

The Globe and Mail
February 1, 2006

Is it chicken to keep quiet about racist remarks?

By SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I am a professional working in a large public-sector organization. My immediate supervisor is a woman whom I enjoy working for.

Due to an organizational restructuring, her husband now works in the same building. He now drops by occasionally and, on a few occasions, some of us have heard him make derogatory comments about minority groups. These have been met with embarrassed silence, followed by someone quickly changing the topic.

My supervisor has begun quoting some of her husband's views to me. She is not giving the impression that she agrees but, rather, that she finds them amusing. My first instinct is to point out how racist and inappropriate these comments are, but I'm concerned about jeopardizing our working relationship.

So far, I've just ignored the comments and steered the conversation to another topic. I should point out that our office is racially mixed and that I'm not aware of her behaving inappropriately or discriminating against any employee. Is silence acquiescence?

-- Chicken Little

Dear Chicken,

No. Anyone whose ethnic joke has met with silence can taste the disapproval.

But there are other ways to express your discomfort. Avoid criticizing the husband. But, as you have a good rapport with your supervisor and she has otherwise shown good judgment, it's fair game to editorialize (mildly) about how her statements affect you.

Keep your emotions in check and comment only about yourself and the impact of her statements on you, as no one can dispute your internal state. It's as if you're commenting on how a forecasted rainstorm makes your arthritic joints ache. Remedies might be suggested but no one would deny how you feel.

To apply this approach, next time your boss parrots unsavoury views, you could say they make you feel conflicted and uncomfortable. You could also say they engender a feeling of cognitive dissonance.

That's the ambivalence one feels when new information challenges firmly held beliefs, according to mid-century psychologist Leon Festinger. In fact, it's this dissonance that's propelling you to say something as speaking up might reduce the inconsistency between your general impression of your supervisor and these particular comments.

Tell her that you know she's not a racist. She treats everyone with respect. Yet these comments make you feel uneasy because they could be understood as slurs. Are they meant to be? You can't ask that but your silence implies it. Then it's her turn to speak.

Dear Susan,

A co-worker who works part-time and sits in a separate office with me always arrives five minutes late and spends most of her day on personal calls. This has started to really annoy me, but I feel that I can't tell her as it may hinder our working relationship. Should I bring this to the attention of our manager or is there some other way of handling it?

-- Worker Bee

Dear Bee,

Let's call a spade a spade. When you can't tell someone politely to keep it down, what you have is a non-working relationship. Neither of you is working, nor is the relationship, so why pretend? Tell her to stop or someone will have to do it for you, and believe me, she'll like that much less. Before you blow the whistle, try one of these do-it-yourself options.

Be apologetic: If you're so concerned about her reaction, use a defensive stance. Tell her that, unfortunately, you're one of those people who always needs peace and quiet to concentrate. Pity, as there's nothing you'd like better than doing your work in noisy places like the bus, the train or Starbucks. Neither of you has an office door (you wish!) and you can't focus when there's background conversation. Is there a way she can help?

Suggest alternatives: If e-mail hasn't occurred to her, offer your BlackBerry or cellphone for text messaging. Not that she'll take you up on it -- a conversation junkie likely has her own phone. It's the silent medium that's the message. Proposing alternatives can upstage a conflict, as in the following inter-generational exchange. At 15, my son coped with summer tedium by perfecting his kick flip, jumping his skateboard off a porch in cottage country and landing it every few minutes with a wood-splintering crash. A kindly neighbour appeared out of nowhere to offer use of his nimble new sail boat, or maybe his kayak. Not a word was said about noise but somehow it stopped.

Use gadgets: Bring in a CD player and speakers and hit the play button the next time she reaches for her handset. If she doesn't twig, put on George Thorogood's You Talk Too Much.

Be direct: Tell her that her personal calls are interfering with your work. Ask her to keep them to a minimum.

Let the chips fall: If none of this works, request to be moved, even if you have to say why. Face it, her slacking irks you and there's a part of you that wants her to get her comeuppance. This is normal. A desire to punish free riders is a hard-wired human

trait with evolutionary origins (experiments have shown that some people will penalize those who coast on the group's efforts, even at great cost to themselves). That's why new whistle-blowing laws have such appeal. You get to oust cheaters without paying the price.

To borrow from one of my favourite Mose Allison songs, "If silence were golden, you couldn't raise a dime. Your mind's on vacation, your mouth's working overtime."

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

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