

Guide For The Humor Perplexed; Must The Water Cooler Be A Humor-Free Zone?

by David P. Tulin, © Tulin DiversiTeam Associates
(Originally published in *Cultural Diversity at Work*, 1999)

"We men and women used to enjoy a good joke around here, but nowadays we have to be so-o-o careful. I wish we could just be ourselves!"

- **Take the "Common Sense Humor Pledge"** (Raise whichever hand you choose): "I will use humor that has a good probability of making my colleagues or my customers feel better about me, themselves, others, and/or the work they do. I will not use humor that has a good probability or predictability of making my colleagues or my customers feel worse about me, themselves, others, and/or the work they do."
- **Don't Use an Elephant Gun to Kill a Mosquito.** Assume that an alleged offensive perpetrator is innocent until proven guilty. Yelling, "You Neanderthal, Sexist, Racist, Homophobic Pig!" is neither a fair nor effective change strategy.

Many professionals are understandably asking whether, in the name of Diversity, some of us have "thrown the baby out with the bath water" by creating a sterile and humorless work environment where employees are even afraid to shmooze or laugh with colleagues around the "water cooler."

- **Use the Test of the Captive Workplace, not the Voluntary Living Room:** When a joke, comment, touch, or subject matter are shared in our living rooms, people are free to stop communicating, throw food, or just plain leave. The law permits most offensive behavior in our voluntary social life, but forbids it in the involuntary captive workplace. People have to be there, they can't just get up and leave!

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- **Friends Don't Let Friends Harass.** Use your gift of courage to interrupt a friend or colleague who falls off the professional wagon. Uncomfortable though it may feel to bear our feedback, it is better to hear it from a friend now than from the HR or legal department later.

In the name of eliminating harassment, while preserving workplace collegiality, Consider this "Guide for the Humor Perplexed:"

- **Confidentiality Does Not Exist.** Whether it is E-Mail on company's software or time, a joke about the boss or co-worker, assumes that the joke's subject is standing in front of you before you proceed. The pollen of humor and gossip circulates throughout a confined work area.
- **Lighten Up.** Men and women from all backgrounds deserve, need, and want camaraderie, warmth, and humor at work. By giving one another the benefit of the doubt, and providing honest and caring feedback, we can help make the water cooler area an "eggshell-free zone."
- **Follow Our Folks' Advice: Don't talk about religion, politics, or...** The logic behind their advice was that opinion on those subjects are so deeply held, sensitive, and volatile that having the conversation about these subjects could blow up in our faces. The same probability for misunderstanding and disaster holds true for subjects of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and ethnic backgrounds.
- **"I Didn't Mean It" Is Meaningless.** We judge ourselves by our intentions, but others judge us by our behavior and its impact upon them. If we really don't mean it, then we must stop, apologize, and not do it again.