wee Bit of a Challenge' Vignette

1	Emily:	And also, the final thing is an involvement with an elective. So that's something that's outside your role. I certainly know that us in the grad forum have found it invaluable, especially in personal development /
2	Larry:	/ what do mean by an 'elective'?
3	Emily:	Well, um, for example, they're involved in the graduate forum – I mean, we're not going to be here forever so hopefully towards the end of the year we'll start swapping.
4	Bradley:	Extracurricular activity.
5	Larry:	Oh, OK. Right.
6	Larissa:	Kind of like in uni with /
7	Emily:	/ yeah, something outside your role /
8	Larry:	/ yeah, yeah, OK.
9	Emily:	So the concept and creation program, so that's the High School robotics program, taking some time out to work with the high school kids, also the Charity Challenge, or something of that nature. It should be encouraging them to /
10	Mike:	/ I mean, a lot of that's about communication in organizations, Marg. It's just that we haven't had the process to communicate – I think you've got a wee bit of a challenge. We would really like to give you those sort of scenarios! [laughter]
11	Margaret:	[sarcastically] Yeah – brilliant – this meeting – so far! [laughter]
12	Mike:	It's also heading in your direction! [laughter].
13	Margaret:	Think I'll stay in comms! [laughs]
14	Mike:	That option's no longer open to you!
15	Margaret:	Yeah.

Figure 3 – Channelling Pathway: The 'Friggin Mystical Conversation' Vignette

1	Will:	The Osprey stuff, as well, has gone up in 2009 and up in 2010, so there's only net one million dollars that is not covered off. The 12.2 looks like it's just pushed out related to the years /
2	Cary:	/ in terms of how that converts with head count and labour costs – at the moment, the 2008 – it would – for the 65% –
3	Mike:	I'm not even listening to this [laughter].
4	Cary:	That's reasonable in terms of where we've been before in other years. It's been up 20-odd points, so /
5	Mike:	/ I guarantee you it's going to stay where it is – it's a friggin' mystical conversation that is dreamed up by accountants to scare us every year [laughter]. It's like bloody Al Qaeda or something [more laughter and talking].

Figure 4 – Dismissing Pathway: The 'You Need Drugs' Vignette

1	Anna:	Yeah, so slide 18, "Connecting to the Company Strategy," so this is about – do I understand the overall business strategy, the overall goals of the organization, okay – and do I understand how I fit into the bigger – picture, how do I fit into that big puzzle, how I fit into the bigger picture. Now the great thing is that /
2	Bradley:	Well, you've cracked it, Mike. [laughter]
3	Mike:	What have I done now? [some chuckling]
4	Bradley:	Strategy. [more chuckling]
5	Anna:	Okay [more chuckling, Anna laughs] – again, 'leaders' [Anna giggles] – to Barry's point – leaders are critical in this, so from a comms perspective and a communication perspective, no doubt people are [Anna raises voice] pretty clear on the overall direction of the company –
6	Bradley:	[interrupts] – they bloody well should be! [much laughing, Anna laughs]
7	Adam:	Mike's sacked people for not knowing. [laughter]
8	Anna:	Ah – okay /
9	Mike:	[interrupts] / we've made it a bit of a focus, with some stick and some carrot /
10	Harris:	It's time to change it again /
11	Mike:	/ You get to beat with the carrot if you don't. [laughter]
12	Anna:	Well it was obviously / [Harris talking over Anna] If you don't understand it, it probably hasn't been explained properly / a good thing, so [more talking and laughter] – yeah, so that's a [Anna raises voice] great plus, because you can see the return on your investment. Obviously, if that's been a focus area, that's good. Now it's just about taking it to the next level. So I'm Anna, and I sit in Ops, and how, and how that overall company direction and how that plays out for me is in what I do in my day to day role and the performance management system has a lot to do with that in terms of how I set the KPIs and how it aligns with what I do on a day to day basis and how it fits in with the – bigger pie.
13	Bradley:	Larry? (Yeah). How can you get an engineer to say "our leader" – saying, "your leaders fill me with excitement."
14	Larry:	[laughs a bit] You need drugs, Bradley. [laughter from everyone] You might try the rack or something.

Table 2 – Key Characteristics of the Four Pathways

Pathway	Definition	Engaging with irony	Establishing Position	Modality of action	Outcome: Moving On
Acquiescing	Framing understanding as having no alternative because of environmental constraints.	Face-building irony is used to collectively vent ideas - often towards an antagonist external to the group – to establish a basis for constructive engagement between group members.	Through this catharsis, there is collective retreat from an existing towards a diminished position that is aligned with the current context.	The group possesses neither the capacity nor the obligation to directly act on that issue.	With present action thwarted by context and expectations lowered, discussion turns towards the mitigation of damage and preventative measures for the future. In this pathway, the temporal focus of agency is shifted away from the present towards the future.
Empowering	Enabling the synthesis of a new view through inputs from two or more individuals.	Face-building irony is used to collectively vent ideas – often towards each other – to establish the basis for constructive engagement between group members.	Irony develops a collective position on the issue via contributions from multiple individuals in a safe space as a new and creative position to responds to the issue at hand.	A new and stronger view emerges and the group has the capacity and obligation to act on the issue.	Discussion shifts towards elaborating a new course of action. In this pathway, the temporal focus of agency is placed on both the present and the imagined future.
Channeling	Imposing a single and often dominant view that, it is argued, is factually or morally superior to other interpretations.	Face-threatening irony is used to vent the speaker's ideas towards the listener – either a group member or outsider – but shielded from responsibility and recourse by the plausible deniability of irony.	Irony delegitimates the position of the listener through the re/imposition of the speaker's position on the issue – serving to redirect or subsume the listener's position as subordinate to the speaker's position.	The speaker's course of action is viewed as superior and the group possesses neither the capacity nor the obligation to act on that issue.	The discussion legitimates the main speaker's view and undermines other perspectives. Expectations are reset as the temporal focus of agency remains in the present and the current course of action is reiterated and specified.
Dismissing	Reframing existing interpretations as wrong or inadequate without promoting a new view.	Face-threatening irony is used to vent the speaker's ideas towards the listener – either a group member or outsider – but shielded from responsibility and recourse by the plausible deniability of irony.	Irony delegitimates the position of the listener by questioning the validity of their position – reinforcing the speaker's existing position by rejecting moves to consider any aspect of the listener's position.	Action is not necessary as the group lacks the capacity to respond to and has no obligation or responsibility to act on that issue.	With present action reiterated, discussion shifts towards further legitimating and boosting the speaker's view by criticising others. The absence of a need for change downplays agency.

Figure 5 – A process model of irony in pathways to deal with and move on with controversial issues

1. Issue emergence
2. Constructing Incongruity
3. Engaging with irony
4. Establishing position
5. Modality of action
6. Moving on

Context

Controversial Issue

if irony

If no irony

Straight conversation

Terse, lengthy, indirect, polite

if insufficient or failed irony

Speaker's expectations

Pragmatic insincerity

Negative attitude to expectation

An implicit display of irony

Face building dynamic

Face threatening dynamic

Retreating to a new position

Deferring action

Constructing a new position

Identifying new actions

Imposing a position

Redirecting action

Rejecting other positions

Continuing action

Acquiescing Pathway
Framing understanding as having no alternative because environmental constraints leads to a collective retreat to a new position and a focus on the future and damage mitigation

Empowering Pathway
Synthesizing a more inclusive view through inputs from two or more individuals leads to the shaping and elaboration of a new view and imagining of new futures

Channelling Pathway
Subsuming other interpretations under a single and often dominant view that is argued as factually or morally superior to other interpretations

Dismissing Pathway
Rejecting alternative interpretations and reinforcing a single and often status quo view without promoting a new view leading to existing views and downplaying agency

