

||| DEFINITIONS

A team player by any other term would rock the boat



SUSAN PINKER
PROBLEM SOLVING

Dear Susan:

Two common terms in business parlance today are "team player" and "multitasking." The first I understand to mean working collaboratively with colleagues. The second I take to mean working at different -- often continuing -- projects at different times during the day. It could be writing a marketing plan, interviewing job candidates, or talking to clients on the phone. Both terms are common in job ads and interviews. I was in a situation recently where mock interviews were being conducted and every interviewee volunteered that they were team players and multitaskers -- a couple of things they'd been told they must say, but weren't quite sure of their meaning. Both terms seem to have invisible "quote marks" around them, as if they're some sort of code. What do they really mean?

--Takes calls and sends e-mail

Dear Takes Calls:

For candidates, these phrases usually mean I'll get along with everyone, I swear, and I'll do whatever I'm asked. Now can I have the job, please?

But without context, these terms are vacuous. Team player in particular, deserves to be put out of its misery. It's overused and can mean anything from won't-rock-the-boat to will-do-whatever-it-takes-no matter-what.

Meanwhile, not-a-team player is an all-purpose epithet that sounds business-like, but can mean disloyal, puts his or her interests first, is different, shy, works or thinks independently, or once disagreed with someone now in a position of power. In short, it's vague enough to house any dark thought people are afraid to utter out loud. It deserves to be ditched, if only because it prevents people from acting, or asking for change.

Every second letter I receive to this column adds a frisson-filled postscript that the dreaded "not-a-team-player" label might be levelled should their problem ever be expressed at work. If you can't ask for help when you're in trouble, what kind of team is it, anyway?

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Once upon a time, team player was one of at least a dozen business buzzwords that migrated from sports, such as coaching, front-runner, level playing field and dropping the ball. The concept was that corporations function like baseball or football teams; players should have discrete roles but also work as a co-ordinated unit. Like linemen, or even ants on a hill, everyone would do their job but collaborate to score the goal.

But, in some contexts, the term has morphed to mean subverting one's needs for the common good. Hewlett Packard executive Ann Livermore was described by BusinessWeek early this year as "HP's ultimate team player." Why? It wasn't just that she helped CEO Mark Hurd effect drastic cutbacks and layoffs to boost profit after the Carly Fiorina fiasco. There was also a "a selfless willingness to follow orders," according to HP insiders, not to mention more than a hint of self-

abnegation. When Ms. Livermore heard that a long-awaited kidney had been donated, "she rushed to the hospital . . . and underwent an organ transplant," gushed the BusinessWeek piece; yet, three days later, she was engaging Mr. Hurd and other HP brass in business discussions from the phone in her hospital room.

Work inevitably requires some self-denial, but taken to the extreme it can make for great theatre, say Shakespeare's Macbeth -- a lot of strutting and fretting and possibly being heard no more. And for what? Does team playing mean avoiding conflict and values clashes at all costs? It may feel like that, says Debra Myerson, an associate professor of education and organizational behaviour at Stanford University. But, being an effective team member may also mean challenging its assumptions. "There's lots of research in social psychology showing that the more cohesive the team, the greater the pressure to conform," she said, explaining that the more people feel a sense of belonging, the less they'll question the team's direction. "The irony is that it's exactly that quality that could undermine it."

She suggested asking interviewees to explain what they mean by being a team player. That will tell you if they understand its nuances. And if their cellphones ring while they're talking, you'll get a glimpse of their multitasking, too.

Dear Susan:

Five years ago, I was at the senior executive level when I saw the writing on the wall and was offered and accepted a buyout. Since then, I have been working on contract, doing some of the same work for many of the same

people, but I have other clients, too. Now, there's another opening at the company, and my former colleagues are encouraging me to apply for it. I know the company has been targeted for not having women on the management team and wonder if that's why the company suddenly wants me back. Should I jump?

--Femme Fatale

Dear Femme:

Their motives are not as important as yours. You have to decide whether you want to continue to work as a free agent, or assume the role of an employee. With your experience and an established client base, do you really want to put all your eggs in one basket? Your former employers deemed you dispensable before and they can do so again. Taking that risk should be worth plenty in incentives. Should you be

offered the position, you can drive a hard bargain.

One reason the management team is largely male is that women often shy away from such winner-take-all competitions, according to two economists, Muriel Niederle, at Stanford, and Lise Vesterland, at the University of Pittsburgh. In a soon-to-be-published study, they describe an experiment in which men and women were given the choice between being paid by the piece or paid after competing in a tournament.

In the piecework condition, they were paid 50 cents for each arithmetic problem they solved. In the tournament, the person who solved the most problems received \$2 for each problem, while the losers got nothing.

The authors found that, even when their performance was the same -- when men and women did equally well -- the

men chose the tournament twice as often as the women did: 73 per cent of the men selected the tournament, compared with 35 per cent of the women, even when they would have earned much more by competing. The authors conclude that two factors explain this difference: Men are more overconfident than women, and women like to compete a lot less. As a result, they're less likely to throw their hats in the ring.

Why is this relevant to you? There is a risk that you may enter the race and not be selected. How much would this irk you? There's also a risk that if you don't compete, the prize will go to someone less qualified, simply because you didn't run. Only you can decide whether that bothers you more.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.
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