

HR Tool Box

Handling Inappropriate Humor in the Workplace

Humor expert David Jacobson (www.humorhorizons.com) says that any humor is considered inappropriate that:

- ✓ Is exclusive
- ✓ Separates people
- ✓ Puts someone down
- ✓ Destroys self-esteem
- ✓ Uses stereotypes of groups
- ✓ Encourages a negative atmosphere
- ✓ Offends others
- ✓ Lacks awareness of others' feelings

This is especially true in the workplace, where inappropriate humor can cause dissention and even generate lawsuits.

Appropriate humor is *inclusive*—it brings people together in laughter and is shared by all. It builds rapport without being negative. Inappropriate humor is *negative*.

Jacobson suggests the following responses when handling inappropriate humor:

- 1. The make-them-think approach.** You can ask the employee to retell the joke or story again using themselves as the main characters, instead of the race, religion, nationality, or sex they used in the original. Most will say, "That's not funny." Exactly.
- 2. The direct approach.** You can simply state that you don't appreciate that kind of humor and request that they please not use it.



- 3. The educational approach.** Choose to educate by explaining the difference between inclusive and exclusive humor. Say something like, "I'm sure if you were aware of how mean-spirited that joke makes you sound, you wouldn't use it."

Jacobson says you can discuss inappropriate humor with individuals, but also with a group (where peer pressure would have a stronger impact on the offender), and let the others know how you feel about offensive humor.

However, Jacobson says don't cut humor out of the workplace completely; in certain professions there is a type of "gallows" humor that serves a healthy purpose as a tension-release mechanism.

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