Types of Humor:

The Good, The Bad, and The (Sometimes) Ugly

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Let’s take a minute to look at a couple of different types of humor. While I’m encouraging you to use humor in your different modes of communication, I want you to understand that there’s humor that brings people together and humor that can pull people apart.

**Positive humor** is the type of humor that makes people feel connected—like part of the group. It builds rapport, it boosts self-esteem and enhances creativity. Very simply, it is laughing *with* others and it’s encouraging.

**Negative humor** is the kind of humor that makes people feel excluded and can cause division in a group. It targets and belittles others and stifles creativity. Simply put, it is laughing *at* others and it’s discouraging.

Now to complicate matters just a bit, there’s what I call the **Gray Zone**. This is humor that can be easily misinterpreted, despite one’s intentions. Examples of this kind of humor are teasing, satire, sarcasm, tickling, inside humor (also known as You-Had-To-Be-There Humor), practical jokes, stereotypic humor (that’s any kind of humor that ends in an –ism, like age-ism, sexism, racism, and so on), and gallows humor (also known as sick humor, black humor, or dark humor).

**Teasing** in the right setting can be seen as nothing more than a funny and even affectionate comment. And then again, it can backfire—like the time I attended a fund raising dinner with a bunch of friends. At the end of the evening the emcee asked folks to get out their raffle tickets as he called out the number for the grand prize—a brand new big screen TV. The emcee asked who had Number 25-437 and the woman across from me jumped up and yelled, “I do! Oh-my-gosh! I can’t believe I won—I never win anything!”

The emcee laughed and said, “You still haven’t! I was just kidding. The REAL number is 25–774.” The crowd turned on him for teasing her in such a mean-spirited fashion but she left in tears.

**Sarcasm** can be found funny among friends, colleagues or folks who know and like one another. But the root word of sarcasm means “to tear the flesh” and if you’ve ever been hit with an effective piece of sarcasm, you know how hurtful it can be. One day when dropping my son off to school I watched a young boy go up to his teacher and hand her a piece of paper. She looked at it and then looked up at the class and said, “Class—when is your assignment due?” Several kids called out, “Tomorrow.” The teacher looked back at
the young boy, rolled her eyes, said, “DUH!” and then handed him back his paper. His posture seemed to crumple right before my very eyes as he made his way to his desk, head down, shoulders slumped. Her sarcasm cut him to his very core—and left a mark that would probably remain for some time to come.

**Inside Humor or You-Had-To-Be-There Humor** can be a very effective means of bonding a group. A key phrase that is understood within a select number of people can reinforce the feeling of being a part of a group. Of course anything that marks people as part of an inside group, also marks the remainder who are “outside” the group. When a new person comes on board, bring them up to speed with the inside gags so that when someone says an inside word or phrase and everyone bursts out laughing, he doesn’t stand there feeling like an idiot.

As for **Practical Jokes**—these can be funny and also foster amazing creativity—like the guys who disassembled then reassembled a Volkswagen Beetle—in their boss’s office! But when you’re planning practical jokes think in terms of intent and safety. What’s the intent? Is it to entertain or to embarrass? Embarrassing someone in public is a quick to destroy a relationship. Is it safe or can someone get physically hurt? If there’s even a remote chance that someone could get hurt—forget about it.

**Stereotypic Humor**

Stereotypic humor is humor that negatively reinforces a stereotype. A couple of examples would include racism or sexism.

Take for example the time Mike was meeting a new client over lunch. He wanted to make a great impression, so he planned his presentation carefully, wore his best suit, and practiced a couple jokes that were sure to win the client over.

The lunch was delicious. His pitch for the new product was perfect. The he wrapped it up by adding, “Oh, by the way, did you hear about the blonde who was so dumb... she thought Taco Bell was the Mexican phone company?”

The client laughed, shook hands, and said how much he appreciated the meeting. Mike calculated dollar signs all the way home. But he didn’t land the contract. And the client never told him how much the joke had offended him.

**Ethnic humor** in and of itself is not bad. Indeed there is great ethnic humor to be enjoyed—If you are a member of the target group or butt of a joke, it’s safer to proceed in telling the joke. If not, you should either wait to be invited or just not go there at all.

