DILEMMAS

What's it going to be: money or meaning?

SUSAN PINKER
PROBLEM SOLVING

Dear Susan:

I am a senior management professional with a successful career and at least two decades to work before I retire. I don't love my job but I like it well enough, and my family has a lot of choices because of my income. Through some volunteer work, an opportunity came up to become the chief executive of a charitable institution that does good work but is in bad shape and needs experienced leadership. I'm tempted, but I'd earn about half my current salary (although there'd be other benefits). No one in the family would starve, but my wife and teen-aged kids would be more restricted and, ironically, I'd have less discretionary income to donate to the same charity. How do I decide this?

--Self-Made Man

Dear Self-Made,

Ah yes, the meaning versus money question.

If you haven't asked it by age 40, you might end up like Jack Nicholson in About Schmidt -- a fussy retiree with a comb-over who suddenly realizes in his 60s that he only gets one chance. The way to sort this out is by unpacking your priorities -- and everyone else's -- for a pre-mortem viewing.

When it comes to deciding between your own preferences, your family's and the greater good, I get the impression that your family's choices come first. There's no problem with that as long as you define their happiness as yours. If you get a kick out of being the provider -- nothing to sneer at -- then you should stay put, and tell yourself how lucky you are to be able to bestow opportunities on others, whether your wife, your kids, or the beneficiaries of your charitable donations. When you face petty employees or clients who make the hair on your arms go stiff with revulsion, recite the following litany: I'm lucky. I chose this. And my kids get to go skiing in Aspen.

The urge to help a small number of immediate kin versus helping many more invisible, distant "others" has a long pedigree -- so long, in fact, that Harvard biologist Marc Hauser says it has evolved over millennia to form part of our innate moral grammar. The author of a new book, Moral Minds, Prof. Hauser told me that, based on answers people have given to his online "moral test," he discovered that people might view one course of action as morally correct, but they only act on helping people they can actually see.

"Say you walk by a homeless man who will die that night without your coat, when you have a block to go. Thirty per cent say it's permissible to walk by. But if you have a collection box for coats on the street, 55 per cent of the people say it's okay to walk by. Altruistic actions at a distance are just not part of our psychology, which is why charities have such a hard time. Helping others who are unseen and unknown is seen as permissible, but you're not obligated."

Feeling pressed into duty never came up in my discussions with two professionals who opted to work for charities.

Perhaps because he's polite, James Hughes, a 41-year-old former lawyer who is now the director-general of Old Brewery Mission, a Montreal shelter for the homeless, said nothing about obligation at all. But he had a lot to say about what he gained from making the switch from "helping a few dozen clients at a time" to being responsible for housing and feeding 488 homeless men a night, not to mention helping them get back on their feet and achieve independence, his new priority.

"The moments of pure joy are when you start to see your energy and creativity have an impact," he said, recounting how he ran into a long-term resident in his 50s who commented that it was harder to make friends in the shelter now that so many people were leaving soon after arriving. "He said: 'It's my turn soon,' " which reinforced Mr. Hughes' resolve. "We cannot accept people living in a shelter on a permanent basis. We need to make sure they know they can do better."

The immediacy of such encounters bolsters Prof. Hauser's theory that in-your-face moral issues trump more distant ones. For Mr. Hughes, day to day encounters at the shelter affect him, so much so that, being able to make a difference there was worth moving his family to a smaller house on a busier street. "It's true we had to downsize. Even though I never earned less, I never felt richer."

His comment got me thinking about measuring the advantages in non-monetary terms. If you're earning plenty but it means little to you, surely your spouse and children will detect this false note. If you raise this conundrum with them, perhaps you'll discover that they value your job satisfaction more than you think.

Another former high flyer, Eleanor Meyers, spent 16 years in investment banking, rising as high as managing director. She saw her priorities change while taking her MBA at the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario. "I was making more money than I ever wanted. But I still wasn't satisfied."

When she helped an Ivey classmate set up breast cancer clinics in Asia, it hit her: "For nine months, I wasn't making a cent. But it was challenging and satisfying and if it worked, it could really help a lot of people. I finally realized that it wasn't about money at all."

She is now the deputy chief information officer for World Vision International in Toronto, a Christian organization dedicated to relieving child poverty. Even though the job requires a lot of travel, the decision to switch gears had a positive influence on her daughter, Ms. Meyers says. "She doesn't act like a typical spoiled brat even though she is an only child and still lives a very privileged life. She says things to me like 'I am really glad I don't have everything I want,' which warms my heart."

Ms. Meyers and Mr. Hughes might be the exceptions -- the Gandhis and Mother Teresas who don't fit the norm, Prof. Hauser says. But they might beg to differ: They made their decisions based on what seemed immediately pressing. Now, you have to decide what's morally pressing for you.

Dear Susan:

Even though my boss has more power and responsibility than I do, she often takes credit for my work, and even takes projects, such as presentations, away from me at the last minute so she can do them herself. I realize there's not much I can do about it, but why would she take on more work when she's already got too much?

--Perplexed

Dear Perplexed,

There are three scenarios. Either you're unlucky enough to be working for a micromanager who fears handing off any work to a subordinate lest it not be picture perfect. Or, she feels you need more training and doesn't know how to provide it. A third possibility is she's competing with you, because your work is stellar and she'd rather be noticed for it than you.

You're right, you can't change her tune, so it's helpful to know which song she's singing. Endless, iterative corrections on every project, large or trivial, are usually signs of the controlling micromanager, who fears the slightest change or error will make her look bad to the higher-ups. Competition is more the issue if she takes credit for work that's rightly yours or grabs projects from right under your nose.

Such one up man ship is universal, more common between those of the same sex and the behaviour shows up in species as lowly as fish. Now, there's evidence that competitive feelings can be tracked in the human brain.

Using a new scanner called a fast, or parallel, MRI, Caroline Zink, a postdoctoral fellow at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Md., has shown exactly where our feelings of triumph or defeat might originate. She designed an experiment where game players thought they were either besting the experts, or losing out to beginners. When the participants thought they won more points than the expert players, their feelings of rising status were reflected in brain regions that monitor conflict, social judgment and self-awareness. But when the participants thought that they were beaten by novices, the ventral striatum, a part of the brain linked to motivation and reward, became activated, along with the insula, which is activated when people feel disgust. "We think the insula is the brain region that gives you that sinking feeling in your gut," Dr. Zink told The New York Times. That's what your boss may be feeling if she suspects she's being outdone.

Why am I explaining the science instead of telling you what to do? The key is to understand what's happening before rushing in to fix it. Your goal should be to have an initial conversation with your boss, to explore her perspective, not to assign blame. Seeking information instead of setting out to solve the conflict can effectively demystify and declaw the relationship between you. Your script should run along the lines of "What can I do to make your job easier? How can I be more helpful?" Listen carefully for her perspective before leaping to add yours.

Simply asking questions and waiting for a reply can be the first step to resolving this problem. It's easier to jump to quick conclusions about good guys and bad guys when there's a power imbalance, but it's safer -- and more interesting -- to be an information-seeker, such as American historian, Daniel Boorstin, who said "education is learning what you didn't even know you didn't know."

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.