
Being Sarcastic Boosts Workplace Creativity



By Li Huang , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour, with Benjamin Kessler, Web Editor

Sarcasm, used in the right way, can spark creative thinking in yourself and even in others.

Nearly everyone knows the sting of sarcasm. In its cruelest, schoolyard form (which is how most of us first encounter it), sarcasm often has a way of getting under our skin that more direct forms of mockery don't. Little wonder then that the use of sarcasm is officially frowned upon in the workplace, despite being a ubiquitous feature of informal office banter.

But what if the uniquely corrosive, conflict-inducing effects of sarcasm could be adapted and harnessed for constructive purposes? When my co-authors Francesca Gino (Harvard University) and Adam D. Galinsky (Columbia University) and I put it to the test, we found that not only did sarcasm cause its users to behave more creatively in subsequent tasks, but those on the receiving end also reaped creative benefits. In other words, the sting of sarcasm can potentially serve as a catalyst for innovative thinking.

Yeah, right, like you could think outside the box...

In our initial experiments for the paper “[The highest form of intelligence: Sarcasm increases creativity for both expressers and recipients](#)”, we exposed one randomly selected group of participants to either sincere or sarcastic remarks, and had another group express such remarks as a prelude to taking a creativity test. Those in the sarcasm conditions performed significantly better on the test than those in the sincerity condition or the control conditions. The question is of course, why? We argue it is because constructing and interpreting sarcasm requires abstract thinking, one of the most critical antecedents of creativity.

Sarcasm and abstraction

Let’s say you’re sitting at your desk one day, surfing the internet when you’re supposed to be working. Suddenly, you hear your boss’s voice behind you: “Don’t work too hard!” The slight sting of sarcasm, tinged in this case with humour, memorably underscores the urgency of the message. More important, framing the comment in a sarcastic way lifts the criticism from the concrete situation to a more abstract question of workplace appropriateness. Similarly, to interpret your boss’s comment, you would have to use abstract thinking as well. Indeed, when we added an abstract-thinking assessment to the experiment described above, expressing and receiving sarcasm significantly boosted abstract thinking.

Of course, sarcasm often leaves a bitter taste behind. In our studies, both dispensers and recipients of sarcasm reported stronger feelings of conflict than participants in sincere and neutral exchanges. This implies that where sarcasm is used indiscriminately, it may generate potentially costly acrimony alongside the creative benefits.

Sarcasm and trust

We wanted to see whether it was possible to unlock the benefits of sarcasm without simultaneously increasing the likelihood of conflict. So in our final experiment, we asked the participants who were giving or receiving sarcastic remarks to imagine their interlocutor was either the person they most trusted, or most distrusted. As before, all participants who had sarcastic conversations performed better on the creativity test. But there was one big difference: the ones who were cued to trust their conversation partner reported no heightened sense of conflict.

It’s good for communication, no really

While most previous research seems to suggest that sarcasm is detrimental to effective communication because it is perceived to be more contemptuous than sincerity, we found that, unlike sarcasm between parties who distrust each other, sarcasm between individuals who share a trusting relationship does not generate more contempt than sincerity. This seems to suggest that sarcasm does not always negatively affect communication. This is consistent with some existing ethnographic research suggesting that sarcasm may enhance solidarity among close others and within work groups.

We hope our research would inspire organisations and communication coaches to take a renewed look at sarcasm. Instead of discouraging workplace sarcasm completely as they have been doing, they could help educate individuals about the appropriate circumstances under which sarcasm can be used. By doing so, both the individuals involved in sarcastic conversations and the organisations they belong to would benefit creatively.

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