

Humor and Leadership

Defining and analyzing humor is a pastime of humorless people.

- Robert Benchley (1889 - 1945)



At the risk of being perceived as humorless, I am going to attempt to unpack humor and how it relates to leadership.

Leaders define the boundaries of humor everyday by the humor they exhibit and respond to. Often this is done without much thought. Imagine yourself having lunch with a group of co-workers. One co-work tells a joke with some inappropriate language and off color references. You give a hearty laugh and tell one of your own jokes. You have just set a boundary. Or imagine this scenario: you use a sarcastic remark in a joking manner about an employee's performance as a subtle way to change a behavior. You have just set a boundary.

Humor can be a power tool for building trust, encouraging cohesiveness, dealing with tough situations, and energizing employees. However, some humor can also cause people to feel uncomfortable, confused, and isolated. This is most evident when humor is used to mask a real concern, poke fun at someone, or used with vulgar messages.

As a leader, it is your responsibility to set appropriate boundaries of humor. These boundaries are set by your example of humor, talking about appropriate humor with employees, and coaching employees that cross a boundary line.

One boundary that we set up in our Impact Performance workshops is a "zinger free zone". Zingers are those verbal jabs we throw at people posed as humor but have an underlying message. We know that zingers can sometimes be hurtful and cause distrust among people.

Another boundary we set is to have fun. We want people to laugh with each other while they are learning. These are couple of examples of setting up appropriate boundaries for humor.

Please go and laugh as a leader within the appropriate boundaries! You owe it to yourself and those you lead.

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