

PROBLEM SOLVING

Divide and conquer the powerful office clique

Saturday, June 05, 2010

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I work in an office with about 20 employees. For as long as I've been here, there has been a powerful clique running the place.

These folks - all women, alas -regularly gather around each other's desks, whispering and giggling, or they send snarky messages back and forth. We can all hear their computers beeping and see them snickering as they type away, dissecting the *victim du jour*.

Every happening in the office is treated to a round of sitcom-style, sarcastic one-liners. After meetings the two ringleaders walk back to their desks together, smirking about who said what. On the odd occasion when one of the rest of us has to ask the ringleader for assistance, we're treated like we're just this side of brain-dead.

The ringleader and her sidekick have been here for at least 10 years and, to my knowledge, no one has ever taken them aside and told them to stop. In fact, the boss and his next-in-command seem to enjoy their sarcasm.

Not surprisingly, morale is the pits. The office is divided into the clique and its adherents versus those who wish they would fall into a deep hole. Do you have any suggestions about what to do in this situation? One day I may just stand up like a crabby librarian and say, "Girls, that is enough!" which would probably cost me my job.

Sick of the Clique

Dear Sick,

There are alternatives to wagging your finger and shushing the in crowd. One is to explore how porous the dynamic duo's boundaries are. The other is to look for a work environment that is less noxious. Humans evolved as a species at a time when ostracism was a death sentence, and social exclusion is still among the most damaging of human experiences, outside of overt violence (consider that solitary confinement is the worst punishment the prison system offers, or the number of teen suicides provoked by bullying and ostracism).

This kind of social stressor can take years off your life, so do your best to adjust the dynamic. If your strategies don't work, get out.

Before calling it quits, though, you have nothing to lose by approaching the enemy. Try to shift the clique's boundaries via a benign invitation to the two members to join you and a few colleagues at a favourite lunch spot, for example, or to work on a new project.

You may have to hold your nose at first, but what's important is to build a connection with each clique member separately. If you find any common ground (you each own dogs, you each speak Italian, each of you are Canadiens fans), you can use this link, tenuous as it may seem, to begin to craft a new group identity.

Because no one seems to have challenged the social hierarchy in your office, my guess is that the dominance of these two has expanded to fill a managerial vacuum. That's a bad sign for the future of your workplace.

Even if the ringleader and her accomplice are acting as if life's a gas, what we know about female aggression is that it escalates not when things are great, but when resources are becoming scarce, according to University of Missouri evolutionary psychologist David Geary. Female bonobo monkeys form coalitions that dominate other bonobos (including the occasional male) to control the best feeding sites when food is running low.

High-ranking female vervet monkeys harass other females to the point that this social stress disrupts the lower-ranking females' ability to ovulate and conceive - the best way to ensure that there will be enough to eat when times get tough.

Even female prairie voles, those monogamous and highly social little critters, will attack other females when a new male - who might confer the most status and sustenance - is introduced into their living arrangements, according to University of Maryland biologist Catherine Bowler and her colleagues.

In humans, female aggression is less about physical fighting than it is about disrupting the social networks of potential female competitors, using rumours, innuendo, and cutting remarks to damage the reputations of other women. That's exactly what you're observing among the members of this clique.

E.O. Wilson, the renowned American evolutionary biologist, wrote that "human beings are consistent in their codes of honor, but endlessly fickle with reference to whom the codes apply," adding that "the important distinction is ... between the in-group and the out-group, but the precise location of the dividing line is shifted back and forth with ease."

My advice is to give yourself a time frame to erode this clique's dividing line. And if you can't absorb these boors into the larger group of co-workers within that time, explore what other opportunities exist outside their small, and increasingly confining, territory.

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

©Copyright Susan Pinker 2010