Using Irony to Move on from Controversial Issues

Episode No.	ISSUE & CONTEXT		IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY					PROCESSING INCONGRUITY		OUTCOME OF IRONY		
	Issue	Nature of discussion	Condition 1: Speaker Expectation	Condition 2: Insincere violation of norms	Condition 3: Negative emotion	Ironic / insufficiently ironic	Incongruity created	Establishing position	Modality of action	Counterfactual	How the issue is moved on	Pathway
47	Ten year service awards.	The team discuss forms of recognition for staff who have served for 5 or 10 years or longer.	Long-service awards 'like a clock or a piece of glass' are regarded as reasonable.	Gifts will be cheap ('plaquey things').	The CEO mocks and says it would be 'too hard' for him to work out, and says the gifts offers little 'bloody incentive'.	Ironic	The importance of long-service recognition is contrasted vs the cheap nature of service gifts being given.	The CEO says the scheme offers little 'bloody incentive' as a challenge to the Company to address it.	The CEO says is 'too hard' for him (to work out a solution) and expects action from the Company itself.	The team might have continued to elaborate how existing gifts could be improved to make them commensurate with a decade of service.	Challenge voiced to company to invoke radical action.	**Acquiescing**
5	Wooden Dollars	The team discuss contracts that colleagues Nick and Paul Atkinson have signed off.	The contract has been signed off following 'forthright' discussion with the customer.	The CEO and COO say the shareholder is 'changing his mind' on the contract.	CEO says the customer is a 'tosser'.	Ironic	The previously stable relationship with Government is contrasted vs them changing their mind.	CEO concludes Government is accumulating 'wooden dollars' (hollow promises), challenging team to stick with, but be aware of the situation.	CEO and COO establish the Government customer's contrariness, and expect them to take action.	Bradley and Mike might have attempted to blame other members with the result the latter become defensive, cutting discussion short.	Internally challenges team and stimulates awareness and perseverance.	**Acquiescing**
75	Targets	The team discuss their commitment to financial targets.	COO says he expects them to reach targets.	He also says they are doubting themselves.	The COO is frustrated that they are 'rowing back' and changing their minds.	Ironic	The doubts the team is displaying over their target is contrasted vs the commitments expected to targets being met.	COO says that despite their doubts, they are being 'leaned on' by someone significant from Head Office.	Pressure from Head Office might mean they need to be more committed going forward.	The COO might have attempted to ask team members to simply meet established financial targets.	Establishes external expectation and presses team members to progress.	**Acquiescing**
43	Inappropriate emails	The team discuss disciplining a female supervisor who has circulated pornographic material around the business via email, including to a female trainee.	Employees don't circulate inappropriate material.	The HRD says the supervisor has 'something of a reputation about town' and that the email has gone to about 'four thousand people'.	He calls it an 'epidemic' and says the 'whole workforce' may need sacking.	Ironic	This 'inappropriate email' is contrasted vs the normally good behaviour of employees.	HRD exaggerates by saying the email has gone to over 4,000 people.	Whips up need for urgent and widespread action.	HRD might have treated the case as isolated and needing only proscribed action.	Creates need for urgent internal action.	**Acquiescing**
41	New leadership at Rubrix	The team discuss new leadership at one of their suppliers, Rubrix.	The new leader will bring clarity.	He is described as 'French' and 'bloody hard to understand'.	The CEO said he 'couldn't understand a fucking word' [of the new leader].	Ironic	The difficulty of understanding Rubrix' new leader is contrasted vs.the importance of their contracts.	The Rubrix contract is important to DSI but the new leader there may jeopardise it.	CEO makes team aware of need to handle new Rubrix leader with caution.	The CEO might simply have emphasised the importance of the Rubrix contract.	Underlines importance of project and cautious treatment.	**Acquiescing**
93	Electronic Support Measures (ESM) -- Reprise	The team re-assess progress on the ESM deal, because slow progress is potentially putting the Osprey Project on a 'critical path' (see episode 12).	Osprey's progress cannot be put at risk, but expectation is not absolutely clear.	DoO's intimation that people feel ESM is doing a 'good job' is only expressed weakly.	There is no negative emotion expression evident.	Insufficiently ironic	The importance of ESM contract is only weakly constructed vs the importance of Osprey the company's most significant project.	The DoO expresses doubt that ESM is working well.	DoE fails to establish ESM as a credible threat to Osprey.	The importance of ESM might have been argued straight forwardly.	Irony is not acute enough. No movement.	**Acquiescing (failure)**
85	Agreeing a realistic cash position	The team discuss the cash position of their business.	The business unit is expected to maintain clarity over it's cash position.	The CEO says he anticipates some 'robust' discussions in the forthcoming meeting with the Group CEO from the UK.	He describes the Group CEO as 'very histrionic'.	Ironic	The recent 'unrealistic' views is contrasted vs the lack of clarity over cash position.	The CEO describes the Director as 'histrionic' to imply that he will not accept their equivocality over their cash position..	The team is urged to be more realistic on cash.	The CEO might have simply asked the team to develop a more certain and committed approach to their cash position.	Exaggerates external view of significant other to press team to change view.	**Acquiescing**
14	Osprey	The team talk about progress of the major Osprey production project against its 'critical path', because of delays in parts for Electronic Support Measures ('ESM') for electronic warfare (or 'EW').	Osprey is the most significant contract and it on schedule.	It is said that the supplier is 'posturing' and threatening progress.	The CEO urges them to 'stick with it' and 'get their reward in heaven'.	Ironic	The supplier's 'posturing' is contrasted vs the significance of the Osprey contract.	The CEO uses the 'posturing' of ESM to imply a threat to the Osprey contract.	The team is urged to 'stick with' and mitigate threats.	The CEO might have simply stated the importance of maintaining progress on Osprey.	Exaggerates threat to press for progress.	**Acquiescing**
25	Implementing expansion of the graduate scheme	Discussion focuses on creating a more integrated and better co-ordinated graduate programme.	The CEO has already agreed Margaret from Communications will take on the coordinating role, but others don't know.	He asks rhetorically 'who would I go to' to prevent the problem, then answers saying 'if in doubt go to Margaret'.	COO contends 'She's actually quite a nice person'.	Ironic	The ineffective management of graduate development vs the size and form of the graduate training scheme.	The CEO rhetorically paints a picture that Margaret is the only one to go to.	The CEO's ironic joke places the responsibility on Margaret to oversee the graduates.	Mike the CEO might have simply asked Margaret face-to-face in the meeting in front of the whole team, to take on responsibility for the Graduate scheme coordination.	Boosts her credibility, providing a challenge to her to say no in front of the team and lose face.	**Channelling**
56	Contracting L3	Reference is made to 'L3' a leading provider of martime systems and solutions.	The CEO know the L3 leader is good.	He suggests that his colleague should not have talked to him.	He says cuttingly 'Well, then you don't need to talk to us then, do you?'	Ironic	L3's leader is competent, vs he is not up to the standard of their own CEO at DSI.	The CEO doubts his colleague who has gone around him.	He tries to stop him acting in this way saying 'Well, then you don't need to talk to us then, do you?'	The CEO might have told his colleague concerned to no longer talk to the L3 leader directly.	Implies his colleague's approach is inappropriate and boosts his own standing.	**Channelling**
77	Project status	The team query the status of a project.	The project is as reported.	The CEO stresses that it is not, and highlights the need to 'check' and 'maintain' their position.	CEO says the financial details he has given are 'sub-edited' and partial.	Ironic	Financials details are correct vs those of the project are wrong.	CEO highlights the team need to 'check' and 'maintain' their position.	He challenges the speakers actions of editing and implies he should not do it in the future.	The CEO might have told his colleague not to [mis]edit data.	Lays down that as CEO he wants the 'full picture'.	**Channelling**
45	Frank's team.	The CEO reflects on his recent meeting with a local team.	Frank's part of the business is performing.	CEO says Frank's team gave him a 'bum steer' and that he was 'opposed' to change.	He describes Frank as 'dopey'.	Ironic	Frank's team can get behind change more vs his team is working well.	The CEO says Frank is 'opposed to change'.	The action implied is Frank needs to smarten up his team's act.	The CEO could have simply said he would enforce the change.	Casts doubt on the capability of Frank, saving the CEO from issuing a directive.	**Channelling**
66	Surprise findings in the staff leadership survey.	The team discuss the findings of the leadership survey.	They will be performing well measured against others.	The HRD says 'Finance is a surprise' and others concur.	CEO dismisses the findings, saying 'There's no surprise and nothing in it for me'.	Ironic	The national survey of company leaders by Telford is a surprise vs does it does not have anything to tell them.	The Finance function is responsible, because of poor leadership.	The CEO concludes the data contains no surprises and no action is needed.	The HRD might have explicitly stated that the Finance function's poor leadership explains DSI's poor showing in the Telford Survey.	The CEO implies he already knows that Finance is responsible and flags it needs to do better.	**Channelling**
87	Larry's 'straw man' over Project Managers.	Here the team is discussing the shortage of good Project Managers in the company. Several members of the team had told us directly that DoO Will had developed something of a reputation for 'hogging' what is rare expertise in DSI (i.e. Project Managers), at the expense of other projects in the business, and this tension is surfaced within the discussion.	There is no shortage of project managers.	Their misuse will be recognised in 2-3 weeks when the contract is signed.	CEO directs criticism of DoO by putting an 'easy action' on DoE as a 'straw man'.	Ironic	Questioning of project manager sufficiency vs Will is 'hogging' them.	Will is over-using project managers.	The DoE is asked to produce a 'straw man' to reveal how they are being used/misused.	The CEO could simply have agreed that DoO Will is hogging project management resource.	He says there is no shortage, but by directing Larry as DoE to develop a 'straw man' proposal that will likely find that Will is indeed monopolising the resource, he neutralises and mitigates potential criticism.	**Channelling**

