

When Laughter Hurts: The Hidden Cost of Mockery at Work, Why HR Leaders Must Replace Sarcastic Cultures, With Spaces of Safety, Respect, and Innovation

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Abstract

Mockery in the workplace is an underestimated form of organizational toxicity that often disguises itself as humour or wit. Yet beneath its surface lies a subtle form of disrespect that corrodes team morale, diminishes psychological safety, and disrupts professional harmony. This paper explores the phenomenon of mockery through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing insights from spiritual, psychological, and management perspectives. The Biblical verse from *Psalm 1* - "Blessed is the one who does not sit in the company of mockers"-serves as the ethical foundation, warning against the moral stagnation that arises from associating with derisive influences. The Bhagavad Gita and the Qur'an similarly caution against speech and conduct born of ego and ignorance, associating them with *tamasic* (destructive) tendencies. By integrating these timeless principles with contemporary HR research on workplace incivility, aggressive humour, and bullying, the article highlights the behavioural patterns and cultural climates that enable mockery to thrive. It contrasts *tamasic* employees, who belittle and divide, with *sattvic* colleagues, who elevate and unite through empathy, humility, and positive communication. The study proposes actionable strategies-ethical training, reflective dialogue, and peer accountability-to transform organizational humour into a constructive, inclusive force. Ultimately, the article redefines mockery not as mere misconduct but as a moral and cultural challenge. It calls upon educators and organizational leaders to foster workplaces where humour enlightens, respect strengthens collaboration, and the dignity of every individual is preserved.

Keywords: Workplace incivility; Organizational culture; Mockery; Emotional intelligence; Tamasic and Sattvic behaviour; Ethical leadership; Psychological safety

Introduction

"Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers"

Psalms 1:1 (Bible)

Every workplace is a living community of people who bring not only their skills but also their attitudes, values, and interpersonal habits. Among these, one of the most corrosive influences is what may be called the "*company of mockers*." The phrase originates from ancient wisdom literature, describing those who deride, belittle, and scorn others instead of building them up. In an organisational context, this attitude can be subtle but deeply damaging.

Who are the Mockers?

In a professional setting, mockers may not always openly ridicule with sharp jokes or cutting words. They may show their mockery in cynicism, constant sarcasm, belittling colleagues' contributions, or dismissing ideas without constructive input. Such behaviour may be disguised as humour, "just being honest," or "telling it like it is," but the underlying tone is one of contempt rather than collaboration. In the modern workplace, "mockers" are not always loud critics or overt bullies. They are often employees who:

- Habitually cloak cynicism in sarcasm.
- Belittle colleagues' ideas under the guise of humour.
- Undermine initiatives by ridiculing change rather than engaging with it.
- Create a climate of contempt rather than contribution.

Their influence may seem trivial at first—just banter, just a joke—but over time it corrodes trust, collaboration, and morale.

Why is their Company Harmful?

- **Erosion of Morale:** Mockery chips away at confidence, especially among young or less experienced employees who need encouragement rather than ridicule.
- **Culture of Fear:** When mocking becomes normalized, employees hesitate to speak up, fearing that their ideas will be laughed at. Innovation suffers.
- **Division and Alienation:** Mockers often thrive in cliques, creating an “us versus them” dynamic that undermines unity.
- **Subtle Sabotage:** Instead of giving constructive criticism, mockers poison the environment with negativity, indirectly sabotaging productivity.

The Silent Saboteur of Culture

Workplaces thrive on energy, collaboration, and mutual respect. Yet, within many organisations lurks a subtle saboteur—the “company of mockers.” Borrowed from ancient wisdom, this phrase describes those who habitually ridicule, belittle, or scorn others. In modern terms, mockery often wears the mask of sarcasm, “light-hearted jokes,” or cynicism. While seemingly harmless, this behaviour slowly eats away at the cultural fabric of the organisation.

Humour is often described as a social glue in organisations. Shared laughter eases tension, builds rapport, and creates belonging. But when humour is weaponised, it becomes a subtle form of mockery—a way of putting others down while pretending to “just be joking.”

This Behaviour is Particularly Insidious Because

- **It Hides Behind Plausible Deniability:** “Don’t be so serious, I was only joking.”
- **It Silences the Victim:** The moment someone objects, they risk being labelled as over-sensitive.
- It earns quick laughs, making the mocker appear witty, while the target quietly loses confidence.

The Double-Edged Sword of Humor

Humor is often celebrated as a workplace strength. Shared laughter builds bonds, eases tension, and makes teams resilient. Yet, humour has a darker side when used not to uplift but to belittle. Mockery disguised as wit—“just joking”—is one of the most subtle yet damaging forces within an organisation.

The Mask of “Just Joking”

Mockery often hides behind plausible deniability:

- “Don’t take it seriously, I was only joking.”
- “Can’t you take a joke?”

These phrases shift the blame to the target, forcing them into silence. The result is a cycle where the mocker gains laughs and social currency, while the victim feels diminished but unable to respond.

