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Using Verbal Irony to Move on with Controversial Issues

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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 International1, 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

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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 irony² [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

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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).
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
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
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
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, sometimesfunnily 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,

³The 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.
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.
**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
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 toser?!” (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 laughter 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
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

Irrony: 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
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
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 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.
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


Descartes, R. 1728. Les passions de l’âme.


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.


Table 1 – Regular and invited meeting participants

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

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>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 /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Larry: / what do mean by an 'elective'?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bradley: Extracurricular activity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Larry: Oh, OK. Right.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Larissa: Kind of like in uni with /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Emily: / yeah, something outside your role /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Larry: / yeah, yeah, OK.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>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 /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>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]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Margaret: [sarcastically] Yeah – brilliant – this meeting – so far! [laughter]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mike: It’s also heading in your direction! [laughter].</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Margaret: Think I’ll stay in comms! [laughs]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Mike: That option’s no longer open to you!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Margaret: Yeah.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Will:</td>
<td>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 /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cary:</td>
<td>/ in terms of how that converts with head count and labour costs – at the moment, the 2008 – it would – for the 65% –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mike:</td>
<td>I’m not even listening to this [laughter].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cary:</td>
<td>That’s reasonable in terms of where we’ve been before in other years. It’s been up 20-odd points, so /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mike:</td>
<td>/ 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].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pathway</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Engaging with irony</th>
<th>Establishing Position</th>
<th>Modality of action</th>
<th>Outcome: Moving On</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acquiescing</td>
<td>Framing understanding as having no alternative because of environmental constraints.</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Through this catharsis, there is collective retreat from an existing towards a diminished position that is aligned with the current context.</td>
<td>The group possesses neither the capacity nor the obligation to directly act on that issue.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering</td>
<td>Enabling the synthesis of a new view through inputs from two or more individuals.</td>
<td>Face-building irony is used to collectively vent ideas – often towards each other – to establish the basis for constructive engagement between group members.</td>
<td>Irony develops a collective position on the issue via contributions from multiple individuals in a safe space as a new and creative position to respond to the issue at hand.</td>
<td>A new and stronger view emerges and the group has the capacity and obligation to act on the issue.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channeling</td>
<td>Imposing a single and often dominant view that, it is argued, is factually or morally superior to other interpretations.</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Irony delegitimizes 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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissing</td>
<td>Reframing existing interpretations as wrong or inadequate without promoting a new view.</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Irony delegitimizes 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.</td>
<td>Action is not necessary as the group lacks the capacity to respond to and has no obligation or responsibility to act on that issue.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 5 – A process model of irony in pathways to deal with and move on with controversial issues
## Appendix

### Using Irony to Move on from Controversial Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode No.</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Nature of discussion</th>
<th>IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCORRECTNESS</th>
<th>PROCESSING INCORRECTNESS</th>
<th>OUTCOME OF IRONY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>Ten-year service awards</td>
<td>The team discusses the issue of recognition for staff who have served for 5 or 10 years or longer.</td>
<td>Using service awards ‘like a clock’ or a piece of ‘paper’ are regarded as unimportant and inadequate.</td>
<td>The team engages in a ‘check and maintain’ process, ensuring that the recognition is ‘over the top’ but not overstated.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Woes of the Dollar</td>
<td>The team discusses the contract with its international supplier.</td>
<td>The team’s offer of a ‘reasonable’ price on ‘L3’ is rejected by the supplier.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>Targets</td>
<td>The team discusses its commitment to its stated targets.</td>
<td>CoCo says that targets are ‘all target’.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Inappropriate emails</td>
<td>The team discusses the inappropriate emails sent by its colleagues.</td>
<td>Employees don’t distribute inappropriate material.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81</td>
<td>New leadership at Rubix</td>
<td>The team discusses the new leadership at its supplier, Rubix.</td>
<td>The new leader is ‘brilliant’ and ‘direct’.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Literature Support Measures (LSM)</td>
<td>The team discusses the literature support measures.</td>
<td>The team’s approach is ‘not even at the fraction of the cost’.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>Agreeing a realistic position</td>
<td>The team discusses the realistic position it has agreed with its customers.</td>
<td>The business unit is expected to maintain clarity on its cash position.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Osprey</td>
<td>The team talks about the progress of the Osprey project.</td>
<td>The team has the ‘wrong’ expectations about the project.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Implementing the graduate scheme</td>
<td>The team discusses the implementation of the graduate scheme.</td>
<td>The team’s approach is ‘contrary to the spirit of the project’.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Contracting</td>
<td>The team discusses the terms of the contract.</td>
<td>The team’s position on the contract is ‘counterfactual’.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Project status</td>
<td>The team discusses the status of the project.</td>
<td>The team’s approach is ‘inconsistent with the spirit of the project’.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Frank’s team</td>
<td>The team discusses the progress of Frank’s team.</td>
<td>Frank’s team is ‘not even at the level of the standard’ of the project.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Surprise findings</td>
<td>The team discusses the findings of its surprise survey.</td>
<td>The team has the ‘wrong’ expectations about the survey.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>Larry’s ‘new view’ over Project Managers</td>
<td>The team discusses the change in views of its project managers.</td>
<td>Larry’s view is ‘contrary to the spirit of the project’.</td>
<td>The team might have the satisfaction of knowing that they have moved on from the controversy.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix

### Table 1: Issue and Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode No.</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Nature of discussion</th>
<th>Condition 1: Speaker Expectation</th>
<th>Condition 2: Intended voice of target</th>
<th>Condition 3: Rejection</th>
<th>Ironic Construction of INCONGRUITY</th>
<th>INCONGRUITY Intended</th>
<th>INCONGRUITY Occurred</th>
<th>Establishing Position</th>
<th>Modality of action</th>
<th>Countermoves</th>
<th>How the issue is moved on</th>
<th>Pathway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Project targets</td>
<td>The team discuss income targets for key projects.</td>
<td>CEO seems to expect that projects will pay their own way.</td>
<td>All speakers describe performance as acceptable.</td>
<td>The CEO criticises the poor performance of one project, concluding all colleagues and their project will need to win.</td>
<td>Impact are underperforming as compared to target.</td>
<td>The last criticises the poor performance of one project concluding all colleagues and their project will need to win.</td>
<td>CEO responds to suggestion of counselling on their performance and the task is rejected over the following year.</td>
<td>The last criticises the current project and its leaders.</td>
<td>By stating that there is a gap in performance, expect performance of projects not fixed and involving them to do better.</td>
<td>Countermoving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Project management</td>
<td>The team negotiate with grouping management company, regarding to take to packaging company Continental.</td>
<td>The consultant will advise them about their building needs.</td>
<td>CEO suggests to agree on a site costing $5.5k.</td>
<td>The colleagues could have done nothing and won't be charged.</td>
<td>Web advisor from consultants as the colleagues do what or two actions.</td>
<td>The CEO argues they are not doing a proper job for what they are charging.</td>
<td>Consultant advisor to acquire their own specialist and follow up to ensure they are taking too much for their services.</td>
<td>The CEO might have simply disagreed that salary increasing costs too much for their services.</td>
<td>By implying they could give something up and let colleagues be consultants without the CEO being taken.</td>
<td>Countermoving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>Salary increases</td>
<td>The team talk about the implications of agreed salary increases.</td>
<td>Those who get salary increases will deserve to do more.</td>
<td>CEO argues it is a result of the team and he has made a sacrifice.</td>
<td>The salary increase is necessary in working so it's not in his own interest.</td>
<td>The CEO isn't salary increases are rewarding under achievement.</td>
<td>The salaries increase are necessary in working so it's not in his own interest.</td>
<td>The CEO asks the DoO's inputs into his area where most of the 'under achievers' are located.</td>
<td>The CEO may well have stated the area for the salary increases are unnecessary.</td>
<td>Rather than criticizing overly, he implies the bar needs to be raised.</td>
<td>Countermoving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: PROCESSING INCONGRUITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode No.</th>
<th>Processing Incongruity</th>
<th>Condition 2: Insincerely</th>
<th>Condition 3: Negatively</th>
<th>Condition 4: Inappropriately</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Project targets.</td>
<td>Normalising the CEO's expectations</td>
<td>Critiquing the CoO's position</td>
<td>Using the CEO's position to downplay the CoO's expectations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Project management.</td>
<td>Using the CEO's expectations</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3: OUTCOME OF IRONY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode No.</th>
<th>Outcome of Ironic Construction</th>
<th>Condition 1: Speaker Expectation</th>
<th>Condition 2: Intended voice of target</th>
<th>Condition 3: Rejection</th>
<th>Ironic Construction of INCONGRUITY</th>
<th>INCONGRUITY Intended</th>
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### Table 4: Modality of action