Appendix

Episode No.	ISSUE & CONTEXT		IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY					PROCESSING INCONGRUITY		OUTCOME OF IRONY		
	Issue	Nature of discussion	Condition 1: Speaker Expectation	Condition 2: Insincere violation of norms	Condition 3: Negative emotion	Ironic / insufficiently ironic	Incongruity created	Establishing position	Modality of action	Counterfactual	How the issue is moved on	Pathway
81	Project targets	The team discuss income targets for key projects.	CEO seems to expect that projects will 'up their game'.	A colleague describes current project performance as a 'baseline'.	The CEO criticises performance, suggesting a 'gap' they will need to 'actualise' over the next year.	Ironic	Projects are underperforming vs compared to target.	The CEO criticises the poor performance of one project concluding all colleagues and their projects will need to 'up their game'.	The 'gap' identified by the CEO is left with colleagues to 'actualise' over the following year.	The CEO could have criticised the performance of key projects and/or their leaders.	By saying their is a gap in performance, he implies expectation of performance is not fixed, mitigating criticism and motivating them to do better.	Channelling
28	Facilities negotiation	The team negotiate with a property management company, regarding its sale to packaging company Cormac.	The consultant will advise them well about their building needs.	CEO implies the [poor] advice they are receiving is costing $350k.	He criticises them, saying "we can give them a bit of consulting advice…" ourselves [for that price].	Ironic	Weak advice from consultants vs the DSI team could teach them a thing or two about consulting.	The CEO argues they are not doing a proper job for what they are charging.	Consultant's advice to acquire expensive offices compared to their own 'cheap and frugal' offices is used to imply they are asking too much for their services.	The CEO might have simply criticised the consultancy for charging too much for poor advice.	By implying they could give better advice themselves, the consultancy is undermined without the CEO losing face.	Channelling
82	Dependency on Singapore.	The team focus on a contract with the Singaporean government.	The Singaporean project is critical and needs therefore needs to work well.	A gap in sales from Singapore will need closing.	The CEO cynically refers to the gap as a 'deferred dependency', thus quietly criticising the DoO.	Ironic	The shortage of sales vs the importance of the Singapore project to the business.	The CEO emphasises the importance of the project to the business.	By describing the shortfall as a 'deferred dependency', the CEO maintains pressure on the DoO to eventually achieve it.	The CEO could have directly criticised the DoO as being short on sales for Singapore.	Expectation for Singapore is made clear while mitigating blame.	Channelling
61	Salary increases in the business	The team talk about the implications of agreed salary increases.	Those who get salary increases will deserve them.	CEO says he 'recollects' it was the same last year, as if no-one has earned one.	He describes colleagues as 'under achievers'.	Ironic	The salary increment scheme is working as it should vs it is not because of the quality of Management judgement.	The COO says salary increases are rewarding 'under achievers'.	The CEO accuses the DoM, implying it is his area where most of the 'under achievers' are to be found.	The CEO may well have stated unequivocally that many salary increases are unwarranted.	Rather than criticising overtly, he implies the bar needs to be raised.	Channelling
3	Automatic supervisor level guidelines	The team is discussing automatic delegation of certain responsibilities to individuals required by the parent company.	Delegates are appropriate.	HRD says delegations are going too far.	DoE suggests that there is "no smoke without fire" in terms of engineer calls.	Ironic	Questioning of whether team is doing what is needed to make things work is contrasted vs the automatic delegation of responsibilities by the HRD.	DoE says engineers are calling for clarity on the position, and contends the HRD is not doing his job.	The DoE uses a metaphor to mask his criticism of, and blame, the HRD, implying that automatic delegation isn't working and he needs to do something about it.	The DoE could have accused the HRD directly for not doing his job well.	The metaphor enables indirect criticism of the HRD by resetting expectation.	Channelling
80	Harris's mobile	The CEO Mike asks DoF Harris about his mobile phone.	The CEO's expectation is *not* made apparent.	He draws attention to a 'colleague' decision to leave the room.	It is not clear if he is 'having a go' at him, or making a point about attention to the meeting in general.	Insufficiently ironic	It is acceptable for staff to take calls while in a meeting, vs it is not acceptable to do so.	The CEO draws attention to a colleagues' decision to leave the room, as if to take a call, to make his position that isn't acceptable.	It is unclear if he is 'having a go' at him, or making a point about attention to the meeting in general.	The CEO might have been clearer as to whether he is criticising the DoF directly, or colleagues more generally.	The criticism of behaviour falters because the target of irony is unclear.	Channelling (failure)
88	Project Management deployment	COO Bradley resists a task he was actioned with regarding Project Managers and how they are deployed.	Bradley is to take the minutes of the meeting.	He contends 'it's not quite the way we discussed it' (at the last meeting), explaining 'my task was to work out' if it were *possible*.	The CEO asks 'Did you not write the minutes, Bradley?'	Insufficiently ironic	Bradley volunteered to write the minutes vs he did not.	Bradley the COO resists and contends what was asked and agreed. When asked by the CEO he continues his resistance, saying "Not this one".	The interchange fails to clarify whether or not the COO was asked to report on the issue and CEO attempt to direct him seems to fail.	The CEO could have directed the COO to take the minutes.	COO Bradley's contention of the meeting minute resists the CEO placement of the task.	Channelling (failure)
68	You Need Drugs	Corporates worldwide – not just in DSI – believe that a knowledge of the strategic direction of a company is a good thing for employees because it serves to align their effort and resources toward a common goal. In this interaction, we see the team grappling with that very issue. Here the team focus on the results of the staff survey which ask staff if they understand the strategy of DSI.	Staff understand the strategy.	Anna the HR consultant shows staff do seem to understand it. COO responds saying 'Well, you've cracked it, Mike' as if disbelieving. HRD adds Mike has 'sacked people for not knowing'.	CEO Mike implies hie needs to use incentives as a carrot as well as force, but to 'beat' them with it or use 'drugs' to excite engineers about strategy.	Ironic	Staff understand strategy vs DSI's leadership is seen as not good.	By saying the CEO has 'cracked it' the COO intimates that DSI leadership is ok and the CEO does not need to do anything.	The belief is that nothing needs doing.	Team members might have flatly disagreed with, or politely raised concerns about, Anna's assertions from the survey. Open disagreement might have damaged relationships with Telford, or portrayed senior management as unable to take criticism.	Instead, irony allows the team to pay lip service to their 'woeful score' on the survey while 'kicking the can 'down the road' by undermining its credibility.	Dismissing
64	Relationship with Consolidated Aerospace	The team discuss their relationships with companies involved in the HIC consortia, principally Consolidated Aerospace. The HIC (Hornet Industry Coalition) is a collection of industry partners working with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) concerned with a structural modification to the Hornet aircraft.	The HIC is working.	DoO suggests that the HIC *isn't* working and that there is a "fair bit of drama" and saying the Commonwealth is "doing its normal thing… [by being] out of control".	The COO resists the action' the DoO tries to put on him by saying he 'did not get that action'.	Ironic	Maintaining control over HIC vs it is important to them.	DoO makes clear his view that the Commonwealth is 'out of control'.	The COO denies the DoO putting the action on him, saying he 'did not get that action'.	The DoO could have said that the Commonwealth was not coordinating HIC properly, and insisted the COO follows it up as requested.	The 'drama' described conveyed the situation and Commonwealth was out of control, albeit that the put of the task on the COO did not 'stick'.	Channelling
51	Core business Outsourcing	Reprising the earlier topic about childcare provision, the team talk about its outsourcing.	CEO is clear that they should not become childcare providers.	There is no danger of their business changing to this extreme.	CEO derogates their existing facilities saying 'we don't even provide our own *bloody* catering'.	Ironic	Childcare could be outsourced to improve provision vs not doing childcare work themselves.	The CEO says DSI is not a 'childcare provider' and that they should stay focused on engineering.	He draws a parallel with the fact that they don't even do their own catering, to imply that they should do nothing.	The CEO might well have said simply that they do not 'outsource' functions central to the business.	Irony is used to underline their position as an engineering company rather than a 'childcare provider', to imply a need to stay focused.	Channelling
59	Bradley's taking the Minutes	The Company Secretary is not present at this meeting and the COO Bradley has been given to stand-in and take the minutes that he normally produces as a note of what is agreed and the actions specified.	The COO says he has been given a menial task as 'minute taker', and that he should not do it.	Other's say it is a 'big responsibility'.	COO resists, saying that his minutes will be 'minimal'.	Ironic	Someone needs to take the meeting minutes, vs the task is too menial for the COO to do it.	The COO pushes back on the CEO's request.	He says his own minutes will be 'minimal'.	The COO could have refused point blank to take the minutes.	Saying they would be 'minimal' enabled him to resist while not contending the direction from the CEO.	Channelling
34	Mike's presentation	The discussion is about the CEO's talk at the graduate dinner.	His normal presentation is sufficient.	CEO responds to making his presentation more interactive as if they are getting 'carried away'.	Critically, he pushes back and says 'software' could be written to do what they are suggesting.	Ironic	The sufficiency of his normal presentation is contrasted vs the advice he is hearing.	The CEO says his team is getting 'carried away' with its suggestions.	The CEO pushes back on the suggestion what he should do.	The CEO might have simply refused to accept that his presentation needs further refinement.	By saying the team is getting 'carried away' with suggestions, the CEO acknowledges their ideas but does not commit to admitting they are necessary and taking them on board.	Channelling
84	Cash position	The team continue discussing the finances with Cary from Finance, concentrating on the cash position of DSI.	The cash positions of each project is good.	In contrast, Cary says to the team that 'you can see a large decrease' in cash.	The CEO adamantly resists saying 'We're giving them no cash…'.	Ironic	The cash positions of each part of the business are held as realistic, vs sales shortages in key areas.	The adamance of the CEO ('we're giving them no cash') resists the position taken by the Finance manager Carey ('you can see a large decrease' in cash in the business).	The resistance of the CEO urges he team to act differently and use cash effectively.	The CEO could have openly contended the Finance Manager's view on the company cash position.	Instead, he contended the relinquishment of cash by his team urging them to use cash more effectively.	Channelling