For instance—during the O. J. Simpson trial, Senator DiMatto from New York began mocking and mimicking the judge of Japanese decent—Judge Lance Ito. The press came hammering down on him and his first response was to backpedal and say in effect, “Hey, I’m Italian—people are making fun of Italians all the time.” Well, Senator, you should have stuck with Italian jokes until the Japanese invited you to make fun of them.

**Sexual:**
You have to be careful these days because not only can you offend someone—you can be hit with a sexual harassment lawsuit. Even if you didn’t intend to harass—your intention does not necessarily stand up in court. When in doubt, leave it out.

A variation of sexual humor would include Blonde jokes. You’ve no doubt heard the dozens, if not hundreds, of dumb blonde jokes—things like

_How do you drive a blonde crazy? Give her a bag of M&Ms and tell her to alphabetize them._

_How can you tell if there’s been a blonde at your computer? There’s white out on the screen._

A woman once told me about a time she began her presentation with a blonde joke only to be accosted by three female attendees afterwards. Their feedback: “You’re not blonde—you shouldn’t be making blonde jokes!”

One evening my (first) husband was going through the usual litany of blonde jokes. I laughed politely (or otherwise had to hear, “What’s wrong—don’t you have a sense of humor?”). At one point my five year old platinum blonde son stood up and walked away from the table, chin quivering and eyes tearful. My husband said, “Hey son—where do you think you’re going? Dinner’s not over yet.” My son turned back around and said to him, “I’m tired of you making fun of me.”

You could have heard my husband’s jaw hit the table. And it was then that I had to explain to my son that dumb blonde jokes are not targeting young white males!

In all fairness, there are jokes that target males, too. Jokes like: What’s the difference between a man and ET? ET phoned home.

What’s the difference between a man and a government bond? A government bond matures.

A guy telling those jokes to a group of women will probably be seen as self-effacing and funny. A woman telling those jokes to a group of men will be seen as catty. If you’re not a member of the group being targeted—don’t go there.

**Sick:**

Almost everyone has experienced sick humor one time or another. And if you’re a member of healthcare, or a policeman or a fireman—you probably experience it a lot. There’s a reason for that. The closer you are to tragedy and death, the darker our humor becomes. So anyone who has been exposed to tragedy or misfortune—even if indirectly—may be exposed to sick humor.

Also called dark humor, black humor or gallows humor—this goes back almost as far as we can find recorded humor. Gallows humor supposedly got its name from a prisoner who was being lead to his death by hanging and made a joke to his executioner: “Good
day for a hanging.”

I did some research on the subject and found that pretty much no event, group, or person is immune to sick humor. As a matter of fact, the more taboo the subject, the more likely it will be the target for sick humor. Jokes flew after the Shuttle Challenger explosion, they were rampant during the O. J. Simpson trial, and there were even some jokes about the death of Princess Di. There are jokes circulating about the war, the economy, global warming—and numerous other topics that I just don’t have time to mention.

The sick joke is used to create distance from the horror and usually the set-up goes something like this: “I just heard a joke that was absolutely awful—want to hear it?” The joke is told, the listener usually reacts disgusted, and then proceeds to perpetuate the joke by repeating the cycle with someone else.

The Internet has added a certain safety factor to these jokes because now one can tell them without actually being present and there’s a certain amount of anonymity.

I think sick humor actually has a place. It helps people deal with their stress and anxiety. A healthcare professional that can’t laugh ends up leaving the profession. A policeman or fireman that can’t laugh ends up burning out. Prisoners of War who have returned tell how sick humor helped keep them resilient and able to withstand the torment of their captors.

The trick is to make sure that certain guidelines are followed so that people aren’t unnecessarily offended. If you are in a position of leadership, you want to be sure that not only do you follow these guidelines, but that you share them with your staff, students, or whomever you are leading.

Karyn’s mission is to empower people and improve global health through humor. She has authored 6 books, she is published in peer-reviewed journals, and she is an inductee into the Speaker Hall of Fame. Karynbuxman.com