The Negative Side of Humor: Put-Down Jokes

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"If there is no malice in your heart, there can't be none in your jokes," Will Rogers

[Adapted from P. McGhee, Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training. Call 800-228-0810 to order.]

Other articles at this website show that appropriately-timed humor on the job has the power to break down barriers between fellow employees and build positive connections or bonds in their place. Shared positive laughter promotes team building and helps teams communicate more openly and honestly. It supports the bottom line by helping us sustain peak levels of performance with an increasing pace of change, and the inevitable stress that goes with change.

We've all seen situations, however, where humor alienates people and creates barriers. The problem here, of course, is the kind of humor employees use on the job. Humor that disrupts and weakens teams is generally some kind of put-down humor—humor in which there is a clear victim or butt of the joke. This kind of humor always feels like "laughing at" rather than "laughing with."

It seems to be part of human nature to tell jokes which poke fun at other groups or individuals. Entire countries are often known for their specific brand of put-down humor. When I lived in Paris for three years (in the 1980s), I discovered that the French loved to poke fun at the Belgians. A favorite butt of Canadian jokes is people from Newfoundland ("Newfie jokes"). When I taught at Texas Tech University in the early 1980's, everyone I knew told "Aggie" jokes (putting down students from Texas A & M University).

If you know a lot of jokes poking fun at other racial or ethnic groups, the opposite sex, etc., and tell them on the job, it's just a matter of time until you seriously offend someone (even if they laugh at your joke). With increasing levels of cultural diversity emerging in most work settings, the best rule of thumb is to simply not tell any put-down jokes on the job. A joke which you assume will not offend your listeners can easily offend someone within earshot of the joke, even though you're not telling it to that person. If you must tell these jokes, save them for your friends when you're outside the office. The one exception to this rule is that it's generally OK to tell jokes putting down your company's main competitors. For example, if you work for Coca-Cola, it's always safe to poke fun at Pepsi.

In my programs, I often put myself at risk by telling a joke which demonstrates the offensive nature of put-down humor. For example, in the year or so after Bill Clinton was
elected President, there were a lot of "Hillary jokes" going around. I ask my audience, "Who's most likely to be offended by this joke?"

**Bill Clinton is walking out of the Arkansas State Fair carrying a pig under his arm, and on the way out he runs into a farmer he used to know when he was Governor. The farmer says, "Hey Bill, what's with the pig?" Clinton answers, "I got it for Hillary." The farmer thinks about it and says, "Good swap."**

The audience quickly points out that most women and many democrats, and certainly Hillary, would be offended by the joke. And yet employees in companies across the country can still be found sharing such jokes around the coffee machine, walking down the hall, etc.

In one company I spoke to recently, an employee was fired for loading offensive jokes onto the computers of fellow-employees (they would see the jokes when they logged onto their computer). He assumed no one would know who fed the jokes into the system—an assumption which cost him his job.

Those who love put-down jokes complain that the workplace has just become too sensitive, and that those who are offended by their jokes need to "lighten up" a bit. While I earn a living helping people overcome "terminal seriousness" and begin taking themselves more lightly (while continuing to take their work seriously), I understand perfectly well why people are offended by jokes putting down other groups.

The joke-teller generally says something like, "Hey, it's just a joke. I was only kidding. What's the matter, can't you take a joke?" The only problem is that unless you know the teller very well, you can never be sure whether the joke does or does not say something about their true underlying attitudes about the opposite sex or another racial or ethnic group. There are enough people who do hold hostile attitudes toward the groups they put down in their jokes that, anyone who does not know you well will assume that you fall in this category. Since this can only disrupt the effectiveness with which you work together, the best approach is clearly to find another way to show your sense of humor on the job.