

At work, cut the sarcasm

by Cynthia Clay



Sarcasm: It's a habitual behavior pattern that weakens teamwork.

If you tend to make sarcastic comments in the name of fun, then this article is for you.

Now ask yourself, Why do I do it?

Is that funny crack a way to make people laugh? Then notice that you may need lots of attention at the expense of others. Is making the wittiest comment a way to earn points?

Notice that gaining the upper hand means making someone else feel put down. Is that pointed remark an underhanded way to disguise a serious observation?

Then realize that your intended target may not get it and, if they do, they might not be too motivated to do anything about it.

The sad truth is that sarcasm reveals more about you than the people you target.

Is it really harmless?

Families, peer groups and work teams often develop sarcastic banter as a way of relating to one another. Sometimes one or two people take the brunt of these jokes.

But here's a news flash: Sarcasm destroys relationships and reduces productivity over time. The repeated victims of sarcasm may suffer in silence rather than speak up and be attacked again. As motivation and morale is eroded, the ability of the team to collaborate deteriorates.

So stop it.

Humor without a victim

When that sarcastic comment forms in your brain, don't say it out loud. Instead of using sarcasm to make people laugh, cultivate humor that doesn't require a victim.

When you have a concern, make a direct observation and ask for an open discussion.

And if you're the victim of sarcasm, here are a few tips to end it. First of all, when someone levels a sarcastic comment at you, don't ignore it or pretend it didn't happen.

Look at them and pause. Then repeat what they said word for word. It might sound like this: "Bob, I thought I just heard you say that even an idiot could have written that report." Then wait.

Bob will probably protest that he was joking or that you don't have a sense of humor.

That's the usual way habitually sarcastic people defend their use of sarcasm.

Don't react. Instead say, "If you have a concern about the report, I'm happy to talk with you about it." Respond to every one of Bob's sarcastic comments by repeating exactly what he said and leaving the comment hanging in the air for him to explain.

In no time at all, Bob will realize that you're not the passive victim he once tormented and he'll move on to someone else. When he does, be sure to teach them this technique.

Cynthia Clay, President/CEO of NetSpeed Learning Solutions (netspeedlearning.com), is the co-author of Peer Power: Transforming Workplace Relationships (Wiley). Her company helps leaders in global organizations lead better virtually.