

does not give people the opportunity to explain why they are leaving, which can make some employees really unhappy."

For example, the person might be leaving right on time because he started work an hour before every one else and worked through his lunch break. If he tries to explain this to the jokes, however, he will almost certainly sound like he is over-reacting, unless he can turn his explanation into a witty retort.

A more formal approach that required the manager to address the matter privately would allow the employee to explain.

Managers who like a joke can also confuse staff by leaving them unsure as to how much formal respect they are expected to show their boss. "Most owners actually expect more deference from staff as the organisation grows, but because they are using humour, they are sending out

business, but he said that was probably just as well as the odd display had put him off. "We thought he was a tear who had embarrassed his junior staff."

On the other hand, well-judged jokes by managers — preferably self-deprecatory — can be useful, he said. "Laughing at your own stupidity

in an environment where it's okay for people to make mistakes. Having a laugh helps people to understand that we all fail and that it's better to fail sometimes than to stop trying."

Staller agreed that there is a place for jokiness when used appropriately. "Humour has its benefits," he said. "It brings you closer to people,

thinking or feeling and their point of view. It can help to make people happy."

Understanding the boundaries of what is appropriate is central to getting the balance right, said Simon Denning, founder of Stagweb, a stag weekend travel site. His clients expect a sense of fun as well as pro-

so encouraging staff to have a sense of humour is part of building the right culture.

"If you go too formal with staff, they will go too formal with clients," he said. "I would not want to work for an organisation that was too rigid... but you do have to be very careful about how you use [humour], espe-

cially when it comes to diversity, but there are limits."

Sexism, racism and any jokes that touch on potentially sensitive topics are out, as are overly clever comments that could cause confusion or misunderstanding, he said.

Everybody at work needs to understand when it is okay to tell jokes, as well as which topics are acceptable and which are not, added Glenn Currie, chief executive of Waste King, the waste collection and recycling company.

"If people have an often 'mucky and difficult' job, and a bit of banter between workmates can help pass the time. On the other hand, employees clearing out the house of someone who has died would need to take a respectful tone when introducing themselves to relatives.

"As the job goes on, they might then see that it is okay to have a bit more banter. It's about using emotional intelligence."

Fun without frontiers

Nicholas Green, founder of Printed.com, the digital printing company, has tried to create a "borderless" environment for his 150 employees. They are expected to deliver results, but beyond that they can come and go as they please. Music is allowed at work and there is no dress code. "I want people to have fun," he said.

"Humour has played quite a big role in that

because we are a pretty young team." For example, the company has a tradition of playing a practical joke on new recruits. "On [one person's] first day, we staged an enormous argument in the middle of the office. I went up to his boss and scolded at him about how terrible his work is... The new guy is watching, thinking, 'Oh my god, where have I started

working?', and then everyone starts laughing".

However, Green believes that jokes are not the right response to all situations in the workplace. "If you need to say to someone, 'You are not doing well', you have to do it seriously. The employee needs to know there is a problem. It does not help anybody if there is a blurred line."