Appendix

Episode No.	Issue	Nature of discussion	Condition 1: Speaker Expectation	Condition 2: Insincere violation of norms	Condition 3: Negative emotion	Ironic / insufficiently ironic	Incongruity created	Establishing position	Modality of action	Counterfactual	How the issue is moved on	Pathway
	ISSUE & CONTEXT		**IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY**					**PROCESSING INCONGRUITY**		**OUTCOME OF IRONY**		
16	Where's the Secretary?	The CEO is checking attendance at the start in the absence of the Company Secretary, Mark. He asks HRD Adam to do so while people are arriving late.	Everyone is there.	CEO *knows* who is missing already.	CEO makes snide comments about this not attending and that someone has 'fucked off…to get himself a cup of tea".	Ironic	Whether or not people are doing all they can to attend is contrasted vs regular attendance.	The CEO acts ignorant, asking if someone is missing when he already knows.	He pushes people to attend but his expletive acts to mitigate his criticism.	The CEO could have accused a particular person – the Company Secretary – of not attending.	He belittles his absence for a trivial task (tea-making), embarrassing him, and making a general point about team behaviour that they should all be in attendance.	**Channelling**
2	Salary Adjustments	The team discuss sensitive data covering grades across all levels of the company, people's positions, and the effects of adjustments made to reward and retain graduate employees.	CEO says he expects team to be well-behaved.	He says some staff seem to be pretending to be 'graduates' in survey.	He describes them as 'masquerading'.	Ironic	Misbehaviour of some colleagues to inflate salary increases is contrasted vs them being earned.	CEO says some colleagues are 'misbehaving' and 'masquerading' as graduates to influence salary awards.	CEO and HRD support each other to establish how they'd like colleagues to behave.	The CEO could have been more direct and accused colleagues of not making salary adjustments properly.	Rather, by exaggerating their behaviour in theatrical terms, he pushes them to behave more appropriately.	**Channelling**
83	Friggin' Mystical Conversation	The conversation on sales targets on projects turns to the specific target for the Singapore project and DSI's contribution to the Consolidated Aerospace contract for the 737 Early Warning Aircraft for Singapore on a major project known as 'Osprey'.	Colleagues will defend their position and make excuses.	The CEO dismisses excuses by saying 'I'm not even listening to this'.	He uses metaphorical expletives (e.g. 'friggin' mystical conversation') and scenarios (e.g. 'dreamed up by accountants' and 'it's like bloody Al Qaeda or something') and show his incredibly towards their excuses.	Ironic	Excuses vs Osprey is 'short' on sales.	The CEO resists the excuses (saying 'I'm not even listening to this') and dismisses them.	His use of strong expletives and scenarios invokes the new behaviours he wants to see (e.g. clear, straightforward and solid figures).	The CEO could have forcefully denied team members' excuses.	Instead, he discredits the positions of the DoO and Accountant by saying they are exaggerating cost rises as if they are 'mystical terrorist threats'. He blames them for not controlling costs so that they concede.	**Channelling**
1	Anonymity of responses	The CEO says despite what has been agreed with the researchers, being anonymised in recordings isn't advisable.	CEO expects people to be responsible for what they say in front of the researchers.	Review processes had solicited a range of anonymous opinions.	CEO described these anonymous comments as 'mischief-making'.	Ironic	Anonymity in response vs the need to be responsible and frank in front of researchers.	CEO says those who are 'mischief-making' should not hide but act responsibly.	CEO says he 'wouldn't expect anyone around this table to make mischief'.	The CEO might have insisted that colleagues in his team do not given anonymised views to researchers.	Rather being seen as threatening, the CEO derides their irresponsible behaviour as making mischief.	**Channelling**
8	QBR Agenda	The team raise the forthcoming Quarterly Board Review (QBR) chaired by the main board director from the UK.	Everyone in the team will attend the QBR.	The CEO says he does not expect all of them to be *not* there.	CEO says he is 'committed' to attending, suggesting others are not.	Ironic	Apparent ambivalence of team to attend is contrasted vs the CEO intention to attend.	The CEO implies others are not as committed to attending as him.	CEO says his is not expecting them all to attend, somewhat mitigating his criticism.	The CEO could have said he insists on all colleagues attending the QBR.	Contrasting his commitment to attend with the ambivalence of others, it helped him instil a responsibility for people to attend.	**Channelling**
53	The OCD (Operational Concept Demonstration) and FPS (Functional Performance System).	DSI is committed to a culture of 'Total Performance', encompassing a customer focus, execution of programmes, financial performance, and responsible behaviour to enhance the company reputation. OCD is important to this as a means of finding out through 'field trials' to get feedback.	Systems are in place to give feedback.	The CEO says trials are not giving feedback, and adds 'So, at *least* there is an OCD and an FPS'.	He calls one collaborator a 'sleeping partner' and says they work with others, 'in theory'.	Ironic	Progress is as expected, vs progress isn't what it should be.	Progress hasn't been what it should be (CEO).	He says the team have to make the trials work.	CEO could have accused his team of not making progress.	By describing their partner as 'sleeping' he rejects the idea that the answer lies with them, instead saying it is their own responsibility to ensure trials work.	**Dismissing**
55	Teaming for 'big business' bids	The team discuss how they bid.	CEO argues they need to make the right choice of who to work with.	He intimates the quality of bid leaders varies, saying 'Pull up a chair…' so he can show how it is done.	He sardonically dismisses the view of the Government official saying 'No, you'll get *much* more than that from the future' – as if he in his experience, knows better.	Ironic	Alternative chairs vs their own CEO has more experience to do it.	They need to make the 'right choice' of bid chairs based on their experience.	Find a chair with the experience of their own CEO.	The CEO could have insisted on them making the best choice of chair.	It enables the CEO to disregard the idea that anyone can chair their bids, instead setting himself as the threshold.	**Dismissing**
6	The Boardroom coffee machine	The question is raised over the installation of a coffee machine and the team highlight the barriers to it happening.	The coffee machine ought to have been installed as requested.	The COO accuses the Group CEO from Head Office in the UK of overruling it being installed.	CEO disregards the explanation of external interference, saying instead that the company is no longer 'awash' with money for such tasks.	Ironic	The machine is needed vs Head Office says it is not.	The CEO overrules the rumour, explaining that cash isn't available for such purposes.	He offers no real explanation and extinguishes the accusation.	The CEO might well have overridden the Head Office decision as beyond their remit.	Instead, the CEO denigrates blaming the Company for the decision, and explains that the cash situation has changed and doesn't allow for such tasks now.	**Dismissing**
49	Should Executives be included in recognition schemes?	A discussion about staff rewards (pay rises) turns to their own eligibility as senior executives.	Executives on the Board should be just as entitled to rewards as other staff.	The HR advisor says the fact awards had not been received by senior executives might suggest that their claims have been viewed as ineligible.	There is no apparent emotional incongruity beyond his statement.	Insufficiently ironic	As the senior management team, they are eligible for the recognition scheme awards, vs senior leaders are dealt with separately.	Not being eligible would explain why previously awards had not been received.	Absence of emotional incongruity undermines any push for action.	The HR Advisory could have said that as a senior management they are <u>excluded</u> from the recognition scheme like other senior leaders.	The senior team implied they ought to be <u>included</u> in the scheme, but irony was neither used as a 'weight' to carry forward their idea, nor that of the HR Advisor.	**Dismissing (failure)**
69	How Chief Executives communicate internally	The team refer to what the results of the Telford survey says about the way in which the CEO chooses to communicate. The consultant compares CEO Mike's results with this of a CEO called Devin in the company MarketInfo.	The CEO's leadership is fine.	The CEO is self-effacing saying that the results suggest CEOs 'communicate seven times a month with their own employees', even though he doesn't.	He derides Devin, the subject of his comparison, describing him as a 'Lazy bastard'.	Ironic	Some company leaders seem good vs how does their own compare.	The CEO infers his counterparts' approach to internal communication is excessive.	As a team we should see through the fallacies in the comparisons.	The CEO may well have chosen to argue that his own leadership is appropriate for the situation they are in.	He denigrates his comparator by implying his communications are excessive, yet incongruously calls him 'lazy'.	**Dismissing**
54	Relationships with other companies in making bids to Government.	The DSI team talk about their relationships with two defence companies – Rubrix (an Australian engineering and construction company) and Pantheon (a US defence contractor specialising in weapons and communications) - with whom they work in making bids for Australian Government defence business contracts.	Partners only have resources to make one bid between them.	The CEO cynically disparages Rubrix as 'blackgaurds' (scoundrels) and describes their leader as 'unreliable'. He adds the leader of Pantheon is a 'puzzle'.	He asks caustically do they 'think we are stupid'?	Ironic	Both partners are important to DSI, vs they can only work with one to make a credible bid.	All their partners have issues – which is Pantheon less of a problem than Rubrix.	Work with Pantheon going forward.	The CEO could have said forthrightly than Pantheon's leader is better than that of Rubrix's.	Instead, he undermined both, conveying one as a scoundrel and the other as unreliable, to highlight the lesser of two evils and establish they need to make whichever relationship they choose to work.	**Dismissing**

Appendix

Episode No.	ISSUE & CONTEXT		IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY					PROCESSING INCONGRUITY		OUTCOME OF IRONY		
	Issue	Nature of discussion	Condition 1: Speaker Expectation	Condition 2: Insincere violation of norms	Condition 3: Negative emotion	Ironic / insufficiently ironic	Incongruity created	Establishing position	Modality of action	Counterfactual	How the issue is moved on	Pathway
65	Results of the staff leadership survey.	Anna from the consultancy, Telford, starts to take the team through the results of the staff leadership survey, which gauges how employees in a host of Australian companies view their own leadership teams.	HRM Anna appears to expect a hard time from the team, who will expect findings to reflect the way they work.	She uses space she has to say that while the HRD is sorting out his slides, they had a reasonable 30% participation.	She belittles the HRD Adam asking him to move to slide 9, saying that is 'nine clicks'. The CEO retorts he hasn't got 'enough fingers' to count.	Ironic	Leadership is important to DSI, vs we need to listen to what the HR consultant has to say.	The HR consultant knows more than the HR Director on the matter.	What she is telling them needs action.	The HR consultant might have said that the HRD's put down of the survey does not tally with healthy 30% participation.	She subtly belittles him to weaken his view instead.	Dismissing
29	Location of the new building	The Facilities consultant has joined the meeting and the team clarify where the planned building will be sited.	The consultants are there to present in response to a request from the team.	Earlier discussion prior to the consultant's arriving made it clear the team don't view this agenda item as a priority. The team fantasise shopping for, and assembling, their own IKEA furniture from the nearby store, for the new building.	The CEO snidely asks 'Across from IKEA, is it?', and adds 'You'll probably get your furniture there'.	Ironic	Is the new building needed vs the consultant and their advice is not sound.	The CEO mocks the consultant's credibility.	No action needed; it is up to the consultant to address.	The CEO could have said straightforwardly that they do not need a new building and/or that they had issues with the locations offered.	Instead, their recommendation was derided by imagining shopping for furniture from they adjacent IKEA and assembling it themselves.	Dismissing
30	Benefits of a new building	The consultant outlines the benefits of the new building.	The building development is a priority.	The CEO jokingly describes the new building as 'shiny' and says staff don't see it as important.	Despite the fact that staff are 'unhappy all the time' he says it 'Wouldn't matter where you put them!'	Ironic	Staff don't want a state-of-art building vs one is being planned.	The CEO scoffs at the proposal saying it "wouldn't matter where you put them!'.	The team make the proposal sound incredulous and without saying it, undermine the consultant.	The CEO could have said they did not need a new office building.	It enables the CEO to imply that a building did not matter because staff would never be satisfied wherever they were located.	Dismissing
31	Potential relocation sites	The consultant summarises DSI needs and options.	All proposals have been discussed by the team.	The consultant says they discussed a particular site with colleagues outside the DSI team in Melbourne, saying 'it went up to London, I think, 4 months, maybe 5 months ago'.	The CEO says the consultant 'Certainly bypassed me, if it went to London'.	Ironic	Consultant is looking at sites for their expansion, vs they are going about it in an irregular way.	The consultant is not working in an acceptable way.	They need to involve the CEO in the future.	The CEO could have accused the consultant of bypassing him and talking to Head Office in London instead.	It enables direct criticism of their behaviour and warned the consultant.	Dismissing
32	The part of the site that is ready	Here the team find out which bit of the site under consideration would be ready and available for them.	Things are going to be confirmed.	The consultant is steering us towards 'easier' sites.	COO Bradley caustically refers to the site as a 'nuclear holocaust'.	Ironic	Proposed site is ready for them, vs it is not.	Using the metaphor of a 'nuclear holocaust' is used to argue that the development is a mess and not ready.	The need for immediate action by the consultant is implied.	The COO could have bluntly stated that the relocation site is not ready.	It was implied that the site's readiness is self-evident when taking into account the 'nuclear holocaust'.	Dismissing
40	The 'Wee Wunz'	The team discuss a consultant (called 'Wee Wunz') advising them on approaches to employee childcare.	The consultant is going to help advise them on a matter crucial to employee retention.	The team – which has already agreed to reduce time on this item before the consultant joints them – disparage the quality of the consultant by sarcastically referring to their name, 'WeeWunz'.	The CEO casts aspersions (with two fingers on each hand drawing 'hooks') and saying 'brackets… consultants'. Others murmur to show concurrence.	Ironic	They need to address crucial retention issues, vs they don't like what they hear.	The CEO does not believe that the consultant is worthy of attention.	The mocking of the consultant puts down their advice.	The CEO might have chosen not to meet with the childcare consultants, as all the team prior to them joining had suggested it was wasting their time doing so.	It undermines the credibility of this particular consultant, even though they know childcare is wanted to recruit and retain employees.	Dismissing
52	Surveying staff about childcare.	The team is discuss the childcare consultant's report, benchmarking DSI's provision relative to that of other major companies.	Their position in the survey reflects the importance firms attach to childcare.	The CEO says companies like ABC, refer to their children mechanistically as 'units'.	A colleague adds derisively in agreement "ABC… how many units do you own?'	Ironic	Childcare is important vs the survey is unreliable.	The ABC comparison shows that the survey is not reliable.	No action by team required.	The CEO and team could have directly confronted the credibility of the survey.	Results at ABC are used to denigrate the benchmarking survey.	Dismissing
27	Progressing the Meeting	The team discuss whether to move on to the next agenda item, or take a brief break before the rest of the meeting.	The next item is a full one.	CEO says 'we now have a decision to take' as if it is a no brainer, to bring forward or shorten the next meeting. The COO says "Not a decision'!	CEO exaggerates saying they might want a 'quiet period' or to have some 'breathing exercises' before they decide, thus belittling the next speakers as 'only estate agents'.	Ironic	We are due to talk to the consultant about our facilities, vs but is it worth the time.	We don't want to waste time on something we don't feel is important.	We can cut the next agenda item short to reflect that feeling.	The CEO might simply have said that he is cutting the discussion short.	The issue of the new building is questioned and the status of the consultants ('only estate agents') is called into question. Attention is refocused on how they can better use their time.	Empowering
60	Winston's stressed	The CEO also points out to the team that one of the University researchers is also present at the meeting.	Everyone is on good behaviour in meetings.	The CEO draws attention to the researchers' present to alert the team that he expects good behaviour. Colleagues say one of the researchers is 'stressed' because of his house renovation and his wife, and the COO says 'just so everybody knows'.	There are no explicit words that suggest reaction to the incongruity, but the overall tone of the interaction is 'jesty', making fun of the researchers to draw attention to them as something to watch out for.	Ironic	Team behaviour is appropriate, vs we can watch what we say with externals present.	Enhanced expectation that we need to behave well in meetings when outsiders are present.	An improvement in behaviour is implied / called for.	The CEO could simply have said that he wanted colleagues to be careful what they say in front of the researchers.	More careful behaviour is called for, masked by making fun of one of the researchers.	Empowering

