

The Serious Side of Put-Down Humor

You're standing in a group, talking, and one of the members starts shooting verbal "zingers" at you. Everybody gets a hearty laugh at your expense. Everybody but you.

Light (and not-so-light) insult humor has become almost a national pastime. When you're the butt of the jokes, you may try to shrug it off as harmless, but it stings. And if you're the one getting laughs at others' expense, you may not realize what you're revealing about yourself.

Let's shed some light and insight to this common family and workplace experience.

Verbal Abuse is Not Funny

For the past number of weeks, I've been engaged in coaching work, formally and informally, with groups and teams. Each of these groups had been intact for months; some, for years. Participants represented the spectrum of "types" that might be included in the myriad descriptions of the MBTI or DiSC-type assessments or profiles. So, nothing unusual in the participant makeup.

However, across teams and groups, I was struck by one behavior that stood out above all others, namely, the propensity for many of the members to consistently engage in making destructive, cutting, sarcastic remarks to and about others in their group or on their team.

Destructive comments personal or professional are those which are hurtful, demeaning, sarcastic and verbally abusive.

What You Say Matters

The comments I experienced were directed at folks' physical characteristics (hair, clothes), perspectives or ideas, life choices (others' choices of restaurants, movies, sports teams), folks' current performance, and even where others had worked or attended school. These were not simply run-of-the-mill light comments. There was an underlying anger, resentment and destructive element wrapped inside.

On more than one occasion, I had to do a "double-take", and ask myself, "Did I really hear that?" "Did he really say that?" "Did she really throw that zinger at him?"

What continually came to me was "Why? What is this all about?"

In Western culture today, the biting, sarcastic, demeaning put-down has become an art form, everywhere TV, movies, talk radio, sports events, journals and magazines. It's part of the fabric of everyday conversation. And more, many folks today see such behavior as "business as usual", as "no big deal." In fact, when I asked some of these folks if they were aware of what they said, most responded, "No." or "So, what?" Like I had three heads or came from another planet. For many of these folks, their behavior is a true "blind spot."

There's Always A Reason

So, let's return to the question, "Why?". In my experience in the realm of psychology and psychodynamics, we understand most folks engage in put-downs, sarcasm and barbs as a way to look smart, witty, sharp and cool (as a defense against their own inner, deeper feelings of deficiency, insecurity, or lack in some way, shape or form). That's the upside for them. The downside is that the person for whom the comment is directed is often harmed, hurt, demeaned, or otherwise made the point of ridicule.

When I ask other group participants, “bystanders”, why they often react with laughter, or “atta boy” comments, they generally say they don’t know, they just do. “It was funny.” Basically, a knee-jerk reaction. The truth is many react this way, in the “go along to get along” fashion as they don’t want to stand out as different, serious, politically correct, etc. They want and need to be “one of the boys” so speaking out, or pushing back against such comments and behavior will only serve to get them ostracized. So, they laugh or jump into the banter. (It’s like a verbal gang rape.)

The deal is, no matter how sharp one is, how educated, how senior in the hierarchy one is, how wealthy one is... no one has the right to strive to look witty, sharp or cool at the expense of another human being, at the expense of being disrespectful to another human being. And, for those who have a need to do so, the underlying question is, “Why? What does it get you? Does it make any difference that you might be hurting someone else?”

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Can you think of a time today, this week, this month when you made a sarcastic or demeaning remark to a teammate, colleague or co-worker “for the fun of it?”
- Can you remember a time today, this week or this month when you were the recipient of another’s sarcastic or demeaning comment “for the fun of it?”
- If you have a reputation for being witty or sharp because you are a master of sarcasm, how does that make you feel?
- If you have a reputation for being witty or sharp because you are a master of sarcasm, would you ever ask the objects of your sarcasm or witticism how they feel? How they really, really feel to be the target or brunt of your jabs?
- What does sarcasm get you, personally?
- Do you think others really respect you, or just go along to get along, when they respond in a laughing sense to you behavior?
- Are you demeaning and sarcastic to your husband, wife, partner, children? How do they like that behavior? Do you ever ask them? Would you? If not, why not? Did you ever think about asking them?
- Did you ever have to apologize, or think about apologizing, for a cutting remark you made? What was that like for you?
- Did you ever tell a colleague or friend to stop using you as a target for their destructive words? Did you ever want to but not speak up? Why?
- Who would you be if sarcasm were not part of your personality? Would you lose some or much of your identity? If so, what would that be like for you?

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