

Put-Down Humor is Not Funny

Over the course of time, I've been involved in coaching and facilitating numerous groups and teams.

I've often been struck by one behavior that stood out above all others, namely, the propensity for some individuals to consistently engage in making destructive, cutting, and sarcastic remarks to and about others in their group.

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

The comments I hear generally are directed at another's physical characteristics (e.g., hair, clothes), perspectives or ideas, life choices (others' choices of restaurants, movies, sports teams and the like), others' current performance, or where others had worked previously or attended school. These were not simply run-of-the-mill light comments. There was an underlying edge of anger, resentment and destruction wrapped inside.

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

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

In Western culture today biting, sarcastic, and demeaning put-down "humor" has become an art form, TV, movies, talk radio, sporting events, journals and magazines. Its part of the fabric of everyday conversation. More and more folks seem to view such behavior as business as usual, or as no big deal. In fact, when I later and privately asked some of these folks if they were aware of what they said, most responded, "No" or something akin to "So what?" and looked at me as though I had three heads or came from another planet. For many of these folks, their verbally-violent behavior is a "blind spot."

So, let's return to the question, "Why?". In the realm of psychology and psychodynamics, we understand most folks engage in put-downs, sarcasm and barbs as a way to look sharp, smart, witty and cool. That's the upside for them. The downside? The victim for whom the comment is directed is often harmed, hurt, demeaned, or otherwise made the point of ridicule (notwithstanding their shrugging it off or even laughing themselves, over their hurt and pain).

When I later ask other group participants, "bystanders," why they often react with laughter, or an "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 respond this way, in a "go along to get along" fashion as they don't want to stand out as different, serious, "being soft," etc. They want and need to be "one of the boys," so speaking out, or pushing back against such hurtful 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, how wealthy...no one (read: 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?

Some questions for self-reflection:

- Can you think of a time today, this week, this month when you made a sarcastic or demeaning remark to a teammate, colleague, friend, spouse, partner or someone else "for the fun of it" because you thought it would make you appear witty, cool, sharp or smart?"
- Can you remember a time today, this week or this month when you were the target of another's sarcastic or demeaning barb "for the fun of it?" How did that make you feel? Honestly.
- 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? Be honest.
- Do you think others really respect you, or just go along to get along, when they respond in a laughing sense to you behavior/comments?
- Are you ever demeaning and sarcastic towards your husband, wife, partner, children? How do you think they like your 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 choose instead not to speak up? Why?
- Who would you be if sarcasm were not part of your personality? Would you lose some or much of your identity - "who I am?" If so, what would that be like for you?
- The underlying basis of sarcasm is anger, and underneath that, fear. What do you think about this?

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