



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: SOCIALIZING AND SOBRIETY

When the manager won't drink to that

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Dear Susan,

The staff in our department go out for a drink at least twice a week after work. Those of us who don't drink or who have family obligations rarely go. I know that a couple of the regulars are heavy drinkers, and they sometimes invite clients along. I think it's unfair, and as a senior manager I am also unhappy about the drinking. Should I try to put a stop to the practice?

- *Straight Edge*

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Dear Straight,

You can try, but you won't succeed. Invisible though they may seem, there are still some boundaries left between work and private life; for most of us, the end of the work day means no longer having to do someone else's bidding. At that time, a senior manager has no more business determining the staff members' drinking partners than it does their sexual partners.

In Canada, at least, we assume that working adults can take responsibility for themselves. Any edicts from on high about how to spend leisure time - especially from a teetotaler - will seem like noblesse oblige.

Still, I share your concern about excluding those who are unable - or prefer not - to groom their contacts during happy hour. Many women fall into this camp. At least one Canadian study has found that, on average, they avoid this type of networking, electing instead to keep their work and social lives distinct. With only so many hours in the day, most choose to go home instead of hobnobbing with colleagues after hours.

A reduced interest in social stumping is one reason why Christy Clark, a former British Columbia cabinet minister, left politics in 2005. Once her son Hamish was born, dedicating evenings to networking in bars and restaurants no longer had much allure, she told me. Now a host at CKNW radio in Vancouver, Ms. Clark is happy with the idea of limiting her hours to 9-to-5.

She wasn't confident that pub-and-party requirements would ever change in politics. But it can in your industry.

Meeting clients at lunch instead of at a bar would mean including more women such as Ms. Clark and more nondrinkers such as yourself. For that reason alone, you should float this suggestion.

However, it's important to keep in mind that suggesting alternatives is a practical matter, not a moral one.

You're on safer ground if you draw the line between your professional domain - equal access to discussion and deals - to what's none of your affair - namely, moral judgments about your employees' drinking habits after hours. As long as they can do their jobs in the morning, and haven't violated company policy or broken the law, you can assume moderation has prevailed.

No matter what formula you strike, if it's somewhere between all or nothing, it will be an improvement over the past 200 years, when a Jekyll and Hyde view of alcohol prevailed, according to Jessica Warner, a senior scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto.

Her book, *The Day George Bush Stopped Drinking*, recounts how workers were once so liberally doused with alcohol that they got paid in liquor, got their wages paid in the pub, and had drams docked if they made a mistake on the job. "It was common for [18th and 19th century] employers to supply whisky and rum throughout the day," Dr. Warren says. By the time a tradesman had finished his 4½-year apprenticeship, he was a "regular drunkard," according to documents she sent me.

Industrialization and the temperance movement have changed that practice, but we're still left with a sense of abstinence - whether over alcohol or other pleasures - as an attainable, appealing ideal.

"Once you are engaged in a particular moral lifestyle, there's an implicit expectation that others should behave the same way," Dr. Warner observes on the long-standing moralization of drinking.

Your mission is to overcome that expectation. As long as everyone has an opportunity to attend meetings and no laws are broken, your mission is not to moralize but to turn a blind eye.

Dear Susan,

For the past 15 years, I've worked in a management consultancy, where I arrive at 8 a.m., and leave at midnight or later. I also work on the weekends, usually from home. I am not alone. Everyone in the office does this, so I feel I have no choice. The work is super interesting, but I am getting tired. What now?

- Too Tired to Stand Up

Dear Waffling,

Your position in the organization will determine whether you can alter the status quo. If you've paid your dues and are now senior enough to wield a little power, you can try to establish a more humane working schedule - not just for you but for those lower on the hierarchy.

But if you're still mid-level and are not owed any favours, the peer pressure to work evenings and weekends will be too great. That's the time to investigate what the market might offer to a management consultant who knows a thing or two about hard work.

When talented employees vote with their feet, employers may begin to pay attention to the impact of their demands. Among the newest graduates, there are movements afoot to boycott companies that expect Draconian hours; some high performing graduates of Ivy League law schools have banded together to rate U.S. law firms on their expectations, and their working environments - and have posted their ratings on the Internet for other new graduates to use when they apply for positions. Meanwhile, some business graduates begin their careers with the request that they get time off to do good works.

Mid-career professionals such as yourself may have missed out on this, but it's not too late to seek more reasonable hours. And you now have the experience and years of hard work that add lustre and a competitive edge to your résumé.

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

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