



If your job's a joke, just tell one



Janet Holmes
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

IN AN item headed “No jokes please, we’re British”, *The Independent* newspaper reported that most British directors took a dim view of humour in meetings, and “a staggering 39 per cent” believed jokes had no place at all at work.

Our Language in the Workplace project research indicates that New Zealand managers are much more sensible on the issue of workplace humour.

Most recognise that humour is an important component in establishing and maintaining positive workplace relationships. Faced with a criticism for leaving the wrong date on a memo, for instance, instead of snapping back, one manager responded, “Ah well, I find it hard being perfect at everything.”

His good-humoured ironic quip ensured the discussion did not turn sour, as it might easily have done if he had taken an offensive stance.

Humour is a flexible linguistic strategy. It relieves tension when tempers are getting short and revives flagging energy during long meetings.

One witty exchange we recorded occurred as people’s heads were beginning to nod during an after-lunch meeting reviewing monthly expenditure. Suddenly, something fell past the 10th-floor window of the meeting room.

Deadpan, Will remarked: “Whoops, someone fell off the roof.”

Quick as a flash Viv added: “It’s the CEO – things must be worse than we thought.” The ensuing laughter woke everyone up.

Humour can express rapport and build team spirit. It says, “We’re on the same wavelength.”

Two women working for a government department commiserated with each other about the fact that others in the department didn’t seem prepared to face up to difficult issues.

“Why don’t we all go on a department trip to the ostrich farm?” said Lynn.

Her colleague laughingly responded, “Some people might say we’re already in

the ostrich farm.”

Humour here expressed their exasperation in a non-destructive way, while also strengthening their feelings of sharing a common perspective and workplace values.

Often several people will contribute to an amusing scenario, which strengthens the feeling of belonging to a team.

One nice example of this process involved three women creatively developing the idea of a shared ministry suit, which could be used when someone had come to work in casual clothes and then was summoned unexpectedly to see their minister.

You will just have to imagine the laughter throughout this dialogue.

Edith: “I think we need a ministry suit just hanging up in the cupboard.”

Leila: “You can just imagine.”

Edith: “It would have to have an elastic waist so that we could all share it, bunched in for some and let out for others.”

Laura: “And the jacket would have to be long to cover all the bulges.”

The shared activity of building a humorous fantasy like this reflects shared work experiences and attitudes, and strengthens a team’s working relationship. In some workplaces, teasing serves the same function. People who can comfortably tease each other generally have good relationships.

Sally and Clara were established colleagues, so when Clara said, “I’m quietly confident that I’ll get it done”, Sally could boldly tease her saying, “I can’t imagine you doing anything quietly!”

In another workplace, Des teased Harry about his sober social life: “So you haven’t done anything exciting this week, like talk to any girls?”

When Harry replied “no”, Des continued to tease him.

“Good, you don’t want to talk to girls. They’re trouble, Harry. Look at me. I would have been rich and good looking if



I hadn't had girls. Now I'm just good looking."

Harry was a relatively new worker in this small business, and Des's teasing was positively motivated, designed to put him at ease and include him in the social talk at morning tea.

Harry apparently recognised Des's good intentions and responded good-naturedly with a smile.

Even better would have been a riposte such as, "If that's what you call good looking, I can expect a movie offer soon",

indicating ability to foot it with this kind of contestive humour.

Teasing is double-edged and the line between amusement and offence is often a fine one.

In some workplaces, challenge and contestation are the bread and butter of interaction and humour serves more complex functions, but that is a topic for another column.

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