Workplaces are not just spaces of productivity; they are ecosystems of human interaction. In these ecosystems, the spoken word and interpersonal tone often shape culture more powerfully than strategy or structure. Among the most corrosive influences in any organisation is what ancient wisdom calls the “company of mockers.”

The Subtle Harm They Cause

The impact of mockery in the workplace is both cultural and psychological:

- **Erosion of Confidence:** Employees, especially new entrants, withdraw from contributing for fear of being laughed at.
- **Stifled Innovation:** Teams become risk-averse when new ideas are greeted with derision rather than curiosity.
- **Fragmented Culture:** Mockers often form cliques, reinforcing an “us versus them” dynamic that erodes cohesion.
- **Contagion Effect:** Negativity spreads. When sarcasm and ridicule become normalized, they redefine the organisation’s tone.

In essence, mockery thrives on tearing down rather than building up. It can silently sabotage even the most well-designed organisational strategies.

Colleagues of Tamasic Nature (Mockers and Cynics)

Tamasic qualities are marked by ignorance, inertia, arrogance, and negativity. A tamasic colleague may not always be overtly malicious, but their presence drags the collective spirit downward.

- **Derisive Humour:** Uses sarcasm and ridicule as their default mode of communication.
- **Negativity Bias:** Finds fault in every idea, dismisses initiatives before they start.
- **Ego-Driven Resistance:** Cannot accept feedback; sees correction as insult.
- **Cliques of Contempt:** Joins or creates small groups that bond over belittling others.
- **Low Responsibility:** Blames others quickly, avoids accountability, thrives in gossip.
- **Energy Drainers:** Leave colleagues feeling small, undervalued, or demoralized.
- **Impact on workplace:** Such colleagues generate fear, stifle innovation, and create a climate where silence feels safer than contribution.

M O C K E R – The Anatomy of Mockery at Work

M – Malice in Disguise: Mockery often masquerades as humour but conceals a subtle malice that wounds trust.

O – Overshadowing Others: It silences voices, discourages contributions, and makes colleagues feel small.

C – Contagious Cynicism: Negativity spreads faster than encouragement; mockery normalizes sarcasm and scorn.

K – Killing Creativity: Fear of ridicule stifles innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking.

E – Eroding Empathy: Mockers fail to connect with the human side of colleagues, replacing empathy with ego.

R – Ruining Relationships: At its core, mockery corrodes bonds, divides teams, and weakens organizational culture.

Colleagues of Sattvic Nature (Encouragers and Builders)

Sattvic qualities are marked by clarity, balance, empathy, and uplifting energy. A sattvic colleague consciously nurtures harmony.

- **Respectful Speech:** Communicates truth in a way that is both kind and beneficial.
- **Encouragers of Growth:** Celebrate others’ success, mentor juniors, amplify quiet voices.
- **Openness to Feedback:** Accepts correction with humility and learns from mistakes.
- **Bridge Builders:** Heal conflicts, include the excluded, and unify divided teams.

- **Positive Energy:** Approach tasks with calm, steady enthusiasm that inspires others.
- **Integrity Anchors:** Model consistency between words and actions, creating trust.
- **Impact on Workplace:** Such colleagues generate psychological safety, inspire creativity, and create a culture where people feel seen and valued.

If MOCKER describes the corrosive force, then BUILDER can serve as its antidote:

B U I L D E R – The Culture-Strengthener at Work

B – Believes in Others: Genuinely trusts colleagues' potential and affirms their worth.

U – Uplifts through Encouragement: Uses words to build confidence instead of tearing down.

I – Inspires Innovation: Creates psychological safety, allowing new ideas to flourish.

L – Listens with Respect: Practices attentive, empathetic listening that makes others feel valued.

D – Demonstrates Integrity: Models consistency between words and actions, fostering trust.

E – Empowers Collaboration: Shares credit, resources, and opportunities for growth.

R – Restores Relationships: Acts as a bridge-builder, healing divides and strengthening unity.

The tamasic colleague thrives on mockery, draining the organisation of its best energy. The sattvic colleague thrives on encouragement, multiplying dignity and trust.

In essence:

- **Tamasic Energy Divides** → mocking, ridiculing, belittling.
- **Sattvic Energy Unites** → uplifting, guiding, respecting.

The HR Lens

For HR professionals, the challenge is to draw a clear line:

- **Healthy Humour vs. Hurtful Humour:** Healthy humour bonds teams; hurtful humour belittles individuals.
- **Context and Power Dynamics:** A joke among equals is different from a leader mocking a junior. The latter damages respect and authority.
- **Culture Signals:** When belittling humour is tolerated, it signals that disrespect is acceptable, eroding the organisation's values.

For Tamasic Colleagues (Mockers, Cynics, Derisive Teachers)

These individuals may not realize the depth of harm their ridicule or negativity causes. The goal is to transform their energy from destructive to constructive.

1. Awareness and Reflection

- **Workshops on Speech Ethics:** Use scripture-inspired principles (e.g., "speech that is truthful, pleasant, and beneficial" – Gita 17:15) to help them reflect on their language.
- **Feedback Loops:** Peer observations with gentle feedback to reveal the impact of their mockery on students and colleagues.

