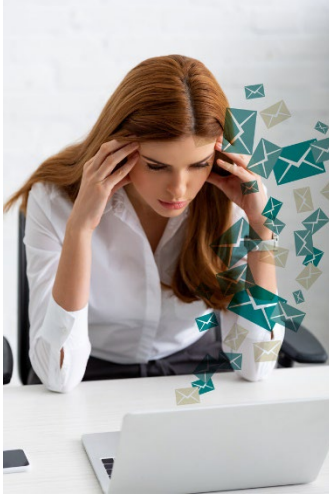


Reducing Conflict 53 Jokes or Not

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



I was having an online conversation about jokes and teams at work. The discussion was relative to having online messages misinterpreted. Clearly, we have all experienced this uncomfortable situation more than once. I got so fascinated about this topic that I wrote a book on it a few years ago.

The reader could take it literally

Someone brought up a situation that is common in person as well as online. One person tries to rib another person with a joke, but the receiver takes it literally. Online the damage tends to linger because the message is there to see forever.

The writer is astonished when the reader takes umbrage at the barb. Often the writer says, “but I was only joking.”

When people say or write things in jest, there is usually an element of truth in them. Jokes are often just distortions of reality; that is what makes them humorous. The problem occurs when a joke puts down another person. This is so common you probably witness it frequently at work. The problem hardly registers because it is ubiquitous. If you are watching for it, you will see it often.

No ability to see the impact

With a verbal jab, it is easy to see the negative reaction through body language. In an email, the sender has no idea the joke caused a negative reaction. Actually, even in person, there is usually a part of the barb that is for real. Online, the danger becomes magnified for two reasons.

- 1) the person cannot see the facial expression and
- 2) emails are permanent, so the person can re-read the joke.

The most effective antidote

The antidote for this common problem is to establish five behavioral norms in your workgroup as follows:

1. We will not make jokes in any forum at another person’s expense.
2. Praise in public or online but offer constructive criticism face to face in private.
3. When there is a disconnect in communication, we will always assume the best intent and check it out.

4. If something in an email seems upsetting, check it out. Meet face to face with the other person as soon as possible.
5. Call each other out politely if we see violations of these rules.

Conclusion

These five rules are not difficult. It does take some resolve to get all people in a population to comply with them. Get firm agreement among the entire group and post the rules in the team meeting area. Actually follow the five rules above. It will change the entire complexion of the workgroup. This is not rocket science. It is much more important than rocket science.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.