



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: KITCHENETTE POLITICS

Buddy, can you spare a coffee?

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Dear Susan,

Once a week, our office kitchen is locked while the four partners meet for an hour and a half over a catered lunch. I understand that they have to get together, but do they have to keep the rest of us from the kitchen table and the coffee machine? The associates and employees also need to eat lunch. Should I mention this lack of courtesy to one of the partners?

- *Holding a little brown bag*



Dear little brown bag,

Calling it a lack of courtesy is a little patronizing, as in: "If you folks had really learned some manners, you'd know something about sharing by now." Wagging your finger won't help. You'd have more luck if you considered why that closed door gives you the willies. Is this really about where you eat your chicken wrap, washed down by that morning's coffee dregs?

A cup of joe is not just a caffeine fix, but it can be a statement of our lifestyle choice and social status: Consider who goes to Tim Horton's and who goes to Starbucks. Even when everyone drinks the same brew, everywhere I've worked - schools, clinics, universities, hospitals - the coffee machine has been the lightning rod for conflict: Who makes the coffee, who pays for it, who cleans the machine, who has access to it during off hours, and who leaves their dirty cups around with day old milk scum on the bottom? These are good indicators of who's on the top of the heap (or thinks he or she is), and who has a more modest sense of their place on the hierarchy.

Now, a recent study by two psychologists at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management provides evidence that such conflicts are not really about coffee but about something much deeper - whether you feel accepted as a member of the group.

As Starbucks figured out years ago, when it sells a \$4 latte, it's not just selling a beverage but a place to be and belong. As it happens, feeling socially excluded can make a person crave the comfort of a hot drink, according to researchers Chen-Bo Zhong and Geoffrey Leonardelli.

By manipulating how many times undergraduates at the U of T were passed a ball during a virtual game, the researchers discovered that being left out of a group activity makes people feel that the room is colder than it is.

Compared with a control group (whose members were passed the ball regularly), those who felt shut out not only felt physically chilled, they were more likely to hanker for a cup of hot coffee or soup. And it wasn't just a nervous desire to nosh, because Coke, apples or crackers didn't cut it.

Clearly, being frozen out is more than just a metaphor. Proving that physical sensations accompany psychological ones is the focus of a new field called embodied cognition, Prof. Zhong and Prof. Leonardelli's sphere of interest. Actually, feeling chilled or in pain when you've been excluded is probably why expressions like "a frosty look," the "cold shoulder," or "sting of rejection" ring true. They're not just figures of speech.

"It's important for people to understand how hard it can be," Prof. Zhong said, referring to exclusion at work. "People not only feel rejection in their mind, but in their body. So companies have to work on building groups that are co-operative and willing to include each other. Even if you're ignored by people you don't like, it's still painful."

In your case, changing where the partners meet is outside your sphere of influence. But mobilizing other staff members for lunch or a coffee outside the office on their weekly meeting day would lessen that sense of exclusion, probably felt even more keenly by office newcomers.

When I asked Prof. Zhong about the applications of his research - whether companies should invest in more espresso makers, for example - he was skeptical.

"The best way is to be conscious about including your colleagues. Be aware of the ramifications of being rejected, because not only do people feel rejected, they really feel left out in the cold."

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

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