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PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: ILLITERACY

Reading, writing, and the worker who can't

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I am a female entrepreneur running a small business that packages nuts and fruits in individual portions for retail sale. My staff of 12 is supervised by a woman who works with tremendous energy and commitment. The problem is she also makes a lot of mistakes, and I just found out why: She can't read. She had us fooled for almost a year. Now that we know her secret, she has become mean and vindictive, although we are doing our best to coach her. She is a great employee, but is now pointing out everyone else's shortcomings and ruining the great team atmosphere I worked so hard to build. Oh, one more thing: She's also my sister-in-law. When we get together with my husband's family there's now new tension in the air. I would like to help her as I understand how difficult illiteracy can be. However, I have a business to run. What should do?

-- *Going Nuts*

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Dear Going,

You are facing several complex problems at once, but the most pressing is that your sister-in-law has not had a professional assessment to figure out why she can't read. As with any symptom - medical or psychological - an expert diagnosis should determine the treatment plan, not just the facts of the case.

Imagine if your toothache were treated without an experienced dentist's interpretation of your medical or dental history, without X-rays, or those telling tap-tap-taps with the back end of a metal probe. You could end up suffering through a root canal or worse, when the problem was really blocked sinuses or 25 years of gnashing your teeth at night.

Similarly, a literacy problem needs to be assessed by an educational psychologist. No one else has the expertise to wade through the overlapping neurological, emotional and occupational issues that are complicating your sister-in-law's life - and yours.

The stress of hiding her illiteracy from her co-workers and family, and now her anxiety over being found out and her fear that she'll be demoted or fired are just some of the emotions driving her vindictiveness. Another is shame. The sooner you address her fears and the faster you identify ways to accommodate her disability, the better she will feel, and the more productive the team will be.

Give up on coaching her yourself. Through the psychologist, or via your local chapter of the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (<http://www.ldac-taac.ca>), you can find a trained tutor who is familiar with teaching techniques that work with adults.

Learning to read as an adult can be a long road. But you need some solutions now. There are technologies out there that scan and read out text, such as DragonDictate, ViaVoice, Kurzeil 3000 and various "text read" programs. Someone at the LDAC can tell your sister-in-law where she can try out these software packages.

By the way, just in case you had a moment's pause about whether you should be the one to shell out for software, or whether you should just look for a new manager who reads, consider this: The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms obliges employers to accommodate employees with disabilities. If family peace doesn't motivate you, that should.

Finally, a word about family: Your discovery may be useful information for other family members.

Claudette Larocque, the information project officer for the LDAC, pointed out that there could be someone else in the family who has had trouble learning to read, or may still be struggling. Several genes linked to the disorder have been identified, its genetic roots are clear.

Still, because it's invisible, the burden of keeping it a secret can erode someone's concentration, and mental well-being. "It's been exhausting - she's had to cover it up all this time," Ms. Larocque remarked.

Emphasizing the biological nature of the problem can dispense with useless blame and guilt.

Dear Susan,

I am a project co-ordinator for a non-profit organization. We are a small team, and I report to the director, who is busy with lots of other projects. I know what needs to be done, just do it, and then sometimes find myself at loose ends. This drives me crazy. I can't stand to waste time, waiting to be given permission to do something. I suggested that I get involved with independent research that might benefit our project, but the director's response was unenthusiastic. She would like me to be "available" to help her out, or to deal with any situations that might suddenly arise. Research might encroach on my "assisting" and "supporting" responsibilities, she said. What should I do?

-- Atom Ant

Dear Atom,

You have grown out of this job. This supervisor must give you a longer leash if she is to get the best out of you. It is up to you to tell her, graciously, that you enjoy working with her and find the project valuable, but that it doesn't occupy all your time. Can she give you more challenges? Is there a way you can learn a new skill on the job?

If she can't help you, you have no choice but to look elsewhere. There are plenty of managers who want employees with initiative. If you really have drive, it won't be hard to find a new, more challenging job.

*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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