

Globe Careers
November 26, 2003
Susan Pinker

Dear Susan,

I work for an international development organization, financed mostly by governments of the Northern hemisphere. Like many public organizations, our funding is increasingly insecure and we now face imminent closure. A way forward has been agreed by the powers-that-remain. We are to be "merged" with a more successful sister organization. "Submerged" looks closer to the truth. The well-funded parts of the organization are to be taken on by the sister. It may yet turn out alright, but there are reasons to fear for the survival of the organization's mandate and the protection of staff interests, of those who will be hired under the new arrangement and of the many more who will be terminated.

Most worryingly, the decisions are all in the hands of the sister. Our board of trustees, which should provide some counterweight, is passive and discredited. It said little about a long series of questionable management decisions. This is not an Enron situation: we are ultimately answerable not to shareholders but to a range of stakeholders who support us or whom we serve. They need to be looking in, but as elsewhere, they are poorly informed and unlikely to learn about what is happening until too late.

No one knows the situation better than staff: the uncertainty affects us and our programs most directly. We have to make ourselves heard and, in these unusual times, we cannot rely on the usual channels. A statement has been prepared but already the "we" is problematic. Some avoid signing. The interests of the likely winners and losers in the transition diverge. Speaking out may not be seen well by the sister if you are hoping for a future with her. Excessive loyalty can be dangerous. I fear that in the end it will be individuals among us who stand up. I'd appreciate your comments.

A loyalist

Dear Loyalist:

Loyal to what and to whom? Often loyalties conflict. Your non-signing colleagues might have been committed to the organization, its mission and team of devoted co-workers until their jobs were in jeopardy. Now they have to weigh the interests of their dependents against other values. Ultimately a family's needs may take precedence – one reason to shy away from risk. Can you blame them? Perhaps they gave decades to the organization, relocating repeatedly as is common in international development circles, yet now find their careers as precarious as a new graduate's. It boils down to whether any of you should expect your commitment to the organization to be

reciprocal. Most North Americans would say no, according to a public opinion poll published in the New York Times Magazine in 2001. Despite nostalgia for what they remember as the good old days and a fierce commitment to loyalty as an ideal, most Americans, anyway, have shifted away from being faithful to an organization, replacing it with loyalty to personal integrity, to freedom of choice, to one's own value system. Like your group, huge numbers have faced downsizing, mergers and an uncertain future so it's no wonder few are willing to stick their neck out.

Alan Wolfe, a professor of Political Science at Boston College who helped design the New York Times poll and wrote about it in his book, *Moral Freedom*, wryly summarizes the collision course of traditional loyalty with the demands of contemporary life as "til circumstances do us part," explaining it this way. "The emphasis that so many Americans place on the personal side of business practice runs up against the way most economists and defenders of business treat the issue of corporate loyalty. Institutions are not, in the view of the latter, like people, subject to emotions, possessing a potential for empathy and capable of dialogue."

It's that dialogue you're after and I'm not convinced you'll get it, especially if you begin with a position paper that divides friends and colleagues, bestowing the moral high ground on some, demoting others and putting the "sister" organization on the defensive before she's left the starting blocks. The new hybrid may yet evolve into an outfit as worthy as its ancestor; it's too early to tell. The issue is not simply who is cleaving to an original set of ideals and who is abandoning them by refusing to set the record straight for stakeholders. The underlying injury could be how people are being treated during the transition. You write that "no one knows the situation better than staff," yet it appears the sister organization hasn't approached this committed corps for its input. This is a source of resentment. Being submerged is one thing, but disappearing without a trace is another, especially for a group that prides itself on a loftier objective than an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. If the new organization treats the original staff in a cavalier, imperious manner, it's no surprise that many will decide that it's best to look out for Number One. I wouldn't be so quick to consign these colleagues to the gutless pile. Loyalty to one's principles in the abstract is a beautiful thing, but "sometimes party loyalty asks too much," says John F. Kennedy, and he should know.

Dear Susan:

I was denied a promotion at a major airline, and when I investigated, the reason given was poor attendance. Every day I missed was covered by a certificate from a medical professional. Can I really be denied a promotion because I was absent, or do you think there's another reason?

Sick and Tired

Dear Sick and Tired:

This is more a legal question than an interpersonal one, but it gives me the opportunity to extol the nursery-school virtue of good attendance, that is, if one is healthy enough to go to work. Two weeks ago the Supreme Court of Canada upheld a Court of Appeal decision that an employer has the right to fire someone who misses work while he was serving a jail sentence. The Charter of Human Rights protects us from being discriminated against at work if convicted of a crime, apparently. No one can fire you for having a criminal record or prevent you from climbing the corporate ladder if you're a crook. But if you've been absent, now that's a different story.

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