

Management Training to aid the Trouble with Sarcasm

Among the various styles that people use to communicate with each other, sarcasm is one of the most unique and dangerous. The excuses people use in an attempt to explain away their use of sarcasm varies from, "I didn't know I was doing it," to "It's how I get someone's attention." Whatever the excuse, and whatever the reason, sarcasm is a deadly communication style that rarely has long-term success and commonly results in contempt from the person who receives it. It's easy to say, "Stop doing it," but it's far more difficult to pinpoint what caused a person to begin being a sarcastic communicator in the first place.

Stated very simply, a person who uses sarcasm to gain effect is nothing more than a verbal bully. Think of the playground bully you experienced as a child in school. The person tried to create terror in the minds of playmates in order to gain some type of power or social advantage. The sarcastic verbal bully, using words rather than physical threats, is also trying to gain some type of advantage over the other person. And it's the realization that a sarcastic communicator is trying to gain an unfair advantage that causes the receiver to form feelings of contempt.

The truth is that most of us don't like to be with and we clearly don't trust people whom we perceive as being sarcastic. Sarcasm is a relational deal-breaker for most people. Communicating with someone who is sarcastic is like trying to dance in a minefield. You never know when the person is going to fire an insult in your direction and the conversation will blow up. Like landmines, the triggers of sarcasm are often hidden out of sight, usually deep within the verbal bully's psyche.

Sarcasm is, "A cutting, sometimes ironic remark intended to wound, demean, or hurt. It is a type of wit characterized by the use of sarcastic language and is intended to make its victim the butt of contempt or ridicule." Sarcasm can be focused outward by directing it toward another person, or it can be directed inward and used against one's self. Self-directed sarcasm is an indication of a faulty or damaged self-perception.

Sarcasm is actually passive-aggressive behavior. Sarcasm can appear to be provocative, because it provokes with words and/or actions. The failure for the receiver to respond to sarcastic jabs may be met with even more sarcasm. Oddly, the mocking contempt of sarcasm makes the victim feel pressured into responding. The victim feels inferior if he or she doesn't respond, and then sorry by responding. The reality is that the victim of sarcasm cannot win and therefore feels helpless.

Sarcasm can have the appearance of being both witty and intelligent; that's why it is so brutal. Almost always the intention of a sarcastic person is to hurt. Sarcastic communicators craft their jabs with wordsmith perfection. The truth is that sarcasm rarely happens by accident. It is a tool, wielded with deliberation. Rest assured, if a sarcastic person is attacking, he or she knows what is going on. Sarcasm requires a victim to even exist, because a hunter is not a hunter without prey.

Sarcasm exists as both verbal and non-verbal messages. In addition to what can appear to be witty, ironic, or cutting remarks, sarcastic communicators roll their eyes, sneer, sigh, shake the head and laugh under their breath. To the victim it's infuriating. To survive in this type of environment, the victim of nonverbal sarcasm must first learn to recognize these forms of abusive feedback, and then determine how to effectively deal with them. Any type of sarcasm is hurtful and causes permanent damage. When directed at others, it hurts others; when directed at the sender, it hurts the sender.

Sarcasm is generated from a pessimistic outlook. And at its core sarcasm is the by-product of a judgmental nature. It is acting on a damaged perspective of reality or outlook. One of the sad effects of sarcasm is social positioning. By being sarcastic the perpetrator feels superior to the victim. In other words, by pushing someone else down with verbal or non-verbal barbs, the perpetrator in effect believes that he or she has been elevated in social stature. In other words, sarcasm is a method of social posturing in order to gain perceived social positioning. The problem with this type of thinking is that in all types of communication the sender's intention is irrelevant. The only thing that matters is how a message is received. Intentions are nice, but are worthless in building effective and long-lasting relationships.

Sarcastic people can change their outlook, but they must first change their tendency to judge others. Judging

others can be as simple as believing in the incompetence and/or inabilities of others. Judging can also be profound arrogance and pride. To avoid sarcasm, it's first necessary to recognize the source of the internal discontent. Some people say that they have been sarcastic so long that they can't change. Remember, sarcasm is a behavior and behaviors can, indeed, be changed. This can only happen after the perpetrator becomes aware of the problem and then acknowledges that a change must be made. Behavior change typically follows this order: first the person must be aware of the problem or issue; second, the person must acknowledge his or her personal responsibility or culpability with the problem or issue; and third, the person must work out a plan to substitute sarcastic behaviors with some other type effective communication.

If in the past you have been told that you've been sarcastic, or if you suspect that sarcasm can enter into your conversation, ask these questions about what you are about to say:

1. Is this comment true and accurate?
2. Is this comment kind and appropriate?
3. Is this comment necessary at this time and to this person?
4. Would this comment strengthen this relationship?

If you can't answer yes to each of these questions, then the comment you are about to make could well be sarcastic. Remember, sarcasm is judgment, poisoned by hidden anger, and then brought to life by communication in action. Sarcasm is verbally acting on some type of internal or unresolved anger. The sarcastic person must stop judging others and start respecting them. Only then can a trusting relationship exist. And trusting relationships are the foundation of all business and personal success.

Regardless of the organization you belong to, management and leadership development sets the tone for success. It affects attitude, communication, productivity and morale of organization members. If your organization needs help in any of these areas you may need a management training program (<http://www.cmoec.com/management-training.htm>) to create positive improvement.

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CMOE has been customizing communication and management training programs for multinational organizations over the past 30 years. For more information, visit <http://www.cmoec.com/management-training.htm>

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