Walk the line

How can managers stop banter from morphing into inappropriate workplace behaviour?

By
Tracy Powley

S arah is a middle manager in a manufacturing company. One day she fell prey to every woman's nightmare – she came out of the ladies' toilets with her skirt tucked into her knickers.

As she walked down the corridor, two male colleagues behind her noticed and joked to her about it. Embarrassed, she hurried away and assumed that would be the end of it. But since then, every time she sees one of them, they make the same joke. This has been going on for three years.

By her own admission, Sarah "doesn't need counselling", but she's fed up with her colleagues' jesting. Her heart sinks when she sees them and she finds herself making excuses not to work with them.

In another organisation, the HR department included two male managers named Chris. One carried a bit of extra weight. He was known as 'Big Chris'. The other was slight of frame and not very tall. His colleagues called him 'Little Chris'. Neither liked the names that their peers used to differentiate them. They were a constant reminder of their physical appearance, which both felt very self-conscious about. But neither could quite find a way to ask people to stop, for fear of seeming unnecessarily 'touchy'.
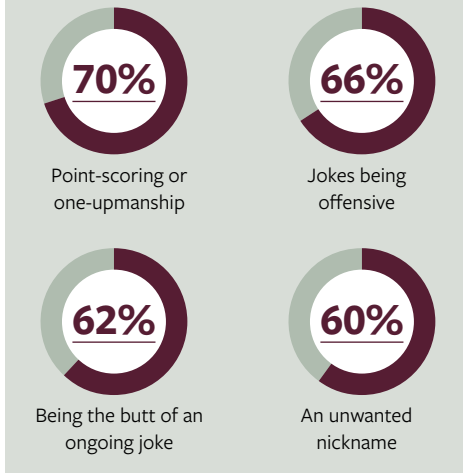
A bit of banter?

Such incidents go on in workplaces up and down the country, and are often dismissed as 'just a bit of banter'. Yet the reality is that they erode workers' confidence and chip away at their self-esteem. Basically, they grind people down.

Organisations are constantly being reminded that they need to foster collaboration and the pooling of skills and ideas if they want to maximise creativity and get better outcomes. But if team members feel uncomfortable with colleagues, are guarded and closed in their interactions, or, worse, have stopped talking to each other altogether, that collaboration, cooperation and innovation will be suppressed.

Last year we conducted a survey that examined the effects of workplace banter. One in four respondents admitted that banter affects their communication with others, while one in five said it demotivates them. Significantly, one in five respondents also said that they think up to two hours a day is wasted on 'banter'.

Most organisations would be deeply concerned if they thought that two hours of productivity was being lost every day or that 20% of their team was feeling demotivated. In fact, we suspect the true figures may well be higher, since many organisations simply don't want to look at, or admit to, these behavioural difficulties. But the truth is that

👁 MOST UNCOMFORTABLE BANTER

70%
Point-scoring or one-upmanship

66%
Jokes being offensive

62%
Being the butt of an ongoing joke

60%
An unwanted nickname

incidents of inappropriate behaviour are damaging workplaces and they are damaging individuals.

So, when does a 'bit of harmless banter' become something less acceptable? When does a joke 'cross the line'? Navigating these 'grey' areas in terms of what is acceptable at work is a real challenge for organisations and their managers. It isn't bullying. Often no complaint is made. But one person's hilarious joke is another's offensive remark.

Enter the killjoy

It is no surprise that managers often do not know when to step in to a situation that is causing discomfort to a team member. And even when they have a sense that things are going too far, they don't want to be seen as a killjoy.

Of course, banter can play a very positive role in creating a sense of camaraderie in teams, and we all need to be able to enjoy working with our colleagues and have fun at work. Nevertheless, there is a line that should not be crossed. Managers often get drawn into exacerbating the situation, however, in the belief that 'ribbing' someone else in the team can help to motivate everyone. If people laugh (including the person being ribbed) it must be having a positive effect, right?

Wrong. The trouble is, if managers leave these behaviours unchecked, uncomfortable situations can escalate. We worked with one organisation where the banter, and particularly the levels of swearing, had ramped up. Then, one day, an employee stood up and called a colleague one of the most offensive terms you can use – in front of the rest of his team. He was dismissed for gross misconduct, but it brought the department up short. The organisation realised that because managers had not stepped in earlier, the →

high levels of swearing and 'one-upmanship' had become normalised – to the point where someone felt it was acceptable to swear directly at a colleague in such an offensive way.

