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From the ant colony to the office colony: How to make others pitch in

By SUSAN PINKER

From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

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Dear Susan,

I am part-owner of a manufacturing company. Every summer, most of my senior management team seems to disappear. Though they stay in contact via BlackBerry, they spend half their time sailing, golfing or at the cottage. The unwritten rule here is that results matter, not punching a clock, but I'm starting to resent the situation. Problems come up and, since I'm always here, I'm the one who deals with them. The problems are usually resolved before the others get called in. Should I make moves to change things?

-Holding the Fort in Ontario

Dear Holding,

One problem with your de facto "face time doesn't matter" work ethic is that everyone benefits but you. You should change the policy. Schedule some time off and discuss who will be physically present at the office when you're not there. Then, try to ignore your PDA and stay away.

This brings up a second problem. Can you really stand to be out of the loop?

Even if you try to divide evenings and weekends more equitably, nothing much will change if you feel compelled to check in, and you sense deep down that the buck stops with you. That inner Geiger counter for work that's not done will just keep on ticking.

Many of us assume specific tasks and work habits that come to define us. The question is, once we know the drill, how do we know when to stop and let others take over?

Recently, evidence about workaholism has surfaced from two diverse sources: ants and economists. Granted, they seem to be at opposite ends of the evolutionary chain, but both offer insights into the ways social creatures work in groups, and how the group's tasks gets divided.

In colonies of *Temnothorax* ants, for example, some specialize in foraging while others carry food and still others construct shelters or mind the colony's brood. This tidy division of labour suggests uber-productivity.

But rather than a picture of efficiency, Dr. Anna Dornhaus, an assistant professor of evolutionary biology at the University of Arizona, has discovered that ants that spend all of their time doing one particular job are not necessarily good at it. Through close observation, Dr. Dornhaus found that while some ants did nothing but collect food, they still took an hour (or even two hours) to do what other ants could do in five minutes.

Meanwhile, efficient or not, all the work in the colony is done by a small group of ants. The rest seem to be slackers.

No one really knows why this division of labour exists, Dr. Dornhaus says. It doesn't seem cost-effective or even logical, but most researchers who study social insects have found a large proportion of every colony doesn't seem to be working.

"The ant slackers may not be selfish. They may have a function. It may be important for the colony as a whole to have ants who are well-rested," she says. "If there's an attack or some catastrophic event, and all the foragers are killed, there are still individuals who are safe and can take over."

As an experiment, Dr. Dornhaus provoked a crisis of sorts to see what would happen. After dismantling several colonies, she removed all of the hard workers - the ants whose job was to transport and rebuild. "Ten per cent of the ants do all the work of moving, while 90 per cent do nothing," she explains.

When Dr. Dornhaus removed that industrious 10 per cent, suddenly a different 10 per cent became active. And miraculously, there was always 90 per cent of laggards left over.

So what do economists have to add to this story? Last year, Daniel Hamermesh at the University of Texas at Austin and Joel Slemrod at the University of Michigan examined the evidence and concluded that those who do all the work, all the time, act as if they're addicted to it. In humans, anyway, they found that workaholics are more likely to be highly educated, high earners who overvalue their market activities, at the cost of their leisure time, their health and their relationships.

They complain, and feel as if they're pressed into service, but they're really making a choice. And as they constantly step up to fill the breach, others feel they don't have to.

Your task is to change that expectation, just as Dr. Dornhaus did when she removed the hard workers. "We think that all the slackers can choose to do the work, if they want to," Dr. Dornhaus says.

Though there's no leader per se, "they're self-organized, and send signals to each other about what needs to be done," she says.

I tread lightly here, as last time I used evidence from social insects as an analogy, some readers took umbrage. But, surely, if ants half the size of a grain of rice send signals about who needs to pitch in, then we can do it, too.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*. Her blog, *The Business Brain*, can be found at <http://susanpinkerbusinessbrain.blogspot.com> Send questions to: spinker@globeandmail.com [spinker@globeandmail.com]. No attachments, please.*

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