2. Emotional Intelligence Development

- Training in empathy and classroom sensitivity, helping them see students not as targets but as learners who need nurturing.
- Role-playing exercises where they experience being mocked vs. being encouraged.

3. Accountability Structures

- Clear codes of conduct that discourage belittling humor in classrooms.
- Encouraging principals/HR to intervene early when patterns of mockery appear.

4. Transforming Negativity into Engagement

- Assign mentorship roles where they must guide weaker students/colleagues-forcing a shift from critic to coach.
- Encourage positive storytelling in staff meetings to re-channel cynicism into constructive narratives.

For Sattvic Colleagues (Encouragers, Mentors, Guides)

These are the culture builders, but even sattvic individuals need nourishment and recognition to sustain their contribution.

1. Recognition and Reward

- Celebrate sattvic teachers as role models during staff meetings and academic functions.
- Institutionalize "culture builder awards" or recognition for teachers who mentor, uplift, and foster positivity.

2. Leadership Pathways

- Encourage them into departmental leadership, mentorship programs, or curriculum innovation committees.
- Provide platforms for their best practices to influence others (seminars, workshops, peer training).

3. Continuous Nurturing

- Ensure they do not burn out by always carrying the emotional load. Encourage collaborative sharing of responsibilities.
- Provide sabbaticals, research opportunities, or retreats to recharge their sattvic energy.

4. Multiplying Their Influence

- Pair sattvic colleagues with tamasic ones in peer-mentoring models, so constructive energy slowly transforms negativity.
- Document their classroom practices as case studies for teacher training modules.

Guiding Principle

A good test is simple:

Does the humour make everyone feel included, or does it leave someone diminished?

If it's the latter, it's mockery disguised as wit.

Closing Thought

In the end, humour is a powerful tool-it can unite or divide. For HR professionals, ensuring that humour never becomes a mask for mockery is not just about protecting feelings; it's about protecting culture.

Because when "just joking" becomes belittling, the laughter stops being shared-and starts being endured.

About the Author

Dr. Syam Sundar Bakki believes that the true strength of organisations lies not just in strategy but in culture. With years of academic and professional engagement in commerce and management, he writes to highlight the subtle dynamics-respect, trust, and encouragement-that shape thriving workplaces.

He draws inspiration from timeless wisdom literature, including *Psalm 1*, which speaks of the danger of "sitting in the company of mockers." With a background in commerce and management, he reflects on how ancient principles

continue to shed light on modern workplace culture, encouraging organisations to build environments of respect, trust, and encouragement.

The Silent Brainstorm

In one organisation, a young analyst was encouraged to share fresh marketing ideas in a team meeting. As soon as she proposed a new campaign concept, two senior colleagues laughed and muttered, “*Sounds like a college project.*” The room joined in with chuckles.

The analyst stopped mid-sentence and never volunteered ideas again. Months later, when the company struggled with innovation, leadership wondered why creativity had dried up. They didn’t realise it was mocked out of existence.

Lesson: Mockery kills innovation not by direct opposition but by silencing the brave.

The Ridiculed Change Agent

A manager introduced a digital tool to streamline reporting. Instead of constructive discussion, a few employees sniggered in the breakroom: “Here comes another of his genius experiments that nobody asked for.”

The whispers spread, and soon the team resisted the tool without even trying it. Ironically, six months later, the same tool was reintroduced by another department-and praised as a success.

Lesson: Mockery can sabotage progress before it starts, delaying growth and wasting resources.

The Clique of Sarcasm

In a department, a small clique was known for sarcastic humour. If someone stayed late, they’d comment, “*Trying to impress the boss again?*” If someone volunteered for training, they’d joke, “*Enjoy wasting your weekend.*”

Over time, colleagues stopped volunteering, stopped working late, and stopped engaging in extra learning. The sarcastic clique had “won”—but at the cost of team spirit and growth.

Lesson: Sarcasm, though packaged as humour, can demotivate and flatten initiative.

A Parable: The Builder and the Mockers

A parable often retold in corporate workshops:

A carpenter in a village was building a bridge. Some townspeople stood by and mocked him: “This will collapse the moment rain comes.” Others joked: “Why bother? No one will even use it.”

The carpenter kept working silently. When the bridge was complete, the same mockers were the first to cross it.

In organisations, the “mockers” may scorn new initiatives—but they are often the very ones who later benefit from them.

Lesson: Builders persist. Mockers only consume what others create.

Conclusion

The company of mockers, whether in subtle jest or overt ridicule, represents more than a lapse in manners—it is a moral and organizational failing. In the teaching profession and beyond, mockery erodes the foundations of trust, empathy, and shared purpose. The spiritual wisdom of the *Psalms*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Qur'an* converge on a common truth: speech shaped by ego and ignorance breeds discord, while words guided by respect and awareness create harmony. Human Resource leadership must therefore nurture *sattvic* values—mindfulness, humility, and compassion—through training, dialogue, and example. When humour becomes a

source of inclusion rather than exclusion, organizations transform from arenas of rivalry into communities of growth and mutual dignity.

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