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<th>Episode No.</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Nature of discussion</th>
<th>IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY</th>
<th>PROCESSING INCONGRUITY</th>
<th>OUTCOME OF IRONY</th>
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<td>29</td>
<td>Location of new building</td>
<td>The facilitator introduces the meeting and the team clarify where the planned building will be sited.</td>
<td>The CEO clearly describes the new building as a priority. Despite the fact that staff are unhappy about the plan, the CEO probably gets your favor. The new building needed is unseen and the advice is not sound.</td>
<td>The CEO shows the consultant's intransigence. No one cares much to update the CEO to address.</td>
<td>The CEO could have said something different if they had not been甸fed with the locations offered.</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Benefits of a new building</td>
<td>The consultant outlines the benefits of the new building development is a priority. The building description is unhelpful. The CEO says, &quot;I wonder if I want to see that.&quot;</td>
<td>The CEO casts it as a 'nuclear holocaust.' The consultant is implied.</td>
<td>The need for immediate action by the consultant is implied.</td>
<td>It was implied that the CEO had made a decision for the consultant to address.</td>
</tr>
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<td>31</td>
<td>Potential relocation sites</td>
<td>The consultant summarises the needs and options. All proposals have been discussed by the team.</td>
<td>The team — which has been discussing the options with colleagues outside the 500 team in Melbourne, saying 'it's not going to happen.' It matters, maybe 5 months. NPG</td>
<td>Consultant is looking at sites for the consultant. They are going about it in an unsound way.</td>
<td>The consultant is not working on the CEO's future.</td>
</tr>
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<td>32</td>
<td>The part of the site that is ready</td>
<td>Have the team find out what all of the site consideration wouldn't need and available for them.</td>
<td>Things are going to be tricky! The consultant is showing you towards certain sites. COO, Bradley, casually refers to the site as a 'nuclear holocaust.'</td>
<td>Proposed site is ready for them, but it is not.</td>
<td>Using the metaphor of a 'nuclear holocaust' is used to engineer the development is a mess and not ready.</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>The 'Weekend'</td>
<td>The team discuss a consultant (called 'Weekend') advising them on approaches to employee childcare.</td>
<td>The team mentions that the consultant looks a bit of a Charlie Brown. The CEO casts it as 'only estate agents.'</td>
<td>They need to address social inclusion issues, or they don't like the site.</td>
<td>The CEO does not believe that the consultant is worthy of attention.</td>
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<td>52</td>
<td>Surveying staff about childcare</td>
<td>The team is discussing the consultants' report, examining the CEOs' provision relative to that of other major companies.</td>
<td>The team has a survey, looking at the importance of getting them across to children. The CEO looks at the survey, reflects the importance to them.</td>
<td>Childcare is important on the survey.</td>
<td>The ABC companion shows that the survey is unreliable.</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>Programming the Meeting</td>
<td>The team discuss whether to move on to the next agenda item, or take a brief break before the rest of the meeting.</td>
<td>The next item is a full 40 minutes. The CEO says, 'we have to nudge this decision in order to allow us to bring forward another item.'</td>
<td>We are due to talk to the consultant about our facilities, but it's worth it more important.</td>
<td>We can cut the consultant agenda here, but it's not that different.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Winston’s requested</td>
<td>The CEO also points out to the team that one of the University researchers is also present at the meeting.</td>
<td>Everyone on good behaviour in meetings. The CEO says, 'we have to get Winston on board.'</td>
<td>Team behavior is appropriate. We can watch what we say with materials present.</td>
<td>An improvement in behavior is required.</td>
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</table>
Episode No.

