

Joke or No Joke

By Robert Whipple MBA, CPLP

I was having an online conversation in a class I am teaching about teams at work. The discussion was relative to having online messages misinterpreted. Clearly we have all experienced this uncomfortable situation more than once. I got so fascinated about this topic that I wrote a book on it a few years ago.

One student brought up a situation that is common in person as well as online, but the damage done online is usually much larger. This is when a person tries to rib another person with a joke, but the meaning on the part of the receiver is taken literally. The writer is astonished when the reader takes umbrage at the barb. The writer says, “but I was only joking.”

When people say things in jest, there is usually an element of truth in them. Jokes are often just distortions of reality; that is what makes them humorous. The problem occurs when we make a joke where the punch line puts down another person. This is so common you probably witness it a dozen times a day or more, and it hardly registers because it is ubiquitous. If you are listening for it, you will hear it often.

Unfortunately, when the joke is documented in online exchanges, there isn't the opportunity for the writer to let the other person know through body language that the barb is totally in jest. Actually, even in person there is usually a part of the barb that is for real. Online, the danger is magnified for two reasons, 1) the person cannot see the facial expression and emoticons often are misinterpreted as well, and 2) e-mails are permanent, so the person can read and re-read the joke. It becomes more menacing with each iteration.

The antidote for this common problem is to establish five behavioral norms in your work group as follows:

1. We will not make jokes in any forum at another person's expense.
2. We will praise in public or online but offer constructive criticism face to face in private.
3. When there is a disconnect in communication, we will always assume the best intent and check it out.
4. If something in an e-mail seems upsetting, it is up to the person who is upset to meet face to face with the other person as soon as possible.
5. We will call each other out politely if we see violations of these rules.

These five rules are not difficult, but it does take some training and resolve to get all people in a population to comply with them. It helps to get firm agreement among the

entire group and to post the rules in the team meeting area. If you can get people to actually follow the five rules above, it will change the entire complexion of the work group. This is not rocket science; it is much more important than rocket science.

The preceding information was adapted from the book *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.

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