



print edition

POSTED ON 29/08/07

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: TERRITORIALITY

Three's a crowd, but you must make space

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I am a senior manager with a large organization. We have two senior executives in our department, and another high-level person has just been hired to start within a few months.

My problem is that there is currently no room for her. I'm trying to figure out how to reconfigure our current office space without angering the two senior executives - one of whom has a rather grand office, the other of whom is already miffed that his is not as large. Someone will have to be bumped, especially as the new hire is of a higher rank than these two. How do I solve this problem without creating bad feeling?

- *Monkey in the Middle*

Print Edition - Section Front



Dear Monkey,

Divide the existing space to create three discrete new offices plus a common area. This is an inconvenient but Solomonic solution to the problem of office territoriality - which you ignore at your peril.

Years ago, I made the error of working in a quiet, vacant office of a colleague on maternity leave in order to get some serious writing done - meeting a deadline that had proved impossible in the din of the common office area.

The broom closet would have been a safer bet. When the new mother returned, she unceremoniously unplugged my computer and swept my mail off her desk, thus marking her territory and making her anxieties about being usurped crystal clear.

Animal behaviour experts call this a dominance display, and it's meant to scare off rivals. Often more than just posturing, it can be dangerous to the newcomer - in this case, your new senior executive. You don't want him or her to have to face colleagues' pique about infringing on their territory - alongside the demands of the new position. Considering how much it would cost your organization to replace this person, it's worth the expense of a designer and contractor to rejig your space.

The goal would be a place that each executive could call his or her own, while making sure they also have a place to meet and talk together. Clearly delineated territories reduce aggression between members of the same species, especially when resources are scarce. And scant resources are certainly a feature of your office, if space is at such a premium. These are the perfect conditions for

conflict - just watch male betas or angel fish trapped in an aquarium, or any reptile vying to dominate a small area. They'll fight to the death.

Even across species (in humans, read rank), it happens. Male red-winged blackbirds advertise and defend the limits of their territories by their insistent whistle, and woe to the intruder who ignores it. At McGill University, fellow teachers were regularly dive-bombed by a tetchy male blackbird whose territory included the front door of our building.

I expect your two senior managers will likewise try to peck out the eyes of the newcomer if he or she is assigned what they see as a piece of their domain.

Dear Susan,

As a senior administrator at a university, my biggest challenge is a colleague who champions the needs of his students at all costs. I spend more time responding to his inquiries than executing a solution.

After my holiday, I read a series of his e-mails, then wrote a response saying that I would solve the problem as soon as I received the documentation. The instructor then started to badger junior staff, who called me at home. They also called the boss, who was on vacation, who then called me at home. By the end of the day, we had all wasted an afternoon and our tempers were frayed, yet nothing could be done until the documentation was received the following day.

How do you tame an overenthusiastic colleague who refuses to let go?

- *The Bone with a Dog*

Dear Bone with a Dog,

I'd say your biggest challenge is explaining your boundaries. When you respond to this needy colleague, do you outline what will happen next? Do you spell out a timeline? Do you clarify what you consider a "call-me-at-home" versus a "this-can-wait" issue?

By not making your decision-making strategy explicit - to this colleague, to junior staff and to yourself - you are giving them permission to waste your time.

There are ways to do this without coming across as an unfeeling bureaucrat. First, recognize that your colleague's heart is in the right place, and that you, too, think that students' needs are paramount.

The proof that you care is that you're going to solve this problem. Include in your e-mail exactly how you'll do that and when things should happen. As you know he's of a nervous breed, write or tell him that you'll follow up if you hear nothing by the deadline. Then do it.

And express, in a firm but gentle way, that you're taking the liberty of copying relevant members of the team so that everyone is aware that you're on top of the problem - in other words, it is up to you to set and explain the agenda.

To ensure that your annoyance doesn't colour your response, save your e-mail as a draft for a few hours before sending it to him or to others.

Finally, contact him to report when the deed is done

*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.*

Copyright Susan Pinker 2007