71 Learning from remote leadership

The team selected on an experiment to make a more compelling CEO Mike's personal leadership with that of his counterpart Don from Markello, citing how he communicated as Christmas to staff. Mike could teach a lot from other leaders.

76 The C4ISR contract

The team is looking at the team of contracts before the they are submitted. C4ISR stands for all the full cycle of 'Command, Control, Communications, Computer, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance for land, sea and air defence platforms that aim to ensure the success of missions for global users. The team is discussing the need to work more effectively on a contract as they do not know enough in the Graduate Forum about the type of work they will do.

44 Best behaviour and company Roadshows

The team discussed workplace behaviour and how to deal with them. One colleague was talking about the graduate trainees. The HRD said that team members have been meeting regularly with the graduate trainees. The DoC challenges the team to make a change. The team does not know enough in the Graduate Forum about the type of work they will do.

56 Cost of recognition gifts

The discussion about services medals ends with a brief interchange about the costs of operating it. The costs to enhance performance awards are too high.

57 Security breach

The CEO talks to colleagues about a recent security breach in the company. The DoC suggests a more efficient way to deal with it.

46 The transparency of the performance recognition scheme

The team discusses the performance scheme designed to motivate employees. The company performance awards work well. The HRD could be more transparent about the type of gifts needed to be funded.

15 Writing remotely

When Executives in the team are away from head office, they tend to get less meetings remotely. According to an interview, the HRD is approaching the team with a new way of working. The team is discussing the need to work more effectively on a contract as they do not know enough in the Graduate Forum about the type of work they will do.

20 Graduate forum – thanks

The HRD managed to get the team to deliver a more coherent message. The impact on the graduate trainees was positive. The team is discussing the need to work more effectively on a contract as they do not know enough in the Graduate Forum about the type of work they will do.
Appendix

