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PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

Promotion becomes exile in 'administrivia'

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

After fifteen years of high school teaching I was promoted from science specialist to school administrator. This looks great on paper and I now earn way more, but after two months of this I have discovered that I dislike several aspects of my new job: disciplining students, settling disputes between staff members, and dealing with "administrivia." What makes matters worse is that my boss, the head of school, doesn't appreciate that I hate paperwork as much as I hate conflict but, because I'm good at it, hands off all local grant applications and internal power struggles to me. Help!

-- Stop the World

Print Edition - Section Front



Dear Stop,

You've made a mistake. You have little choice but to endure the year while planning your escape. In the meantime, learn as much as you can - about conflict resolution, how organizations function, and about yourself - while you plan the right time to tell your boss that you're unhappy and that you want to return to teaching.

At the same time, exploit your experience as a teacher by getting out of your office and into your school's hallways, classrooms and science labs. As you know, that's where the real education happens, and where your years of expertise can be put to excellent use.

The essayist Samuel Johnson once quipped: "He is not only dull himself, he is the cause of dullness in others."

If you help just one struggling or boring science teacher find his or her feet, your year of living dangerously will have been worth it.

Dear Susan,

I am a 47-year-old woman entrepreneur. My small business does about \$1-million a year in sales and I would like to grow that to \$3-million in order to sell the business. I know I need to expand to do that but I am having trouble taking the big risk of financing

a move and the construction of a plant. I did move my business two years ago at a cost of \$75,000. I financed that and have already paid it back. Small risks, such as buying equipment, are okay but I can't seem to take the leap for this big one. What is your opinion?

-- *Down to the Quick*

Dear Down,

Three scenarios could be preventing you from expanding. The first is that you're having fun, making a decent profit and don't want to jinx yourself by aiming for more. It stands to reason that when you've created something from nothing you can be ambivalent about parting with it. The second is that taking on big debt makes you viscerally uneasy even if you know, rationally, that it will pay off. And the third is that you have no one to show you how.

As it's the easiest to deal with, let's start with the third one. There are lots of business consultants who can advise you about expansion. My preference, though, is to approach friends or colleagues who have weathered the experience and start gathering experiential data first. Here is where you get to exploit your social capital - the connections and networks that helped you get to the \$1-million mark. You couldn't possibly have reached that point without building firm business relationships. Think about who you trust. Then discreetly seek their counsel about what they needed to do to grow - and what financial safeguards they deployed to plan for and counter the risks.

It might also help to know that it's not just you who is wrestling with the dilemma. Research from Germany indicates that women are less likely to take business risks than men, and the older they are, the more risk-averse they are.

In 2005, economist Thomas Dohmen and colleagues at the Institute for the Study of Labor in Bonn set out to test the connection between gender and entrepreneurial gambles. They asked 20,000 Germans how they would invest €100,000 (\$137,620) if they won the lottery, but with these qualifiers: They could double their money every two years by investing it, but the probability of making that healthy profit would be 50 per cent - and there would be a 50-per-cent likelihood that they would lose half their winnings.

Thus, the study participants were confronted with this question: Should they hold on to the original sum or invest it, and how much should they risk? The researchers discovered that men invested €6,000 more than women, on average. And young people invested more than older ones.

Interestingly, people who reported that they enjoyed taking risks saw themselves as happier and more optimistic, although it's not clear what came first - the risk-taking or optimism.

The researchers also found that an appetite for risk was linked with self-employment, while less risk-prone people were attracted to working in the public service sector, which offers job security and benefits but lower earnings.

As an entrepreneur, you are already in the risk-taking group. Consider your past triumphs. Didn't they require taking chances? You've jumped before and have not only survived, but done well with your business. Now, the question is whether your guts are telling you to hold back for a good reason. Hand-picked outsiders can help you evaluate your fears.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*, to be published in February.*

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