

Getting Serious About Humor

We all know that humor can be an effective tool in the life of any group. Everyone in the professional world has had the experience of someone making a light comment at a moment of awkwardness, and with that, somehow, productive work discussion starts to flow once again.

Of course, this can happen in any setting. At home, the skilled host knows just what to say to put a smile on the face of guests who arrive knowing few in the room. When it comes to building a connection with some new people, that smile can make all the difference in the world...

But, just as these familiar examples may remind us of the benefits of some uses of humor, there is a downside:

Think of a task group focused on some particularly difficult aspect of their work.

I suspect that we all have had the experience of someone making a funny comment that distracted the group from its focus, and thus, prevented what may, at that moment, have become an opportunity for significant progress.

At the extremes, we might even know of people in our professional lives who operate as the “class clown.” To such folks, it seems, everything can become the stimulus for a joke. In such situations, rather than their expressions of humor advancing the development of the group, they can become a digression, at least a source of distraction, or even an annoyance.

As I hope is evident, humor in group settings is very much a “two edged sword” and understanding those psychological forces that point these uses of humor in

productive, or destructive directions, is a valuable resource to anyone who wants the groups with which they engage to be at their best.

In order to understand more about these issues, it is important that we introduce another fundamental aspect of the psychology of group development:

Tension, is simply “motivational energy.” We can think of tension as the *fuel* that makes things happen in groups.

Some examples might be useful here:

A *provocative question* is likely to increase the level of tension in group settings. Unresolved conflict, even when modest, will typically have the same result. Leaving things *unfinished* usually increases tension.

And, as is perhaps obvious at this point, when a satisfying answer to a question is offered, tension diminishes. Tension also decreases when conflicts are resolved, and when those things that seem unfinished, or incomplete, are brought to conclusion.

Another aspect of the notion of tension is that problems are likely to arise when the level of tension in groups is too *low*, or too *high*.

When tension is too *low*, group members are lacking in interest, their focus is diminished, their energy is depleted, and though unlikely, at the extreme, they might even fall asleep.

When tension is too *high*, people become agitated, again, the value of their focus diminishes as they jump from topic to topic, their heightened animation becomes counter-productive, often, conflicts may flare up in response to what would otherwise appear to be exquisitely trivial provocation.

With our understanding of the meaning of *tension* it becomes possible to clarify aspects of the “two edged sword” nature of the uses of humor that I mentioned earlier:

Skilled group members sense, and then sometimes adjust the level of tension displayed by those with whom they work.

Less skillful members (and most particularly the “class clowns” we have all seen) respond not to the tension in *others* but rather to their *own internal* tension.

Rather than focusing on the needs of the group, it is in a desire to diminish their *own* internal discomfort that such folks use humor inappropriately. It is that inappropriate focus that is the fundamental cause of the problems generated by this form of group participation.

And finally:

Skilled group members often do things to adjust the level of tension they observe in others, and indeed, that can be effective.

There is an approach that is usually even more effective (though perhaps less obvious):

By *supporting others*, skilled group members can *expand the zone* in which tension in a group can be productive. With that, the productivity of any group will increase.

The material above is offered in our desire to share our thoughts with our many colleagues.

Of course, we sincerely value any reactions you might have.

If you wish to reach us, please call us at 866-659-3169, or send an email to downloads@soleassociates.com.

We thank you for your interest in our work...

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