Appendix

Episode No.	Issue	Nature of discussion	Condition 1: Speaker Expectation	Condition 2: Insincere violation of norms	Condition 3: Negative emotion	Ironic / insufficiently ironic	Incongruity created	Establishing position	Modality of action	Counterfactual	How the issue is moved on	Pathway
	ISSUE & CONTEXT		IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY					PROCESSING INCONGRUITY		OUTCOME OF IRONY		
71	Learning from Devin's leadership	The team reflect on what DSI can learn from comparing CEO Mike's perceived leadership with that of his counterpart Devin from MarketInfo, citing how he communicates at Christmas to staff.	Mike could learn a lot from leaders of other companies.	Adam the HRD talks about his visit to MarketInfo where he saw their CEO in an open board room signing Christmas cards to everyone. He hints that they are themselves not doing these things and says that 'It does work…for that organization'.	Harris excuses Mike saying Devin does this 'Because he doesn't have email'. The HRD retorts that 'Mike does that electronically', with the sentiment of his messages to staff being "Have a good Christmas, you bastard'.	Ironic	Mike leadership is effective, vs it is not.	Senior colleagues in effect tell Mike that as CEO he can learn from other leaders and improve his approach.	There is a sense communicated that Mike either needs to communicate more, or do it differently.	The HRD could have said to Mike that, as their CEO, he isn't communicating enough, or in an appropriate way.	Colleagues collectively 'boost' Mike, jokingly implying that there are ways that they can help him improve his communication. Any implied criticism is mitigated by expletives that disparage his counterpart at Devin.	Empowering
76	The C4ISRE contract.	The team is checking on the terms of contracts before they are submitted. C4ISR stands for the full life-cycle of "Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance for land, sea and air defence platforms that aims to ensure the success of missions for global users.	There are no issues with the contract.	CEO Mike asks rhetorically 'Are we still happy with the terms C4ISRE? Is that how the customer still refers to it?'. He says "in a pinch you could put Nulka into that category', implying the customer is seeing the category differently than they are.	Paul describes the project as a 'liability', and Mike admits 'That's what I was thinking'.	Ironic	The C4ISR contract is acceptable, vs customer expectations are changing.	The customer needs have changed and this contract is now no longer attractive to us.	We could make it work by recategorising this type of business.	The CEO could have said straightforwardly that this type of contract is a liability.	Instead, they suggest other business could be added to the category to make it work.	Empowering
44	Bad behaviour and company Roadshows	The team discuss employee behaviours and how to deal with them.	Colleagues will behave appropriately on such occasions.	The CEO and DoC refer to an email from a senior company director which is alluding to poor behaviour in DSI Australia.	As if 'men behaving badly', CEO refers to 'inappropriate emails', the DoC criticises an Irishman (probably the CEO); and the HRD describes the North Ryde site as full of 'grumpy bastards'.	Ironic	Consistent and appropriate behaviour is important, especially at roadshows, vs what can we do to tackle bad behaviours.	We don't take this accusation seriously, that's why we are having a go at each others' behaviours.	Setting of awareness of need for improved behaviour when 'out and about'.	The CEO and/or DoC might have said behaviour needs of staff needs to improve when they are out.	Belittling of each other enables the team to suggest there is scope for all their behaviours to improve, effectively resetting expectation that they will do so.	Empowering
50	Cost of recognition gifts	The discussion about service awards ends with a brief interchange about the *costs* of operating it.	The costs to enhance the scheme mean it can be funded.	In hearing that DSI has already 'outsourced' the scheme to a named company, HRD jests that 'Maybe they'll (that is the outside company) put in some (additional) money'.	The CEO mocks the HRD, saying 'Or maybe Adam can offer up some of his budgetary savings' from HR, which he infers is significant.	Ironic	The reward scheme is resourced well, vs can it be strengthened.	The service awards scheme is under-funded and can be readily addressed.	Joking implies they could even fund it internally.	The HRD and/or CEO could have said that the scheme to recognise staff contributions is under-funded and not working properly.	Humorous suggestions show a willingness to make up the funding themselves and that they are serious to find a way.	Empowering
57	Security breach	The CEO tells his colleagues about a recent security breach in the company.	Security schemes are effective.	The CEO cockily says he knows how to get procedures 'waved'. A colleague relates a story about the CEOs interaction with a farmer by a company site, where they got around security.	Bruce says 'Bloody security came up…'; Paul that the guys had 'pulled balaclavas' (as if they were terrorists); and that the problem could be 'nipped in the bud'.	Ironic	Security processes at sites works well, vs does it need strengthening.	There are ways around security processes and they need strengthening.	Jesting enables them to acknowledge ways that security could be improved.	The CEO could have said simply that site security is now what it should be.	The team self-deprecate to elaborate how security can be improved.	Empowering
46	The transparency of the performance recognition scheme.	The team discuss the performance scheme designed to incentivise employees.	The company performance awards work well.	A colleague says you have to 'rob Peter to pay Paul'; the CEO talks about the effect of 'rounding errors' on salary increases; and others describe the reward gifts as poor 'Tupperware', 'key-ring' tags, 'blinged-up', and 'weapons of self-destruction'.	CEO Mike cuts to the chase to say 'I mean money. People like money' to conclude that the scheme is a diversion and is missing the mark.	Ironic	The company performance reward scheme works reasonably, vs can rewards be made more meaningful.	The performance recognition scheme is not working.	The team fantasise about how the incentive scheme might work/what it needs to work.	CEO Mike could have said the staff incentive scheme is important and needs to be properly funded.	They mock the nature of existing gifts and fantasise about the type of gifts needed to act as an incentive.	Empowering
15	Working remotely	When Executives in the team are away from head office, they endeavour to join team meetings remotely, by conference call. HRD Adam is on the phone remotely from North Ryde in Sydney (where he lives) and the rest of the team, as normal, is in the Adelaide boardroom at their HQ. HRD mentions to Greg Gillard that he bumped into Mike Sutton at the company base at Williamstown, next to a Royal Australian Airforce base near Newcastle in New South Wales, some 160 km from where he himself lives in North Ryde, Sydney.	All are present at the meeting.	DoP intimates HRD Adam is 'Probably in the coffee shop', but the HRD adds (through the teleconference speaker) 'no, I'm in North Ryde, in Sydney…Do you know where that is?' He tells Greg he met Cary Sutton yesterday.	Adam suggests to Greg that Cary 'can't bring himself to mention your name' – but instead calls him 'That other bloke from DSI'.	Ironic	As a leadership team we are knowledgeable, vs do we get out around the business enough	We are all committed but do we get around the business enough?	Prompts Greg and others to show that they *already* get out and about.	Members could have simply criticised each other for not getting around the business enough.	It is used to show how they *are* getting out, and the type of criticism that comes if you don't – hence challenging colleagues' behaviours.	Empowering
20	Graduate forum -- thanks	The HR Manager present outlines the format the graduate event took, participation, and thanks Executive Team members involved.	The HRD says that team want to know how the Graduate Forum is working.	COO asks the graduates 'Did you give him [the DoC] a score?' referring to his presentation to them. HRD says he has a 'Lovely smile'.	DoC accuses them of 'taking the piss' and asks rhetorically 'where were you lot?'	Ironic	The graduate scheme is important, vs can we improve the graduate programme for you.	Some of us have been meeting with the graduate trainees.	By asking 'where were you lot?' the DoC challenges the team members to get involved more with the graduates.	The DoC could have said simply colleagues are not getting involved enough in the Graduate Forum.	It challenges colleagues to do more with the Graduates.	Empowering

