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# The Dark Side of a Funny Situation



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**A sense of humour can help managers cultivate a cohesive work environment but, when used as a defence strategy, can foment confusion, tension and offence.**

Everyone agreed that Jack, the VP Information Systems in the company, was a very funny guy. He had an unusual, self-deprecating twist to his humour, he knew how to get laughs out of people and to help them see the lighter side of things. But his banter also had a darker side, especially when it was directed at others. While his coworkers would laugh when he joked about colleagues' imperfections, it would also leave them with a bitter aftertaste. What added to their ambivalence was that Jack was always giving conflicting signals. It was difficult to decipher his true intentions. Was he using humour to defend against his own insecurities? Was he covering up his own fears and pains? Was he using having fun to mask his hostility? Or, was he (by making others the butt of his jokes), deflecting attention from himself, to avoid getting too close to people?

**Is it really funny?**

Humour is a complex cognitive function that often, but not necessarily, leads to laughter. It may be used in a variety of ways, to both positive and negative effect. Most of us, when we engage in humour, do so to entertain. Such humour is congenial and empathetic: it brings people together. Humour is also a great way to relieve psychological tensions. It puts us face-to-face with life's incongruities; the disparity between what we expect and what we experience can be quite absurd and thus comical. Also, at times, humour may be used to deal with situations that are beyond our control or are depressing. In such instances, it may provide an optimistic perspective or a temporary light at the end of the tunnel. However, there are also instances in which humour is used in a more malicious way. Making jokes or "laughing at" someone else's expense may be funny for some but not necessarily funny for the person who is the subject of ridicule. In this case, humour may lead to resentment.

### **Humour deconstructed**

From an evolutionary perspective, humour must have had a survival value. Like all characteristics that are passed on through natural selection, humour makes us feel better and is good for our mental health. Laughter helps connect us with others and encourages social activities. By turning negatives into positives, being optimistic and creating hope in face of despair, humour can help us cope with the challenges of life.

From a physiological perspective, a body of research has shown that laughter gives our bodies a positive workout. It has a stress reducing impact and makes people more resilient. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans show that laughter changes the biochemistry of our brain and hormone system. The use of humour, in stressful situations, decreases our heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. It helps us to increase infection-fighting antibodies and has a positive effect on our immune system. It's no wonder people who use humour are more likely to be healthier and live longer.

From a psychological perspective, there is much more to humour than we may be consciously aware of. In his study, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud noted that humour was a significant defense mechanism to release repressed sexual and aggressive tensions. While some defensive strategies are extremely dysfunctional, contributing to maladaptive behaviour that may threaten the mental health of the person,

others can help us live happy, productive lives. We can even classify defence mechanisms into a hierarchy of severity ranging from pathological, to immature, to neurotic, to mature. Not surprisingly, humour fits into the last category. Humour also serves a functional and social purpose. It is an age-old device to express criticism about injustices, arrogance, pretensions or hypocrisies that can't socially (or legally) be expressed in other forms. It can be a foray into "taboo" or "politically incorrect" subjects, making the unbearable bearable or the unspeakable known. One of the earliest historical figures to be firmly associated with humour and laughter was the Greek philosopher Democritus, also known as the "laughing philosopher" because of his tendency to mock his fellow citizens while laughing. In many of Shakespeare's plays, the "fool" often turned out to be, paradoxically, the wisest and most honest of them all. More recently comedians/satirists Charlie Chaplin, John Cleese and Woody Allen were both entertaining and biting in their criticism of society's foibles.

## **Two-sides to the laughing clown**

But, as mentioned earlier, humour can be used to both positive (connecting) and negative (alienating) effect. Sarcastic or derisive humour - making others the butt of our jokes - is often contemptuous, hostile and manipulative. This type of humour reveals more about the person who is attacking rather than the person under attack. Although often disguised as humour, sarcasm is really a thinly disguised form of hostility. It shows a lack of respect for the subject and can be hurtful.

In contrast, self-deprecating humour is more disarming and inclusive. It involves amusing others at our own expense in a self-disparaging way and suggests humility on the part of the humourist. In between sarcastic and self-deprecation, we can find a range of possibilities. Whatever form of humour we use, however, we should keep in mind that using it to excess may suggest underlying feelings of self-doubt, low self-esteem and other forms of anxieties.

## **When jokes at work backfire**

Returning to Jack, the confusion he caused with his colleagues required attention. During a series of leadership coaching sessions to help him better understand himself and his relationship with others, he underwent a 360 degree feedback assessment report on his leadership strengths and weaknesses. The report showed that although he was using humour (most of

the time) to good effect, there were unexpected, negative consequences that needed addressing.

To help change his communication style, Jack enlisted the help of an executive coach. He explained to his coach that he thought his use of humour was innocuous and that people understood what he was really trying to say. In response, the coach pointed out that while a good sense of humour was a blessing, it often resulted in crossed signals. Jack needed to become more conscious of the message he was giving.

## **Humour as defence mechanism**

A turning point for helping Jack understand his behaviour was his reflections on his family background. Through deeper exploration of his sub-conscious, Jack realised he was using humour as a distancing device - as a way to deal with his insecurities and to avoid dealing with conflicting situations. He had a difficult and confusing upbringing having grown up in a household where his parents fought daily. In order to make his situation emotionally more manageable, humour became his survival strategy, a coping mechanism that turned out to be highly effective in defusing the quarrels at home. This reliance on humour was reinforced through his experiences at school where, being overweight and poor at sports, he was the butt of many jokes. To defend himself against the bullying he assumed the role of the class clown.

Turning every stressful life event into a joke became his default mode of coping with his personal life drama. But (as the feedback report showed) it had turned into a dysfunctional, overused habit at the workplace and one that he needed to break.

With the help of his coach, Jack began to leverage humour as an asset and to use it more constructively. He was able to recognise when humour was appropriate and advantageous - when he could, with others, make fun of the paradoxes and follies that are part of life - and to distinguish situations when its use would be repelling and divisive.

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