

**Open discussion: Afternoon****Just a bit of fun: banter or bullying?****Stella Chandler, Director of Development, Focal Point Training and Consultancy Ltd****Thursday 16 May 2019****Introduction**

Katherine Bradshaw, Head of Communications at the IBE, opened the event by welcoming guests and introducing the speaker.

There is a fine line that we thread between banter and bullying. On the one hand you have friendly chat in the office and at the other extreme; you have offensive language and sexual harassment. How do we know when to draw the line and what is acceptable?

Stella Chandler is Director of Development at Focal Point Training and Consultancy Ltd. She has 15 years of experience from the Metropolitan Police Service and used to work in the equivalent of AC-12 in Line of Duty, which is exciting.

**Main Item: Just a bit of fun: banter or bullying?**

Stella thanked Katherine for the introduction, and said she was happy to see so many willing to spend an hour and a quarter talking about this topic. The audience were immediately asked to participate by sharing their thoughts on the word "banter" with the people sitting on their table. Often, what first comes to mind when people reflect on this word, are things like "a bit of fun", "having a laugh", "bringing people together", "getting to know each other" and "building a sense of team". Banter can therefore help bring down barriers in teams and create a shared sense of fun. However, banter can also have the opposite effect. It can put barriers up if it crosses the line. By excluding people and making people feel uncomfortable, you untick the inclusive environment you are trying to build or maintain. Banter can also be an example of inappropriate behaviour or be an excuse for inappropriate behaviour, and it may be the starting point for other forms of inappropriate behaviour. While the behaviour witnessed by the likes of Weinstein is on the extreme end of the spectrum, such behaviour often starts with banter.

Audience members were then asked to raise their hand if they had ever been the butt of an ongoing joke, been given a nickname they did not like, done something that has "passed into folklore" and is regularly referred to, or if they had been introduced to someone new with a reference to an "in" joke. Stella explained that she had often been referred to as a certain green bottle of beer because of her name. Those who have never had any of these experiences should listen to those who have to understand the impact that these comments can have. If you are on the receiving end of such banter, the joke very quickly wears thin. This was certainly the case for a creative director who spilled his curry lunch on his blue suede shoes and never heard the end of it. People can also experience retaliation when speaking up about not liking having such ongoing comments said to them. Stella shared her experience of working at the Rochester Row police station where she was told "if you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen".

For managers, banter can be particularly difficult as they want to be a part of the team and spend the majority of their working hours in a team. To avoid situations where banter goes too far, it is worth taking the time to stop and think about what is happening and how it might affect other people. There are many examples from HR departments and exit interviews where people cite too much banter and a lack of support as reasons why they quit their job. Focal Point's "Banter Survey" asked what type of banter makes people feel uncomfortable. Nearly 70% said point-scoring, which is particularly common in a sales or competitive environment. 66% said jokes being offensive, 62% said being the butt of an ongoing joke and 60% said having an unwanted nickname.

The audience were then handed cards with statements and asked to discuss whether these would constitute sexual harassment. While the vast majority of people do not mean to cause offence, even a single comment can constitute sexual harassment. Stella shared that she had met one person who did not believe anything could constitute sexual harassment unless there was physical contact involved. It is important to facilitate open discussions about this topic that allow people to ask questions.

- A member of the audience pointed out that for organisations that conduct business globally this is a particularly difficult topic. In some contexts, law covers these matters, while in others, culture dictates it. For instance, in some places it is customary to greet others by kissing them on the cheek. In other places, there are different queues for men and women.

Focal Point's "Banter Survey" reveals that one in five people believe that up to two hours of their working day is wasted on workplace banter. One in four respondents to this survey say that it affects their communication with others, one in ten say that banter crosses the line once a day, and nearly one in five say that it demotivates them.

Audience members were then asked to raise their hand if they had ever perpetuated a joke, nickname or folklore story. They were also asked whether they had ever stopped to think about what impact such comments may have on the other person and whether this behaviour is in line with what their organisations and their own values say about respecting others. Banter and inappropriate behaviour that makes other people feel uncomfortable can affect every aspect of working life, from day-to-day relationships to the bottom line. When such behaviour crosses the line, it also stops us from creating an inclusive culture.

- The audience were asked whether they had ever discussed their policies in this area to ensure that everyone understands them. Generally speaking, about 25% of people have had the opportunity to do so.

This means that the majority of people only discuss this topic once someone has crossed the line. In order to create the right culture, there need to be discussions about what appropriate behaviour looks like. Many organisations find that creating their own, realistic charter about this is a good way for people to get talking about this subject and to get them to sign on to these guidelines. By doing so, consequences of breaking the charter can be established and this 'living' document can be trialled.

Any policies relating to this also need to be accessible to people. At times, what the policy says and what is actually happening are worlds apart, and by knowing this you can work to close the gaps. Part of being a responsible manager, is developing the right culture by encouraging people to speak up about wrongdoing and inappropriate behaviour. However, this will only work if people have reliable and confidential channels to go to – like an ethics champion – and genuinely believe that their concerns will be taken seriously.

- To maintain the right culture, any policies on this topic need to be linked to all internal and external activities.

By embedding these policies into day to day operations and regularly reviewing them, inappropriate behaviour can more easily be rooted out. If you ask an HR manager what success means to them in this area, they often reply less complaints, less exit interview revelations and a happier workplace.

The right culture can be ensured by helping people see "how the dots join" from values and behaviours to policies. It is also important to ensure that everyone understands that they have a responsibility to behave in a way that does not make others feel uncomfortable and that those in leadership positions have the confidence and skills to role model the right behaviours. Supporting managers and leaders to "nip things in the bud" is also important. The audience were then asked to think about what they will take away from this event and what they will take back to their organisations.

## Q&A

The presentation was followed by questions from the audience. Among the issues raised were:

- Scenarios in codes of conduct do not take into account this level of detail. How can we make sure that they do?
- When developing manager training this is often based on policies. How can training be developed to focus on specific examples instead?

- My organisation has around 35,000 employees and is developing resources around respecting others. How can I settle the nervousness of managers about getting this right?

### Close

Katherine Bradshaw closed the event by thanking the speaker for a thought-provoking presentation. It can be difficult to know where to draw the line or even where the line is. Thanks to the Chatham House rule we are able to be honest about this and discuss this openly. The IBE's next open event 'The Case for Change: Racial diversity and Inclusion in Business' will discuss how organisations can address the challenges of diversity so that they can become truly inclusive. The IBE is also about to launch its Speak Up Toolkit, so please look out for that.