Appendix

Episode No.	ISSUE & CONTEXT		IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY					PROCESSING INCONGRUITY		OUTCOME OF IRONY		
	Issue	Nature of discussion	Condition 1: Speaker Expectation	Condition 2: Insincere violation of norms	Condition 3: Negative emotion	Ironic / insufficiently ironic	Incongruity created	Establishing position	Modality of action	Counterfactual	How the issue is moved on	Pathway
22	Graduate placements	DSI has been struggling to retain talented and young engineering graduates, most of whom would appear to prefer working in larger cities -- especially Melbourne and Sydney. Here, the team continue the discussion around graduates and the management of their placements in different parts of the company.	Graduates need to be moved around the business and they expect to be moved.	CEO asks if the necessary mobility of graduates is a 'trial of fire thing, or what?'	A colleague implies that the graduates masochistically 'enjoyed it' – the trial of fire thing – and benefited from it.	Ironic	Development needs to take them to different parts of the business, vs their expectations are to stay in the main cities.	They have to realise they need to move beyond the main cities for their own good.	We need to just keep challenging their presumption that they don't need to move around.	The members could have said that the Graduates are not prepared to move around in the business enough.	It emboldened them to challenge the graduate assumption that they didn't need to move around the business.	Empowering
38	The standing of customer employees	Senior team members share their relative knowledge of the military customer.	We know what the Ministry wants.	CEO Mike describes the man in the Minister's office as a 'covert supporter' of his and the COO says he 'has 2 stars', as if he knows more than Mike.	There is added ambiguity between the views of the CEO and COO and a lack of emotive engagement with each other.	Insufficiently ironic	We have to understand the Ministry needs, vs we already know what they want.	We don't know the Minister as well as we imply.	Lack of clarity over who has the closest relationship with him.	Either the CEO or COO could have said that they know exactly what the Ministry wants from them, and what they are not currently doing.	Contesting positions and usurping each other added to ambiguity and there was no follow-through and attempt to involve other from either person so as to champion a view.	Empowering (failure)
24	Deeper engagement with the Graduate programme	The team focus on how the Graduate Programme can help them deal with recruitment and retention challenges.	The graduate programme 'rounds off' individual graduates.	Graduate Emily implies that 'if someone did have that coordinating role', then the graduates would need to work with them to make it work.	CEO places the task forcefully saying 'And that would be (with) Margaret!'	Ironic	DSI takes graduate development seriously, vs there is room to improve it.	Margaret will take on the role of coordinating graduate development.	We will push her to take it on, even though she is resisting doing so.	The CEO could have asked others to get involved and work with Margaret to enhance the scheme.	Others 'boost' Margaret in her new (as yet unconfirmed) role and in the process, start to get involved.	Empowering
42	Doing an 'Avalon'.	CEO Mike quizzes DoC Greg about his attendance at the Australian International Airshow, held annually at Avalon near Melbourne.	DoC will be attending the airshow.	DoC says he will be going but doubts she (the Minister) will be 'up for seeing me before', adding 'she's nice'.	HRD Adam says 'she always want to see you…' and that 'She's bumped you five times'.	Ironic	Greg needs to attend the Avalon air show, vs will he attend.	We want DoC to attend the show to see the Minister.	DoC sees the value in attending too, but we need to persuade him.	The CEO could have given him a directive to go to the airshow.	The DoC feels not only that he should go, but that his colleagues really want him to go and see the value in doing so.	Empowering
78	Explaining Henry's stand-in	The CEO contextualises the meeting for a colleague's stand-in, who is an outsider but known to the team.	Having a stand-in is ok.	The CEO asks Andrew (Henry's stand in) and says 'Do you know who they are, by the way?' (pointing to the researchers). He then asks 'Do these remarks' (from Henry in the previous meeting) have to be attributed to you?'	Mike jokes saying the researchers are 'from the government', then says 'the University…in the depths of the northwest of England'.	Ironic	The stand-in is aware of researchers present vs he is not.	The stand in is alerted to researchers being present, as well as the fact that the CEO probably does not agree with some of his predecessor's points.	Action implied is to be careful what you say.	The CEO could have told him that researchers are present.	The stand-in is brought up to speed and understands that he needs to be careful as to what he says.	Empowering
58	Harris's en route to the meeting	The CEO Mike talks with the Director of Finance Harris on the phone at the start of the meeting.	Everyone is present.	CEO asks Harris on the phone where he is. Others suggestively say he is 'at the roundabout, again'; 'sitting in the car park', and COO asks Harris if he is 'happy with the Universe'. The comments dig at him and signal he should be there.	Harris seems to admit defeat to the CEO and knows he should be there.	Ironic	Attendance at meetings is good, vs could it be better.	Attendance at meetings needs to be better.	Others recognise that they need to improve their attendance.	The CEO could have simply said he wanted improved attendance.	Picking on Harris makes the CEOs expectations visible.	Empowering
90	The Ford Hill proposal	Ford Hill is a suburb in North East Adelaide where DSI has a facility. The suburb is named after 'Ford's Hill', a name given to a certain road extension in 1855. The road ran through land owned by Mr. S. Ford, who was an avid fan of Ford vehicles. The DSI site at Ford Hill also has an Artillery Orienting System (AOS) to provide the army with the capability for ground troops to determine their orientation and position in all weather independent of using Global Positioning Systems. The site is the Electro-Optic centre of excellence for DSI and a training ground for apprentices.	Ford Hill continues in its normal role.	CEO Mike asks for someone to 'send me the stuff' about the investment proposal at Ford Hill site to 'have a look at it'. A colleague from the site says simply 'We'd love to have you'.	The CEO says 'I know you would. I know you would', adding 'And I love going to Ford Hill'. His fawning causes others to laugh before he exaggerates it would lead to a 'A whole new sense of life and freedom'.	Ironic	Ford Hill has a clear role vs it could do more.	The CEO is aware of the proposal.	He is willing to look at it and visit.	The CEO could have made the decision to invest, or say the team will look at it.	By agreeing to visit, the CEO underlines his commitment to considering the proposal from Ford Hill.	Empowering
7	Larry's back from leave.	Larry is the Director of Engineering and he's just joined the meeting after finishing his vacation.	The DoE is away on vacation.	DoE says he's 'still on it' (the task) and has 'put a file in for the salary stuff', even though he is still away.	CEO jests asking if he has 'raised a satellite mast somewhere out there' (in the bush), and has you 'Got your parakeet with you?'.	Ironic	On holiday vs he is present and committed to DSI.	As DoE Larry is ever-present and reliable.	No action needed as the DoE already taken it.	The CEO could have asked the DoE to submit the salary work that has been requested..	The job has been done without asking and the team understand Larry's commitment.	Empowering
11	Female executives	The presenter highlights how few females are employed in the company. The brief interchange is brimming with tension between a self-painted 'alpha male' boss and a 'heavily pregnant' HR Executive.	Female participation levels are acceptable.	By labelling 20 women in the executive workforce as a 'disgrace' and asking 'how did it get so many?!', the CEO intimates while the problem is actually worse, they are doing better than they think.	Hermione explains they are better than the rest of the company, but the CEO calls it a 'Total disgrace'.	Ironic	His ambiguous response intimates he is at fault as CEO.	Female participation is not what it should be.	They need to find ways to do more.	The CEO could have stated categorically that he wants a significant increase in female executive numbers.	Adds gravity to the situation, and while masked by humour, intimates that the CEO does not find the position acceptable.	Empowering
12	Positive discrimination	The HR discussion moves on to how gender imbalance might be addressed possibly through positive discrimination.	Female participation is ok at 20%.	The CEO joking accuses the male HRD saying participation has only increased because 'You've stopped harassing them?'	Hermione says the performance of those females is 'very good' and that they might be being overlooked.	Ironic	There is a gender imbalance in DSI, vs are we doing enough.	Female participation is lower than we want it to be.	They need to do more going forward.	The CEO might have put a number on acceptable female participation and puts a timeline on it.	Set against the CEOs own commitment, the mocking of the HRD underlines his responsibility to resolve the imbalance.	Empowering

