

||| DILEMMAS

Bully boss wreaks havoc, but is there another side to the story?



SUSAN PINKER PROBLEM SOLVING

Dear Susan:

I work on a small team. My immediate supervisor and I communicate openly and her feedback has helped me excel. However, the next-level supervisor (the director of the department) is demeaning and spreads rumours about me to other staff and, most distressingly, to the president of the company. This seems to happen when I get praised for something I've done well. My supervisor has spoken with the director several times about it, and I've tried everything, including active listening, initiating conversation, taking on extra work and asking her to be on my annual review committee -- she said she was too busy. But all of this has landed me nowhere. I want to stay in this job but I don't know how much I can take. Am I missing something here?

-- Teetering on the Edge

Dear Teetering,

This is a compelling story that resonates for many of us. The problem is that some important facts are left out of your account -- perhaps to simplify the story and make it coherent. Self-editing is what we humans do to make sense of the unexpected, according to the sociologist Charles Tilly in his new book *Why?*. Whether it's 9/11, a spectacular faux pas or a medical surprise, humans tend to truncate cause and effect to explain something

complex. So, yes, you are probably missing something and you should test out alternative hypotheses before you jump ship.

For example, the discomfort you feel is real but it may not be about you. The director could be facing some personal challenges that you're interpreting as hostility. Or, perhaps the conflict is really between your supervisor and the director. As you have less clout, you're being targeted instead of your mentor. "Children are sometimes used as proxies for aggression between mothers," observes Cheryl Dellasega, author of *Mean Girls Grown Up*, and a professor of humanities at Penn State University. She suggests a face-to-face talk with your director to straighten out any distortions, hewing closely to the facts and avoiding any emotional overlay.

If you do decide to clarify matters, stick to observations and prepare in advance by jotting down your ideas. One script might go like this: "I'm enjoying working here and it seems to be going well. But there's something circulating that's been attributed to you. I'm wondering if you're aware of it." Then pause. If the director denies it, consider the matter closed. If she suggests you're not performing up to standards, ask what you can do to improve.

You should also ask your supportive supervisor what she has observed and if she can help you understand the context. Instead of relying on hearsay, explore whether there's any foundation to the rumours and what you might do to dispel them.

Keep in mind that not all interpersonal issues are resolved through action. I once asked a colleague how to repair a rift with another professional, who had taken to

stonewalling me. "It's just like a psychologist to think that everything can be solved by talking," she chided me. It had happened to many others, she said. I just had to wait it out. With time, my detractor would either calm down or fall on her sword. In either case, eventually peace would prevail. "Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake," Napoleon said. And he should know.

Dear Susan:

My company pays big bucks for external consultants to advise on programs to attract women and prevent them from leaving. Despite their yearly efforts and reports, it seems to me that young and midlevel women continue to leave our company on a voluntary basis. The consultants seem like a waste of our time and the company's money. Should I talk to someone above me about this?

-- Cynic Qua Non

Dear Cynic,

It's impolitic to object for lots of reasons, not least of which is that any effort to increase the number of women at the upper ranks is seen as good corporate citizenship. In a widely quoted 2004 study, Catalyst, a research and advisory group that monitors women's advancement, divided 353 Fortune 500 companies into four groups based on the number of women at the top. It compared the companies that had the most women leaders with those with the fewest and found that the former enjoyed the strongest financial performance.

Now, we don't know whether it's women per se who were increasing profits, or whether other factors -- inspired leadership, a lack of internal silos, certain management practices -- were driving both the bottom line and women's persistence. But it's a good news story for those companies, and diversity consultants would

be connected with it. Anyone decrying their role would be seen as a naysayer.

Two recent news items drive home how any increase in women's representation is noteworthy.

Last week, Wal-Mart announced that any supplier wanting to do business would have to show it's serious about diversity. This comes one year after the retail behemoth told its top 100 law firms that only those with at least one woman and at least one person of colour among the top five "relationship" lawyers handling the retailer's business would be retained. Never mind how they got there, as long as two out of five legal rainmakers are not white men,

their firms can continue to bill Wal-Mart about \$200-million (U.S.) a year. Any consultant who can help make that happen would be lauded.

In January, an executive search firm led by Jay Rosenzweig in Toronto published a study that reported a 50-per-cent increase in female executive officers in Canadian public companies since last year. It was a tiny increase -- to 6.9 per cent from 4.6 per cent -- but it made national news.

Is this something consultants can change? If they discover that women in a company hanker after regular working hours, flex time, or part time and will leave their jobs in order to get it, will relaying this

information to their corporate clients result in meaningful changes? A communications officer for Catalyst, one of many diversity consulting groups around, couldn't point me to data showing cause and effect -- that diversity consultants' interventions bring measurable increases in the number of women at the top. "We do research, not programs," she said.

That left me scratching my head. But if I were you, I'd do my head-scratching alone in your office, with the door closed.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.
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