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Workplace hazing: Time to face the harrassers head on

By SUSAN PINKER

From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

spinker@globeandmail.com [spinker@globeandmail.com]

Dear Susan,

I've been working on contract for six months, where I'm the most recent arrival to an office of practical jokers. One person in particular prompts me to write. He started with a little teasing, which is par for the course around here. Then there were Internet pranks. Now he's making comments about my boyfriend and family, and how I spend my "fun" weekends, always with a double meaning and big laughs from everyone else. Can I tell this guy where to go? I don't want people to think I can't take a joke.

- *Grin and Bear It*

Dear Grin,

As the relative newbie, you're being hazed. It's nothing personal but you're being put through the ringer to see if you fit in.

Your biggest challenge right now is not just to learn the ropes of this new position but to prove you're one of "the guys," and loyal to the group.

The point you want to make is: "I'm going to stick around, blend in with you folks and do a great job, no matter how many dumb jokes you make."

Still, loyal or not, you have to establish boundaries, and you have to do it soon.

How? Play it straight. The next time this guy makes a nudge-nudge-wink-wink remark, call him on it, mildly, right then and there, as in: "I think you're asking whether I had sex with my boyfriend this weekend. I don't review that with my colleagues, so there's no point in asking about it again. But if you're curious and would like to meet him, I can invite him to meet us after work for a drink. How about tomorrow?"

Hazing, and often teasing, are all about putting someone or something threatening in its place. It's about defusing feelings that the jokester finds uncomfortable.

You may be the butt of jokes because you're the new one, different in some way, or eliciting feelings this guy doesn't know how to handle.

A woman in a primarily male environment? A hard worker among slackers? College-educated when the others are not?

Naming the unidentified source of discomfort will go a long way toward disarming it, as long as you do it with humour and good-natured sincerity.

For example, during an interview, one young female engineer new to a mining company told me how one of her project managers half-closed the door to his office when she came to speak to him.

He stood with his back to the almost-closed door, on which he had hung a girly calendar, and proceeded with project discussions framed by the buxom bare chest of the model behind him.

The engineer was startled when it happened the first time. When it happened again, she called him on it, but played it straight.

"That's a pretty explicit calendar you've got there."

Then, pointing to a framed school photos of two girls, she added: "You have daughters, don't you? Is this the kind of thing you'd like them to see when they start working at their first jobs?"

The next time she met with him, the calendar was gone.

Though not much research has been done on workplace hazing, large national studies of campus stunts by Elizabeth Allen and Mary Madden at the University of Maine showed that just 12 per cent to 25 per cent of students realized they were being hazed.

Meanwhile, a much higher proportion of coaches and residence dons knew exactly what was gong on, yet did nothing to stop it. By standing by, supervisors become implicit in initiation rites that can damage reputations - their own and their employer's- and leave everyone open to lawsuits.

Responding to the teasing while keeping your cool is a challenge - not just for newbies but for their managers, too.

Everyone in a supervisory role should have their antennae up to detect hazing rituals. Subtle forms of harassment can masquerade behind office traditions or an ironic style of banter. Steady turnover is one sign of the problem, as new arrivals like you come to the conclusion they're better off elsewhere.

Before you turn on your heels, seek out an advocate in the group who can school you in its hidden rites. In the meantime, face the joker's fears and prejudices about you with good humour, but head on.

"Prejudice is a great time saver. You can form opinions without having to get the facts," according to E.B. White, the American writer and essayist.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to supply him with the facts.

*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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