6

Appendix

Episode No.	ISSUE & CONTEXT		IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY					PROCESSING INCONGRUITY		OUTCOME OF IRONY		
	Issue	Nature of discussion	Condition 1: Speaker Expectation	Condition 2: Insincere violation of norms	Condition 3: Negative emotion	Ironic / insufficiently ironic	Incongruity created	Establishing position	Modality of action	Counterfactual	How the issue is moved on	Pathway
13	High potential employees	Talk continues about advancing 'high potential' people (so-called personnel who are rated as 'Golds') within the organisation as future leaders.	We don't have sufficient 'Gold'-ranked employees.	COO describes the 25% women who are Golds as a 'big population', and intimates there is not an issue.	The CEO tells Hermione to 'Take the rest of the day off!', as if to acknowledge her pregnant state and his understanding as her boss.	Ironic	We have enough 'Gold' rated employees, vs we need to make more of the rising proportion of female 'Golds'.	Female employees are important to future leadership at DSI.	No actions are established.	The CEO could have put a clear target on female leadership participation.	He hows he understands and is sensitive to promoting female leadership.	Empowering
23	Wee bit of a challenge	The graduates talk about their experiences of working in the company.	The graduates are well catered for.	Recognising that their development is not challenging the graduates enough, the CEO says the challenge in re-orienting them is 'communication'. Graduate Forums are telling us they feel 'lost' in the programme.	The CEO adds '…Margaret' softly to the description, as if to compliment her, saying 'We really would like to give you those sort of scenarios' (to resolve). When she tries to push back he forcefully denies her with 'That options no longer open to you!'.	Ironic	Graduates are disoriented, vs someone needs to manage their development.	Someone needs to actively manage the graduates' development.	The CEO 'invites' Margaret from communications to coordinate their development which he sees as part of communications.	The CEO could have announced Margaret will take the lead on coordinating graduate communications.	The fawning CEO and compliments from graduates and others makes Margaret feel valued and wanted.	Empowering
26	Closing down discussion about the Graduate programme	In this last part of the Graduate programme exchange, discussion is brought to a close.	Graduates need to know we are committed to addressing this issue.	The CEO puts down DoC saying he was only the '2nd choice' speaker at the graduate forum event.	He describes him as part of the 'B team'.	Ironic	We are done talking about the Graduate Forum, vs we still want to engage you going forward.	The 'A Team' will be taking care of you as graduates in the future.	The meeting is closing now.	Mike as CEO might have said they have run out of time and need to end the graduate discussion.	Intimating the 'A team' will see the graduates next makes them feel valued, even if the discussion had to stop.	Empowering
33	Company event day	The team members react to a summary on a proposed internal 'event' day that will include Graduate Trainees. The event will end by asking them who they regard the best two leaders in DSI.	The team regard their leadership as ok.	CEO says the HRD Adam is worried saying 'You think no one'll vote for you?' The team trade compliments and proffer support for each other.	CEO says 'Well, I live in hope' that someone will vote for him [the HRD].	Ironic	Leadership is important, vs asking graduates who the best leaders are is legitimate.	We are committed to finding the best leaders to help you.	Legitimation of voting on views of leaders at graduate event.	The CEO could have told the HRD which two leaders he wants to attend the next graduate event.	A competitive spirit is engendered, in which even the CEO and HRD begin to vie as candidates to speak.	Empowering
37	Nurturing relationships	The team talk about the nature of their relationship with the military customer.	The relationship with L3 is good.	CEO implies L3's leader contacted him today for help.	He describes him as 'Mr $3bn turnover man' and 'too low [short] to drag me into anything'.	Ironic	Relationship with L3's leaders is crucial vs our own CEO is the key.	We need to drive the relationship with L3 as we can't rely on their leader to do so.	L3 think they're better so we need to show that we can drive the relationship.	The CEO could have told colleagues to take hold of the L3 relationship and make it work.	The CEO belittles and denigrates this counterpart at L3 to argue that only DSI can take the lead.	Empowering
73	Creating a buzz.	The team continue to gauge what to do in response to the Telford Survey.	Our leadership is not rated as highly as it is elsewhere.	HRM says we 'make a lot of promises' and there is a lot of 'variability' of how people respond. Mike jokes and says 'There was one guy who said "I don't need to say any more because I'm resigning"', to which HRD Adam says 'And one guy said "I wouldn't tell them".'	HRM Anna plays their self-criticism down, saying she is just playing 'devil's advocate' to say that people are wanting 'more of a buzz…than what there is today'.	Ironic	Leadership approach is working vs it is not.	We need leaders that create a buzz.	We need to develop an approach to improving leadership.	CEO Mike might have said their leadership doesn't cut it.	He sets the team thinking about the nature and purpose of leadership and how they can improve.	Empowering
9	Employee retention	At the beginning of a presentation by Hermione from HR on employee retention, reference is made to her imminent pregnant state.	Hermione is heavily pregnant and due to give birth soon.	CEO says nothing is going to happen during the meeting and she says 'I hope not! Can't guarantee anything, of course'. She asks him if he is 'feeling uncomfortable'.	He says he is ready with 'hot water and towels' to cope, adding he can always 'delegate' it.	Ironic	Retention of employees is important, vs are we doing enough to retain them.	The CEO shows his personal understanding of her pregnant condition.	The CEO fantasises about being ready for action if she gives birth in the meeting.	The CEO might have said they will make tangible improvements in things that aid retention, as with pregnant employees.	Through his own embodied commitment, the CEO underlines support for improving staff retention.	Empowering
17	Childcare facilities	We know that employee retention in DSI is important to their continued success given the competitiveness of the regional and inter-state labour markets for engineers. Here the team discuss progress on the childcare facilities and the use of a specialist consultancy company to help them move forward.	We may need better childcare facilities for employees children.	The HRD says they (DSI) don't run childcare centres.	DoC says they are 'not subject matter experts at all', and HRD adds that a few of their employees actually *have* children.	Ironic	We can provide childcare ourselves, vs do we need childcare specialists.	Involving specialist consultants demonstrates that we take childcare of employees seriously.	They need to bring in expert help.	The CEO could have said he wants childcare resolved.	Intimating it is not their business and that they need specialists underlines his support and commitment to address it.	Empowering
92	Mike's health.	DoM Mike is off ill and the team discuss his health.	Mike is recovering.	DoM is asks how JH is doing, given he's been off ill. The stand-in says all the medical tests are 'clear' but there is a problem they have not diagnosed, which means he looks 'surprisingly healthy'.	CEO quips and adds '…Despite evidence to the contrary' (i.e. that he is *not* healthy). Harris adds 'Obviously, the doctors haven't asked for *our* opinion', as if he is implying that they know better.	Ironic	DoM is off ill, vs he may not return.	The team now know that his condition may be worsening.	Showing genuine concern.	The DoM or CEO might have asked how Mike is.	They show they are asking after him in a wry fashion, which makes their concern sound genuine.	Empowering
63	Thanking the HR manager.	The CEO expresses appreciation for the HR Manager attending the discussion on the phone, and calls her 'Fran'. He then repeats his thanks and her name.	The CEO is appreciative.	As if realising he has got her name wrong, the CEO jokes and says 'Stop changing her name, you're confusing me'.	She thanks them in return and hangs up, laughing as she does so.	Ironic	The CEO appreciates the HR Manager's input, vs he does not.	Margaret has made a difference in that role.	The CEO and team show appreciation.	Nothing might have been said, and the CEO might not have admitted he got her name wrong.	The CEO admitting he got her name wrong, and blaming it on her shows fallibility and sincerity.	Empowering

Appendix

Episode No.	ISSUE & CONTEXT		IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY					PROCESSING INCONGRUITY		OUTCOME OF IRONY		
	Issue	Nature of discussion	Condition 1: Speaker Expectation	Condition 2: Insincere violation of norms	Condition 3: Negative emotion	Ironic / insufficiently ironic	Incongruity created	Establishing position	Modality of action	Counterfactual	How the issue is moved on	Pathway
18	Welcome to the Graduate forum	Graduate presentations to and discussions with the Executive Team of the company is viewed as a good thing to keep in touch. Here, generation Y graduate employees are brought in to talk about their experiences of working in DSI.	The graduates will be nervous.	CEO exaggerates and says 'Bring them in!' (as if to slaughter)	A colleague adds it is like on the television programme The Gladiators, and repeats the CEO's saying 'Bring them in!'	Ironic	Young graduates are here to talk about their development, vs are we aware enough of their needs.	Graduates are important.	Making a song and dance to receive them reveals the team take their welfare seriously.	The CEO could have simply told the Graduates how important they are to the Company future.	Rather than receiving platitudes, the upbeat introduction boosts their standing in their own eyes.	**Empowering**
19	'Guinea Pigs'	The CEO explains to the graduate employees why researchers are in the board room.	We need to put the nervous graduates at ease.	Instead of explaining, the CEO describes the researchers present as 'external examiners'.	DoO mocks the graduates by describing them as the 'guinea pigs'.	Ironic	There is a gulf in the meeting between senior executives and new trainees, vs the team can help the graduates.	We are ready to talk at your level as 'guinea pigs'.	Open to conversation.	The CEO could well have told them they are just starting with basic graduate development.	Saying they are 'guinea pigs' masks the basic position encourages them to become involved in improving their lot.	**Empowering**
21	Heavy breathing	As the meeting with the graduates continues, the team is distracted by funny sounds on the line from those attending remotely on the teleconference facility.	The graduates will assume we are 'straight laced'.	COO accuses colleagues on the phone are 'breathing quite heavily' and others join in the innuendo.	DoC accuses one of 'breaking into a sweat', and the CEO suggests they 'stop the breathing for a while'.	Ironic	We are formal, vs we work very informally.	We are an accessible team and have fun working.	Tone encourages graduates to join in.	CEO might have asked them to join in discussion.	Candid, open and honest approach indicates sincerity.	**Empowering**
4	Workshare allocations	Discussion about redressing apparent inequities in work share allocations between individuals. It begins with the manager saying she is "having problems" operationalising it.	Work share allocations are fair and equitable.	COO says they are 'not going to resolve the work share issues long-term'. He says the problem is intractable. The DoO adds they haven't got the 'desired employees'.	CEO retorts that this does not mean give it all (the resource) away', and COO says it is not worth 'dieing in the ditch over'.	Ironic	Managing work share allocations for bids is straightforward, vs there is a need to be more pragmatic.	There is a work share issue that needs to be practically managed.	Need to focus on management of resources rather than work share per se.	The CEO and COO could have simply said that work sharing isn't the answer to their problems.	Underlines the scarcity of good human resources and need for careful approach to their deployment.	**Empowering**
10	Ageing workforce	In the HR discussion retirement is raised and compared with that in other companies. This is important in the tight South Australian labour market, where there is strong demand for engineering skills.	Our engineering employees have an ageing profile.	CEO says if the average age of their retirement is '72, I'm not very worried'. The CEO says the retirement age increases every year…	CEO jests 'Sounds like our Osprey schedule' (which is constantly overdue).	Ironic	Retaining elderly engineers is important to the business, vs do we fully understand how to keep them.	They might have an ageing profile, but staff are committed and staying on.	It is a problem that they will need to keep working on.	The CEO might have stated he wants a plan to address the ageing workforce issue.	The metaphorical comparison with delay over the valuable Osprey project implies that just like that, they need to keep working at it as it won't go away.	**Empowering**
48	Long service	The team discuss what constitutes 'long service' as opposed to simply 'service recognition', and what an appropriate award might be.	The long service award scheme needs to change.	The CEO asks sarcastically, "If it's not long-service, what is it?' A colleague says people don't want 'another gold watch'. He stresses it will have to be something they *need*.	Three colleagues fantasise enthusiastically about products they would find desirable. They talk about a 'vacuum cleaner' – even a company one with your 'name on the back', a 'Mercedes', or a 'Mercedes vacuum cleaner'.	Ironic	The long service awards are appropriate, vs but can DSI make them better.	Long service awards need to be improved.	No hard action, but a sense that the parent company needs to do something to address the issue.	The CEO could have committed to addressing the issue, or to approaching the company to do so.	By fantasising over what might make the awards scheme work, the team engage in grounded brainstorming that might prove useful to that debate. It also reveals concern.	**Empowering**
62	Sign-off of conversations with line managers	The team talk about how to best ensure that line managers have signed off on their accountabilities by completing the form concerned. Currently this does not ask for the line manager's signature but there is a proposal that should be changed.	Sign-off conversations are on accountabilities work well.	CEO accuses saying 'we need to ensure that…each line manager, each supervisor takes responsibility…'. DoO jokes there are easy ways around that ensure sign-off, like 'putting two signature blocks' into the form that includes the CEO's and asking the manager to sign it off. It is as if he is showing the process is weak.	Mike says he is 'happy' this is occurring but adds 'we've got to make sure that people *take* accountability'. HRD claims that it is a 'good idea' and 'that (it) was mine!'. Others jest with him for doing this, with Harris suggesting the 'Chairman's award' for Adam and that he should be 'bronzed'.	Ironic	We need to be more stringent in our signing-off of accountabilities, vs how can it be improved.	Accountability sign-off needs to work better.	We need to more consciously work at improving sign-off.	The CEO could have insisted accountabilities are signed-off appropriately by team colleagues.	It is implied signing-off is working, but the discussion challenges the team to make sure staff understand how to deliver their accountabilities.	**Empowering**
67	Focus of the staff survey	The team discuss with Anna whether the leadership survey could focus on sites and functions, or is more about 'the top' level of the Executive Team.	The survey focuses on top-level leadership.	The CEO admits that people might be thinking "we're not seeing much of them" (senior leaders), and the HRD adds that might just mean him as CEO.	HRM Anna sympathises with site employees, as if they were hearing them say 'do I feel heard?', 'do I feel people value employees' contributions in this organization?' 'Or is it …all about the bottom line?'	Ironic	All leadership matters, vs central senior leadership is more important.	Leadership is wider than just senior leaders; it also includes people on sites.	As a team they need to be more visible around company sites.	CEO Mike might have asked them to visit sites more regularly.	Getting out and about to sites is not cosmetic, is is about staff feeling genuinely heard and engaged.	**Empowering**
70	What else can Mike do to improve perceptions of his leadership?	Aided by the team, the CEO reflects on what he can learn from the survey, and what he can do to improve perceptions of himself as DSI's leader.	The CEO's leadership is viewed as fine by staff.	The CEO outlines all they do to improve their accessibility as leaders, ending with 'Maybe the bastard (referring to the task) is just a nightmare'.	The HRM says the scores *don't* mean the leaders are not doing any of this, to which the CEO pretends and says 'I'm very hurt…', saying 'Maybe they just don't understand me', adding that 'If you ask me wife…oh, she doesn't understand'.	Ironic	The CEO leadership style could be better vs it is acceptable as it is.	The CEO knows he can improve his leadership style.	Members of the team are willing to help him.	HRM and team members might have told the CEO his leadership style needs to change.	His feigning of being hurt saves loss of face, but shows that he is hearing what they say.	**Empowering**

