

The High Cost of Negative Humor

by Ann McGee-Cooper, Duane Trammell, and Gary Looper

“A group of managers in a Dallas-based company was discussing the challenge of silos. One vocal woman was challenged on her perspective by a man who cut into her conversation, asking, ‘Where did you say you were from?’ She answered, ‘New York.’ He said, laughing, ‘Well, that explains a lot!’”

“A doctor, lawyer, and priest were stranded on a desert island. They could see large cargo ships going by but the ships couldn’t see them. So they decided to draw lots and see which one of them should swim out to flag down a passing ship. The lawyer lost and got in the water. These were shark-infested waters and to the amazement of the priest, the sharks parted and made a lane for the lawyer to swim through. The priest said, ‘My God, it’s a miracle!’ ‘No,’ replied the doctor, ‘It’s just professional courtesy!’”

You may have enjoyed a good laugh at similar jokes created at the expense of certain groups. It usually feels good to chuckle and feel “in on” the joke. But while all comedy has overt meaning,

much of it also delivers a hidden, negative message, one we may not consciously recognize or realize we are sending. Our joking at someone else’s expense—even if they aren’t present—sends a strong message defining “insiders” and “outsiders.” And if we happen to be members of the group being targeted, such humor can undermine our sense of self-worth, commitment to the organization, and performance.

“Rope a DOAP”

This subtle art of intimidation and one-upmanship is prevalent in corporate America and our society at large. Not long ago, we were working with a company that had recently hired some new marketing executives to position the company for greater growth. A schism soon developed between the new hires and the “old timers” in the accounting



department. The finance executives balked at the money that was being spent on marketing campaigns without regard to budget limits and battled with the “outsiders” in meetings. In response, the marketing people began to refer to the accountants as “DOAPs”—dumb old accounting people. After a while, they began to discredit any input that came from a DOAP. To really slam a person the marketing executives would say, “You’re beginning to sound like a DOAP,” or “That was an incredibly DOAPY think to say!” and everyone would have a good laugh.

As this derogatory terminology surfaced in meetings and hallway conversations, many employees felt uncomfortable but kept quiet out of fear of being the next target. They would think to themselves, “I would never say something like that.” But their silence gave tacit approval to those who made the jokes, so they were equally responsible for the trash talking. Over time, the polarization and bitterness increased, and the two groups failed to capitalize on the potential synergies between their complementary approaches to business challenges.



Zinging Zingers

What are the roots of negative humor? Some might argue that they lie in American-style individualism, which pits one person against the other in a race to be the best, first, fastest, or smartest. Part of the “winning” strategy is to intimidate, put down, or best others by

discounting them and their position, opinion, or performance. When we “zing” a group of people based on race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, weight, or other characteristics, we feel superior to them. And when others laugh at our “zingers,” we feel affirmed and justified.

What is the result of this tactic? When we are the targets, we may pay a price in lowered self-esteem, self-doubt, anxiety, and loss of energy. It’s hard to stay motivated at work when you begin to question your credibility within the organization. And fear weakens the immune system, which increases illnesses and absenteeism.

In many instances, the offended person falls into the double bind of being insulted and then told not to feel insulted. In fact, the retort, “Can’t you take a joke?” implies that you are overly sensitive. This puts the labeler in control and the labeled as unworthy of a valid complaint.

When we aren’t the intended victim of a mean-spirited jibe but rather someone on the sidelines listening and observing, we may feel that our personal integrity has been eroded. If we laugh at negative humor, we are tacitly agreeing with the joke teller and buying into his or her point of view. If we don’t laugh, we risk being excluded or the butt of the next joke. We may be chided, “Loosen up” or perhaps “Where’s your sense of humor?” But although it may seem like harmless fun, negative humor can be emotional bullying or verbal abuse in its most vicious form—even if we aren’t the targets. Over time, it can strip us of our sensitivity, empathy, and compassion.

What are the costs to the larger organization of negative humor? They include dysfunctional

teams, internal competition rather than cooperation, less-than-optimal performance, loss of trust, absenteeism, and a shift in focus from organizational goals to petty agendas. When people josh at the expense of another's dignity or worth, they inadvertently create a hostile, polarizing culture.

But Aren't There Exceptions?

