



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: PETS ON PARADE

Dog days at the office? Not if you can help it

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Dear Susan,

People are allowed to bring their dogs to the office, mostly because the owner of the company loves animals and likes to bring his. Aside from the owner, two people bring their dogs in to work regularly and I find it annoying and distracting. The dogs don't bark that much but it's an open office space. They're big, they nuzzle me when I don't want them to, and are always underfoot. Should I complain?

- Cat Lover

Print Edition - Section Front



Dear Cat,

An office is a menagerie of sorts but most workplaces should be limited to homo sapiens, and here's why.

Some employees may be allergic to dogs and can't function effectively while taking antihistamines, hardly a boon to productivity. Others may be afraid of dogs and ashamed to admit it. Animals can even be dangerous in some settings.

But perhaps most important is the fact that not all dogs are docile or obedient enough to stay silent and immobile for at least eight hours a day; nor is this necessarily in their best interests. It's hard enough for their masters to do without exercise and fresh air all day. Must they impose this on their pets as well?

There are exceptions to my no-pets rule, especially in schools and therapeutic environments where the presence of animals relaxes people, fosters conversation and even lowers heart rates, according to several good studies.

Clearly, being around animals can be good for your health and some of the evidence is intriguing. People who have been asked to gaze at a tropical fish tank for a few moments are less anxious while having a tooth extracted and are more comfortable afterwards, especially if they are prompted to imagine the aquarium during their dental procedure, according to a study by Purdue University animal ecologist Alan Beck and his colleagues.

Dr. Beck's book, *Between Pets and People*, co-written with psychiatrist Aaron Katcher, outlines other physiological evidence of the benefits of having animals around. Pet owners have lower blood pressure than non-pet owners, lower cholesterol levels, and survive longer after heart attacks, although we don't know why. It could be the exercise that comes along with regular dog walking, the salutary effect of having to take care of another creature, or the fact that pets are social lubricants - people meet other people through their dogs, so they feel less isolated.

While we can't pinpoint the exact reason for all this animal-based good health, we do know that animals also foster language skills and well-being in children (along with liberally dousing them with dander and fur). Dr Beck also told me that animals are now common in 65 per cent of nursing homes, where they have been found to relax residents and staff alike. In fact, just patting an animal releases serotonin, a neurotransmitter that attenuates stress and depression.

Still, just because an activity is good for you doesn't mean it should take place in the office. Drinking red wine is good for you, as is eating sardines, having sex, and doing the cardio workout on a treadmill. Should these activities be included in the standard office smorgasbord? Of course not.

The limits between work and home, as well as between humans and other animals, are blurring, to be sure, but it's important to maintain some boundaries. This will become obvious to everyone if, rather than complaining, you suggest that, to be really fair, the office should be open to all pets.

When cats, gerbils and ferrets start to appear, the absurdity of the situation will become clear to the boss. He's still the boss, after all, so he may bring his dog no matter what you say. But perhaps he'll consider barring other dogs, or subsidizing doggie daycare if he wants his employees to be happy and on site at all hours. That way they won't have to leave work to walk their dogs. And you won't have to leave work to get your work done.

Dear Susan,

I am a female principal who has established a satisfying career over the past two decades by improving the performance of students in schools in our city's low-income areas. As a result, I was recently offered a promotion to a leadership position at the board level. I was very pleased to be recognized. But in my series of interviews with the executive committee, I have discovered that their goals seem to be the opposite of mine. Their focus is on test results, mine is on individual kids and building trust with the community. Should I turn down the position?

- *At Odds*

Dear At Odds,

It depends on how much oomph you have left. If, after decades of advocacy, you have any energy reserves left, you should try to fight the power from the inside. Go for the promotion, but keep your ultimate values and goals in mind, while considering the fact that you don't have to show these cards right away.

Spend time at the beginning of your tenure introducing yourself and observing those in power, asking questions, attending meetings, and building relationships and networks. After all, you didn't raise your schools' profiles by storming into classrooms and staff rooms hollering: "It's my way or the highway!" You persuaded people resolutely, one at a time. And that's your role here - to convince your fellow board members that students and teachers who receive targeted support are motivated to do well, and your history shows that this translates into higher scores.

Simply stated, it's about focusing on the destination, not on the journey.

According to U.S. surveys, female managers are as reluctant as you are to be cagey - to work behind the scenes to get what they want. Rather, they prefer to work with like-minded people who respect them and have similar values.

In their recent book, *Why Women Mean Business*, leadership consultant Avivah Wittenberg-Cox and journalist Alison Maitland marshal similar evidence for European women and their desire for "authenticity." The dearth of women in leadership positions is a result, in part, to a reluctance to

play the game. Many women choose to work tirelessly and invisibly just getting things done, and then wonder why they haven't been cherry-picked for promotions.

"Hierarchy itself, and its implicit positioning of people into one-up, one-down positions, is actually far from women's search for establishing series of relationships between equals ... So they refuse to get involved. They disdain 'politics' as being about self-promotion and power grabbing ..." they write.

You have shown that you can make a difference. If you can find a mentor outside the organization to help you deal with the dissonance you will feel and the inevitable frustrations, you now have a chance to take your ideas - and your ambitions - higher.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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