Appendix

Episode No.	ISSUE & CONTEXT			IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY					PROCESSING INCONGRUITY		OUTCOME OF IRONY		
	Issue	Nature of discussion		Condition 1: Speaker Expectation	Condition 2: Insincere violation of norms	Condition 3: Negative emotion	Ironic / insufficiently ironic	Incongruity created	Establishing position	Modality of action	Counterfactual	How the issue is moved on	Pathway
72	Getting employees 'excited'.	The team continue to grapple with the results of the Telford Leadership Survey and focus on what they can do as leaders to excite staff going forward.		Staff like their leadership.	Mike as CEO admits 'It's a woeful set of scores no matter how you look at it'. Said in this way, he appears to set the bar higher to challenge the team to respond. Harris adds that they don't know how to 'excite' employees, and maybe they should just ask how they install 'confidence' in people.	The CEO reacts saying 'That's as excited as Harris gets', and the HRD Adam says DSI is 'conservative' compared to the 'hippies' at MarketInfo where Devin is based.	Ironic	Staff like our leadership, vs it needs to change.	We have to improve our leadership approach by 'exciting' people.	We need to take steps to improve leadership is implied.	The CEO could have followed up his statement that their leadership scores are 'woeful' compared to others, and insists it is addressed.	Improvement is required that will 'excite' employees rather than just lead them, in a way that competitors do not.	Empowering
74	Engineers are complicated people.	The team discuss the culture in DSI and how they might adapt.		There is nothing wrong with the culture at DSI.	DoE Larry says the results are because their culture is DSI is dominated by introverted engineers culture view leadership. As a lawyer, the CEO argues a need to do a 'mass personality test 'on employees.	He says they should preface each question with 'in an introverted way…' to cater for engineers.	Ironic	The culture at DSI is fine vs the culture is different.	Appreciation that the culture needs improving, but that might be helped by tailoring the questionnaire to engineers.	Action to take steps on adjusting the questionnaire is implied.	The CEO might well have said that DSI is dominated by engineers and thus is different.	Displays understanding to the company's different position and culture of introverts, which needs sensitivity.	Empowering
89	Any Other Business.	DoE Larry raises an additional item, the process for reviewing authorisations.		The authorisation for process reviews works well.	DoE offers a 'straw man' to challenge the DoO Will, and invites others to add weight to the argument that Will is hogging resources. The CEO asks when he has to sign the project managers' contracts and COO says in 'about two weeks'. This implies a pressure to resolve as soon as possible.	DoE Larry retorts cynically that the project managers are 'part of the problem'. The COO ignores his idea and says 'I think we really ought to let Larry get on (to develop a plan)' to resolve it.	Ironic	We have enough project management expertise vs it needs to be fairly shared across projects.	Some directors (i.e. DoO Will) are hogging this valuable resource.	We need to be less selfless in project manager deployment.	The CEO could have told Directors, and especially Will, not to hog them.	Tightening up on process review authorisations depersonalises the criticism by putting selfless behaviour centre stage.	Empowering
91	Greg's 'delegation'	The team talk about the need to replace Director of Contracts Greg with one of his team while he is away.		There is a gap that will need filling by someone.	Greg joins the meeting by phone and says a member of his team is moving on to Infosys, so a short-term delegate needs agreeing. Mike asks Greg if he is away on holiday and then cynically says that 'Progress might be made then'.	Someone from Greg's team says 'I'll sign anything', as if Greg's absence and his stand in will make life easier. The 'piss-taking' boosts his stand in.	Ironic	There is no gap vs there is a gap that needs filling with a short-term delegate.	The team is aware of the gap and the need for a stand-in.	We need to push things through the weaker delegate in the meantime.	CEO Mike could have told the stand-in that he needs to help them make faster progress.	It let's the team know that the CEO sees an opportunity to change things by taking advantage of the stand-in.	Empowering
79	External roles	The CEO declares an external role at the University of South Australia that might generate conflict of interest with the company.		Colleagues won't have an issue with external roles.	The CEO declares his role on the University Council and a colleague asks 'Is there a doctorate attached to this?' (implying Mike might be doing it to gain recognition).	Mike exaggerates saying 'Maybe!' then jokes 'Donations. Degrees for cash, and all that stuff'.	Ironic	Being CEO is Mike's only job, vs he has other non-executive positions.	CEO's wider commitments are recognised as important and there are no conflicts.	Jokey acknowledgement implies that the team want to know what he achieves in these roles.	The team could have asked Jim why he is taking on the role and how it will help DSI.	Recognition that Mike is being asked because of his standing, which the jesting atmosphere serves to boost.	Empowering
35	Building 'Plan B'	The team summarise the likelihood of Plan B occuring for a new building		The planned Building looks promising.	The team reflect from an earlier meeting with a Main Board director, who was supportive. One member says 'we're stuck with your Plan B'.	Emotive reaction from the CEO is week, saying 'In the event' the new building is a 'baseline'	Insufficiently ironic	We would like a new building, vs is there only a weak counter-argument.	Our building plans are inadequate.	We need to do better with our planning for building B.	The CEO might have insisted they need a new building but does not engage emotively to 'prove' it.	Counter argument against the need for a new building is weak, and the CEO does not voice it with strong conviction.	Empowering (failure)
36	Stable bid resources	The team discuss progress on OMS (Operational Mission Simulator) that the DSI business unit in Australia has agreed to buy from Consolidated Aerospace in order to train airborne 'early warning' mission crews, and whether or not the resources to make the bid work are stable.		There is no shortage of good people to chair bid team reviews.	CEO says the choice is 'in theory' as there is a shortage of good people.	There is little or no emotion generated from weak irony to drive home the implied shortage.	Insufficiently ironic	DSI has too-few people skilled in bidding, vs no counter-argument	There is a shortage of good reviewers.	Can the shortage be proven?	The CEO could have asked for figures to show bid teams are short.	The CEO fails to argue that it is the quality of expertise in the bid teams that matters more than quantity.	Empowering (failure)
86	Ferrett's expertise	The team is talking about the type of person they might appoint into the Finance function to sort out their financial challenges.		They want someone with regular financial expertise.	Mike suggests Ferrett could solve their financial problems but is being wasted 'sorting out his Amex expenses' in his current role. DoO concurs his talents are being wasted at Osprey.	There is no real emotive disagreement with the incongruity of someone good being wasted in a less senior post, so the issue does not appear to be driven home.	Insufficiently ironic	A sound finance person is needed to help sort out our challenges, vs can we find the right person.	We know someone who would be good for us in finance.	There is no follow-through outlined to reveal to the team that Ferrett is the solution to their Financial expertise.	CEO Mike might have suggested Ferrett is a strong candidate for the post and should be appointed.	The CEO fails to convince colleagues.	Empowering (failure)
39	The Policy Committee	The team discuss who they need to seek approval from, and the chair and membership of the Policy Committee.		The CEO knows who chairs the policy committee.	The CEO starts 'Right, well…' and asks who is on it, revealing his lack of knowledge.	The DoC 'So no women' and a colleague responds disparagingly with 'What, you want a cup of tea?'	Insufficiently ironic	CEO doesn't know who is on the Policy Committee, vs without knowing, it will be hard to seek approval.	No one is clear who is on the committee.	Lack of emotive engagement and willingness to find out.	CEO could have asked who are on the Committee.	Gendered comment undermines seriousness of the issue.	Empowering (failure)