On the other hand, when a blonde tells a blonde joke or a lawyer tells a lawyer joke, the message can be genuinely funny, endearing, and open people's hearts. In fact, some of the most healing humor pokes fun at our shared human foibles. Jerry Seinfeld, for example, has made a career of pointing out missteps that we all make:

“The problem with talking is that nobody stops you from saying the wrong thing. I think life would be a lot better if it was like you're always making a movie. You mess up, and somebody just walks on the set and stops the shot. Think of all the things you wish you could take back. You're out somewhere with people. ‘Boy, you look pregnant. Are you?’ The director steps in. ‘Cut, cut, cut. That's not going to work at all. Walk out the door; come back in; let's take this whole scene again. People think about what you are saying.’”

We have found that many enlightened leaders use this kind of self-deprecating humor as a way to create a safe environment for admitting mistakes.

In the early 1990s, we were asked to develop a process that would help five competing engineering and construction contractors work together on the multi-billion dollar Comanche Peak Steam Generation Nuclear Plant in North Texas. Construction on the first unit involved huge cost and schedule overruns, with many challenges from local environmental groups, which delayed the schedule from 3 years to 12.

When it came time for the second unit to be built, the client wanted to do everything possible to ensure success. To develop a new kind of teamwork and leadership in order to meet schedule, budget, and quality goals, 39 of the most highly qualified individuals were selected to manage the project as a team.

Not long into the process, we noticed that project leadership team meetings were rife with slams and trash-talking humor. For instance, when trying to explain why schedules were slipping, people would commonly make a nasty joke about the scheduler. The resulting sense of humiliation among those being slammed was palpable; they became quiet, didn't offer information, and looked for opportunities to avenge themselves.



As we began to draw attention to this dynamic, the team wondered about unintended consequences of their ribbing, sarcasm, prejudicial slurs, and mean-spirited put downs on productivity and morale. We coached them that negative humor was reinforcing hierarchy and stifling the information flow they so desperately needed. “This just isn't the attitude of success we want to create here,” team members agreed. And so they made a bold and courageous move. They set a new standard for language and humor of the work site, beginning with themselves. At meetings, they started charging a fee when

participants used humiliation, or ridicule. Violators would throw a quarter into a jar on the table when they made a verbal slip.

In just weeks, the tone of the humor in these meetings shifted 180 degrees. Even more importantly, the group’s productivity went up. Information flowed more freely, and root causes of problems became more evident. Putdowns lost favor. Everyone learned the difference between “teasing” and “putting people in their place.” When someone was the butt of a joke, all they had to do was say “Ouch!” and the team understood that the line had been crossed.

As the project management team began to work together in more productive ways, the atmosphere at the project site shifted as well. New recruits commented, “This is not like any construction site I’ve ever worked on.” The 2,000 workers adopted an incredible sense of pride and ownership for the project; it became the elite place to work in the industry. Employees who persisted with negative humor were weeded out through peer pressure. The project was ultimately completed in record time, under budget, and with the highest quality assurance/quality control scores ever given by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The Different Kinds of Humor	
Negative Humor	Positive Humor
Puts other down.	Lifts other up.
Laughs at the expense of others.	Laughs with others.
Humiliates, discounts, ridicules.	Gently makes it safe for our frailties.
Stereotypes people as all alike.	Lifts up and honors difference.
Is mean spirited.	Is gentle spirited.
Is self-aggrandizing.	Is humble.
Is defensive competitive, and offensive.	Is open, vulnerable, and safe.
Polarizes the listener, splitting them off from empathy.	Integrates the listener with self and others.
Challenges the right of others to think differently.	Invites the listener to be curious about the unexplored and undiscussed aspects of life, such as our common human foibles.
Belittles, demeans, ridicules.	Giggles at the human frailties we all share.
Erodes our dignity and the pride and spirit of others.	Lifts us up as precious beyond those moments of embarrassment and failure we all wish to forget.



The Healing Benefits of Humor

It's easy to be a critic; it doesn't take much talent to find fault with others. Responsible dialogue, on the other hand, takes great skill, energy, intelligence, and insight. We must have the ability to hear meaning beyond the words, to empathize with others, and to move beyond personal positions, biases, and life experiences. Thoughtful, respectful people question the thinking of others in ways that do not discount them, their motives, or their ability to think, but rather focus on the assumptions, logic, or basis for their statements. This approach is the foundation of a healthy, positive learning environment.

To be playful and humorous within the context of respectful dialogue is an art form that reveals the highest sense of character, intelligence, and emotional well-being. It is a goal worthy of all our efforts to learn to achieve. The world will be a better place should we accept this demanding challenge!

Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214 357-8550 or visit us at AMCA.com