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<tr>
<th>Episode No.</th>
<th>Nature of discussion</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Condition 1: Speaker Expectation</th>
<th>Condition 2: Audience reaction of names</th>
<th>Condition 3: Speaker emotion</th>
<th>INCORPORATION OF INCONGRUITY</th>
<th>PROCESSING OF INCONGRUITY</th>
<th>OUTCOME OF IRONY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Graduate placements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A colleague implies the graduate is randomly selected – the &quot;value of the ticket&quot;, or what they expect to be handed.</td>
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<td>Insincere</td>
<td>The CEO places the task forcefully saying that he would be very happy for the firm to make it work.</td>
<td>The CEO could have stated that the graduates would need to make it work.</td>
</tr>
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<td>28</td>
<td>The standing of customer employees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Insincere</td>
<td>The CEO places the task forcefully saying that he would be very happy for the firm to make it work.</td>
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<td>Deeper engagement with the Graduate Programme</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Living on Avalon</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>Explaining Henry's stand-in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Harris's pitch to the CEO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>The Boardroom proposal</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Larry's back from leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female executives</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode No.</th>
<th>ISSUE &amp; CONTEXT</th>
<th>IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY</th>
<th>PROCESSING INCONGRUITY</th>
<th>OUTCOME OF IRRONIC</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>High potential employees</td>
<td>We don't have sufficient Gold-ranked employees.</td>
<td>The CEO tells the 25% of women are doing so well because of 'big population', and cardiovascular disease is an issue.</td>
<td>We have enough 'human resources', employees, we need to make more of the rising proportion of female Golds.</td>
<td>No actions are established.</td>
</tr>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Mike's health</td>
<td>Nurturing relationships</td>
<td>Organisations are important to focus leadership at CEO.</td>
<td>Mike as CEO might have said they have run out of time and need to end the graduate discussion.</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Closing down discussion about the Graduate programme</td>
<td>We need to develop an approach to future leaders and DSI.</td>
<td>The team regard their leadership as ok.</td>
<td>The CEO could have said they have run out of time and need to end the graduate discussion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Company event</td>
<td>Incongruity created</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Creating a buzz</td>
<td>Leadership approach is working or it is not.</td>
<td>We need leaders that create a buzz.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Employee retention</td>
<td>We need leaders that create a buzz.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Childcare facility</td>
<td>We need leaders that create a buzz.</td>
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</tr>
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<td>63</td>
<td>Thinking the HR manager</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode No.</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Nature of discussion</th>
<th>Condition 1: Speaker &amp; Expectation</th>
<th>Condition 2: Considerable variation of norms</th>
<th>Condition 3: Negative reaction</th>
<th>Incorrigibility</th>
<th>Establishing position</th>
<th>Modality of action</th>
<th>Counterfactual</th>
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<td>We have enough 'human resources', employees, we need to make more of the rising proportion of female Golds.</td>
<td>No actions are established.</td>
<td>The team now know that his condition is moving.</td>
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<td>Welcome to the Graduate Forum</td>
<td>Graduate presentations to introduce new-comers to the Executive Team of the company is offered as a good thing to keep in touch. Here, generation y graduates are brought to talk about their experiences of working in DSI.</td>
<td>The graduates will succeed. CEO recognises and values their potential. Prizes are allocated.</td>
<td>A colleague adds it is a key part of the programme the Graduates, and repeats the CEOs words about the importance of hiring them.</td>
<td>Making a long and detailed speech to them before they hear about their new roles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>'Guinea Pigs!'</td>
<td>The CEO explains to the graduate employees why researches are in the board room.</td>
<td>We need to pull the graduates into action.</td>
<td>DoD outlines the graduates by describing them as 'research guinea pigs' and other jokes about them.</td>
<td>Open to conversation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Heavy breathing</td>
<td>At the meeting with the graduate contractors, the team is distracted by funny sounds on the line from those attending remotely on the teleconference facility.</td>
<td>We are accelerated teams and line management.</td>
<td>The team outline areas to improve sign-off, as it is currently a long process.</td>
<td>Open to further discussion.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition 1: Speaker Expectation</th>
<th>Condition 2: Implicit violations of status</th>
<th>Condition 3: Negative emotion</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Incongruence created</th>
<th>Establishing position</th>
<th>Mode of action</th>
<th>Counterfactual</th>
<th>How the issue is moved on</th>
<th>Pathway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Graduates</td>
<td>Predominantly senior leaders.</td>
<td>Graduates are important. Making a long and detailed speech to them before they hear about their new roles.</td>
<td>The CEO could have committed to improving their organisation. They are better trained to help than them.</td>
<td>The CEO could have explained to the company how they could improve.</td>
<td>Open to further discussion.</td>
<td>The CEO could have told them they are not being managed. The board could have done the plan itself.</td>
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### IRONIC CONSTRUCTION OF INCONGRUITY

**Condition 1:** Speaker Expectation
- The CEO expects the graduates to succeed. The graduates are valued for their potential.

**Condition 2:** Implicit violations of status
- The CEO acknowledges the graduates' importance.

**Condition 3:** Negative emotion
- There is a gap in the meeting, between senior executives and new graduates, as the team can't help the graduates.

### PROCESSING INCONGRUITY

- The team is accelerated teams and line management.
- The team outlines areas to improve sign-off, as it is currently a long process.

### OUTCOME OF IRIONY

- The CEO could have explained to the company how they could improve.
- The CEO could have committed to improving their organisation. They are better trained to help than them.
### Appendix

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<th>Episode No.</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Nature of discussion</th>
<th>Ironic construction of incongruity</th>
<th>PROCESSING INCONGRUITY</th>
<th>OUTCOME OF IRONY</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>Getting employees involved</td>
<td>Mike asks Greg to support the idea of...</td>
<td>Mike is CEO, asks Greg, it's...</td>
<td>We have to improve our leadership approach by...</td>
<td>Improvement is required that will factor employees rather than just lead them, in a way that competitors do not.</td>
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<td>73</td>
<td>Engineers are complicated people</td>
<td>Mike asks Greg to support the idea of...</td>
<td>Mike is CEO, asks Greg, it's...</td>
<td>We need to take steps to improve leadership...</td>
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<td>74</td>
<td>Any Other Business</td>
<td>Mike asks Greg to support the idea of...</td>
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<td>We have to improve our leadership approach by...</td>
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<td>75</td>
<td>The CEO has an internal problem</td>
<td>Mike asks Greg to support the idea of...</td>
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