When banter becomes bullying

A more extreme case illustrates how uncomfortable situations can be a precursor to bullying and leave a lasting impact on the person who is the butt of the so-called 'joke'. Last year, four men were put on trial, accused of religiously aggravated attacks on their work colleague. They are said to have mocked his Christian faith by tying him to a makeshift crucifix and daubing crosses over his face and body. The perpetrators' defence was that it was "just banter".

The 'line' can be hard to determine – it is often different in different working environments. Still, one thing our survey shows is that once banter starts to become personal and it is directed at an individual, it is likely to make them feel very uncomfortable. And if that joke starts to run and run – a phrase we use to describe this is "something passing into folklore" (as it did with Sarah) – it can have a hugely detrimental effect. That feeling of being singled out or picked on, even when there is no malicious intent, is very excluding.

In a world where inclusion and inclusive leadership are much debated and aspired to, managers and organisations seem worryingly unaware of the negative effects that banter can have. Neuroscience tells us that feeling excluded (social pain) activates the area of the brain associated with physical pain. Think back to the sharp feeling of rejection associated with being the last person to be picked for a school sports team, for example. We feel exclusion acutely and it shuts us down.

Action plan

So what should organisations, HR departments and managers do to manage inappropriate behaviours? The first thing is to move beyond their policies. Many will have dignity-at-work policies or codes of conduct. But because banter situations are not clear-cut, people need to discuss them so that they really appreciate what is acceptable, what isn't, and what part they play in it all.

A very simple, but effective, action is for managers to discuss with their teams what they think constitutes 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' behaviour in their particular working environment. This starts to raise awareness of how others might feel, and helps everyone to become more aware of the impact that their comments and humour can have on their colleagues. Using specific examples grounds the discussion in a day-to-day context, which helps people to be clearer about where that

20%

of people believe that up to two hours of their working day is wasted on workplace banter

25%

of people say it affects their communication with others

10%

say that banter crosses the line once a day

1in**5**

say it demotivates them

10%

say that management never deals with banter

> ### ◉ SAY 'NO' TO NICKNAMES
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> Think about the nicknames you have had or known others to have. Who chose them? Very rarely do we decide to call ourselves something else. Nicknames are usually given to us by other people who are 'having a bit of a laugh'. They often stem from some joke or mishap at work, or are related to physical appearance.
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> And that's the problem with nicknames. Once they stick, it is really hard to undo them. One participant in a workshop we ran for years had been called 'Batteries'. Something to do with staying-power or resilience, perhaps? (Think the Duracell Bunny). No, actually he wore a hearing aid, and when the batteries started to go his teammates would shout at him: "Hey, Batteries!" He hated it, but laughed along anyway because if he did otherwise, he would be seen as a spoilsport.
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> Of course, there are a number of people who genuinely love their nicknames and are very happy with the associated banter. The important thing is not to make an assumption about who is happy and who isn't. Managers have a key role to play here. If they sense that a nickname is unwanted or inappropriate, they can check it out with the person concerned and lead the way by only using that individual's real name. Others will soon get the message and follow suit.

elusive 'line' is. It is important to position these discussions positively. If people feel that they are being treated like naughty school children, managers will often get push back in the form of, "Can't we even have a laugh now?" or, "This is political correctness gone mad!" Managers need to emphasise that it is absolutely OK, indeed important, to have a laugh – just not always at someone else's expense.

Everyone should feel able to 'bring their whole selves' to work, but this won't happen if people feel mocked for something they have said or done, or the way they look. Some simple discussions can help people to know where the boundaries are, and enable managers to feel more confident about stepping in to nip things in the bud. That's the start of building a genuinely inclusive workplace.

As a final thought, we did a piece of work with three London wholesale markets where we helped them to consider how to create a more respectful working environment. When we went back to evaluate the results, one unexpected benefit emerged. Besides people feeling happier and more comfortable that the levels of swearing had abated, one team member commented: "We have a better quality of joke now!" **E**

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