The dangers of office 'banter'

When barrister Charlotte Proudman tweeted what she described as a sexist message from a fellow lawyer on LinkedIn in September this year, she received broad support from people who agreed with her stand against everyday sexism.

She also faced criticism, however, from those who felt the message was harmless office banter, many of whom described her public outing of the lawyer as a “feminazi” overreaction. When does office banter stray into the realms of harassment? Can office banter actually have a positive impact in the workplace?

The Oxford Dictionaries describe “banter” as the ‘playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks’. That sounds delightful, but in the workplace, banter can often lead to employees feeling excluded, bullied or harassed.

Benefits of humour in the workplace

Laura Haycock, senior psychologist at Pearn Kandola, said office banter was fine as long all the parties engaging in it found it mutually funny. “There is definitely a place for humour in the workplace and that is undoubtedly a positive thing, but if it tips over and the person or topic being laughed at feels threatened, that is when it can potentially become harassment.”

Haycock said there could be benefits for both employees and a team if the banter was good-natured and shared by all. “In terms of psychological benefits, laughter reduces the level of anxiety and stress and has an impact on the cortisol stress hormones. It also helps in terms of people's coping mechanisms.” she said. “One of the benefits of a shared sense of humour is that it creates a stronger sense of connection and team identity and a way of bonding, but this is only true if the humour is shared by everyone.”

In fact, a 2014 academic study by Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock and Joseph Allen investigating the relationship between humour patterns in team performance and team interaction, found that humour triggered positive socio-emotional communication and new solutions in the team interaction process. At the team level, humour patterns positively related to team performance.

One of the psychological dangers of banter, however, can be the creation of an "in-group" within the team, said Gordon Tinline, independent business psychologist. "It can create an 'in-group' culture when you have a group of people within a team participating in it but not everyone is included in it. One of the difficulties then is that you're creating groups that exclude people and it's difficult for new people or individuals who are a bit different to break into that group."

When banter becomes harassment

Where banter begins to cross the line into the area of harassment is when the discussion or jokes in the office are not welcomed by one individual or when an individual takes offence, said Audrey Williams, partner at Fox Williams. “If neither party finds it offensive that is fine, but if one employee has a different standard then it could be harassment.”

Of course, there are legal protections for individuals who are subject to harassment under the Equality Act 2010, which protects individuals against offensive remarks under six equality strands of sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief, disability and age. "In theory that means I could complain but in reality what organisations will do is to provide guidance about how to manage the situation. Often if an employee has a concern, then they will go and see HR so it can be addressed internally," Williams said.

Haycock said one of the negative aspects of banter could be seen on the trading floors of financial institutions in the City. "If you're working in an environment like the City that is dominated by young males and you're not on the same wavelength then you will probably feel excluded by their sense of humour."

Behaviour such as bantering can be regarded as the "norm" on trading floors, Williams said. "So if an individual complains about it they are often described as "over-sensitive", but in reality, it's the type of behaviour that, in other working environments, would not be acceptable."

Banter which excludes or bullies individuals can have negative repercussions on an employee's health. One of the main impacts is a deterioration of the victim's physical and mental health according to research carried out by Paul McCarthy et al in 1995 and 1998).

Jane Sunley, chief executive of HR consultancy Purple Cubed, said employees should keep away from anything that could possibly be construed as contentious. "I'd prefer that employers think about 'fun' rather than 'banter'. Fun in the workplace is essential in my view: the key is to ensure that the fun isn't at another's expense."
Clear policy on harassment essential

The culture of an organisation was very important when it came to office banter, Williams said. “It's important to say to individuals that you need to be aware but also it's vital that the organisation stresses the tone as what they regard as acceptable. It starts with HR as a policy such as 'dignity at work' but it has to be the management team that implements it.”

Sunley said managers and HR had to be clear themselves about what was acceptable, and that in turn they should ensure that others had a clear understanding of the organisation's policy, to prevent banter from becoming harassment. “They must ensure people are fully aware of and on board with equal opportunities and fair treatment in general within [the] workplace. Thereafter, people should be able to self-regulate. Management and HR should respond appropriately and quickly to any complaints and also be aware of what's going on around them so as to regulate any unacceptable behaviours,” she said.

Haycock said organisations could take several actions to prevent banter from straying into the territory of bullying and leading to a deterioration in working relationships. “Championing diversity is really important as it's about creating an environment of respect and dignity for everyone. It's also about the organisation talking about the difference between banter and harassment.”

Organisations need to make sure that employees are aware of the dangers of making jokes about protected characteristics such as gender, age or race, Haycock said. “Employees also need to be mindful of the level of familiarity and trust that they have with the person [with whom] they are exchanging humour. An individual might assume that a colleague will see it as a joke, but if they don't then the person should take care of how the joke will land.”

Role-modelling group behaviours

Another important element of creating a respectful work environment lay with senior management, Haycock said. “It's important that leaders role-model group behaviours. They have to role-model behaviours and take action when people don't behave appropriately. This doesn't mean that nobody can have a laugh but it's about being thoughtful and careful about what is funny about the jokes they are sharing with their colleagues.”

Social media

The dominance of social media means that office banter can be conducted very easily on Facebook or Twitter, and this too can also cross into the realms of harassment. Martin Lucas, partner at Cultural Gravity, said the rise of social media had created a trolling culture.

“Social media gives people permission to go into schoolyard bullying. A lot of it comes down to the culture of the organisation, and if you have the correct culture of trust and respect then it's fine. It goes awry when employees don't have standards and don't trust and respect each other. Those values and behaviours of trust and respect have to come from the leadership team. HR's role is to execute the values.”

Sunley said employers needed to have clear guidelines about the use of any work-related social media and that if work colleagues were connected via social media, behaviour outside work was not allowed to have a negative effect on the workplace.

“Employees should be advised to privatise their social media if their personal behaviour is such that it could impact adversely on the reputation of the business,” Sunley said.

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