

humour in the workplace

Humour is part of our day-to-day working life. We use it to keep ourselves amused, and to lighten a heavy or dull work environment. But humour is useful for more than amusement. It is part of the way that groups manage their relationships.

Humour is one tool that managers can use to get a message across while maintaining an open informal team environment. Similarly, humour can be used by team members to let a manager know that something needs fixing without being directly critical or confrontational. Humour is also often used by group members to show indirectly who belongs in the team and who does not.

Humour is a very powerful communication tool, if you understand it and use it well.

The Language in the Workplace Project team has studied interactions in a range of workplaces from government departments to commercial organisations to discover how New Zealanders use humour at work. The team found there are a range of ways that we use humour in meetings. This pamphlet provides examples of some of the key humour strategies they found.

strengthening solidarity or collegiality

- Many times, humour was used to build solidarity between participants at a meeting. A successful attempt at humour indicates that the speaker shares with others a common view about what is amusing - thus creating rapport. Shared humour emphasises common ground and shared norms.

Example: In a large meeting Will and Viv react wittily to something falling past the tenth floor window of the meeting room.

Will: whoops someone fell off the roof top
Viv: it's the CEO - things must be worse than we thought

- Shared criticisms of others can also serve to cement solidarity between participants. A humorous criticism endorsed by others reflects common values and attitudes.

Example: Rod and Sam are members of a project team. Silvia is the team's administrative assistant, and Sam's comment causes them all to laugh.

Rod: how do you keep track of the projects?
Sam: bits of sticky yellow paper all over the wall

handling embarrassing information

- Humour can be a means of handling difficult or embarrassing situations.

Example: Val's colleagues all have an extra task to fit into their schedules, but Val has some free time to use for other tasks. She makes a sarcastic, self-deprecatory remark – "nobody wants me - good eh [laugh]"

softening a suggestion

- People commonly use humour to soften the impact of an instruction or suggestion, so that the other person does not feel they are being bullied. In these instances, humour maintains the respect between participants, and acts as a signal of goodwill and co-operative intent.

Example: Sally wants Tina to take a proposal away for some more work – "Well, we've just about done it to death I think [laughs]. It's about ready for you to give it some mouth to mouth resuscitation do you think? [Both laugh]"

downplaying a criticism

- Between equals working together on an issue, humour was a commonly used device for "managing" suggestions which were intended to be critical.

Example: Two advisors are comparing written evaluations. Andy humorously implies that Vince has been too wordy – "And apart from that I've just got what you've got but in a lot less words. [Both laugh]"

controlling the behaviour of others

- Where group members have different levels of power, humour sometimes functions to disguise a less acceptable message - a device to sugar the pill.
- Humour may also be used to disguise the fact that the speaker has the authority to explicitly require the addressee to behave as he orders.

Example: Manager to administrative assistant who is chatting to a secretary – "OK Marion I'm afraid serious affairs of state will have to wait. We have some trivial issues needing our attention [All laugh]"

Example: Neil has come to collect his administrative assistant for a meeting for which he is late. His comment is ironic since the assistant is working at his computer and appears to have forgotten the time – "I hate to drag you away when you're obviously having so much fun but it IS after ten."

challenging the power of a manager

- Finally, humour may be used to challenge power relations. Humour is one of the few acceptable means available to subordinates who wish to contest, even if momentarily, the existing authority structures. Humour serves as a useful disguise for what could be regarded as an implicit challenge to the superior's authority.

Example: During a planning meeting, May uses humour to direct Jenny, her superior, to take responsibility for the next presentation – "I'm sure you would love to show off your new whizz-bang computer with all its special effects wouldn't you Jenny?[laughter]"

important things to remember

- Humour functions in complex ways in the workplace;
- Humour can be a subtle device for getting things done while also conveying important messages about power relations;
- Humour builds solidarity within a group, and isolates outsiders;
- The power of humour lies in its flexibility for all these purposes - it can function as a disguised weapon for those who want to complain, a cushion for criticism, and perhaps most importantly a source of fun among colleagues.

about the project

The Language in the Workplace Project aims to identify the characteristics of effective interpersonal communication in business contexts. To date the project has recorded and analysed over 2000 interactions in 16 government and private sector organisations. Some features of workplace talk we are currently investigating include:

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| <i>Directives</i> | What is the most effective way of getting things done? |
| <i>Miscommunication</i> | How do people prevent or fix misunderstandings? |
| <i>Style shifting</i> | How do people adapt their talk to their audience? |
| <i>Email</i> | What role does email play in workplace communication? |
| <i>Problem solving</i> | How do people collaborate to solve problems or complete tasks? |
| <i>Meetings</i> | What structures and processes are typical of effective meetings? |
| <i>Humour and small talk</i> | How does "social talk" work as a communication tool? |
| <i>Workplace culture</i> | How is an organisation's culture reflected in their communication? |
| <i>Knowledge work</i> | How is knowledge created and advanced through talk? |

The Research Team

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Associated researchers and workplace practitioners
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We would like to express our thanks to those who allowed us to record their interactions

Where can I get more information?

Visit our website to see a list of our publications and the latest project information:
<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp/>

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