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Self-sabotaging lapses

By Susan Pinker
From Friday's Globe and Mail

We're all guilty of 'ironic errors'

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Dear Susan,

A colleague I'll call Adam is the best tax mind in the office and makes a huge contribution to our working group, even though he can sometimes be inappropriate. This is a brilliant guy who can ask someone if he has put on weight recently (and how many pounds), or tell a female colleague that she looks nice today, for a change. Most of us know him and make light of this stuff. But one relatively new team member has reacted by exchanging long, significant looks with another colleague she works closely with, as if to say, "Can you believe what this idiot just said?" If we're in a meeting, she literally turns her back on him. As group leader, I find this unacceptable. Should I say something to her?

Biting My Tongue

Dear Biting,

Your resident tax maven may have few social inhibitions and even fewer social skills, but the colleague who locks eyes with her buddy, excluding everyone else from their silent tête-a-tête, is just plain rude. The question is whether saying so will have the right impact.

Saying nothing, though, is tacit agreement that open scorn is okay. It's not. While you're not in loco parentis as a manager, you do have a right to set the tone - an inclusive and tolerant one, I hope.

Pull Ms. Haughty aside for a little huddle of your own. With some delicacy and indirect language, discuss Adam's strengths and relative blind spots. Despite his awkwardness, he - and everyone else in the group - can tell the difference between snubs that are intended and social gaffes that are not. Adam may be ill at ease socially, which is probably the source of his blunders. But does this co-worker really want to set herself apart from the group by excluding him?

We're all guilty of faux pas at times, and the more anxious we feel about a social situation, the more likely we are

to stick a foot in our mouths and blurt out the very thought we're trying to avoid. It's a case of trying not to think of pink elephants, yet constantly revisiting that mental image; or vowing not to reveal the identity of a secret crush and finding that, inexplicably, conversational references to him or her keep surfacing despite your best efforts to keep these thoughts, and any pointers to them, under wraps.

Edgar Allan Poe called this contrarian aspect of the human mind "the imp of the perverse," Freud called it "the counter will," while Daniel Wegner, a psychologist at Harvard University, calls the effect on our behaviour "ironic errors."

Whatever you call these self-sabotaging lapses of self-control, they're universal. Paradoxically, they're exacerbated by the mental tension and hyper-vigilance created by trying to banish a ticklish subject from your mind.

Writing in an article last July in Science magazine, Prof. Wegner explained that ironic errors often occur "when we attempt to be socially desirable, as when we try to keep our minds out of the gutter. People instructed to stop thinking of sex, for example, show greater arousal than do those asked to stop thinking about a neutral topic."

Similarly, he says that worries and fears can prompt ironic errors, a phenomenon that sports psychologists, athletes and coaches know well; golfers call the effect of concentrating hard on not over-putting, yet doing it anyway, "the yips." I suspect that Adam gets "the yips" when he feels uncomfortable in social situations.

Explaining this in broad strokes might prompt your haughty employee to recall when she fell vulnerable to the same forces, perhaps spilling her glass of red wine, as I once did, on someone's exquisite silk jacket while admiring it at a public event. Has she never watched in horror and embarrassment as her words or actions betrayed her?

If such social gaffes weren't universal, comics couldn't make a living saying and doing exactly the wrong thing, spoofing our social anxieties with such good aim. There'd be no Larry David, no John Cleese, no Mike Myers, no slapstick.

The tack you should take with your female colleague is that we're all in the same boat. In striving for acceptance, it's only human to goof up and blurt out a reference to the distinctive mole you're trying so hard not to notice, or to say just the thing that you wish you hadn't. The threat of being excluded because of your faux pas just makes things worse.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*. Her blog, on the science of human relationships, can be found at www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind.*

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