

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

Cheap shot? Consider where it comes from

SUSAN PINKER

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Dear Susan,

I was recently promoted from director to vice-president and am experiencing discrimination for the first time in my career. One of the other executives has made several jokes about the management team needing someone to add a soft touch, and that my presence would smooth out their rough stuff, implying that I was moved up because I'm a woman. I feel that these comments discredit my qualifications and I'm not sure how to react.

- *The Token*

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Dear Token,

Lighten up and lower your hackles. I agree - it's clumsy and ignorant to apply group stereotypes to an individual, especially to someone who's new on the scene. But the intention may have been jocular - even complimentary - not exclusive. Nor is it necessarily a slur about your competence. You may or may not have great interpersonal skills or be a crackerjack mediator. But whether you resolve conflicts or incite them says little about your strategic planning, financial wizardry, or your ability to lead. That's the point you have to get across, preferably in the light-hearted tone in which the remarks were first made.

You're an individual, not a caricature. And you were hired for your capabilities, not your chromosomes.

You could respond with: "Yeah, when it comes to having a soft touch, I wish was a bit more like Florence Nightingale than John Wayne. But luckily I'm also more like Obama than Borat."

It's all a matter of style, but however you make your point, you shouldn't be the only one to say it. The person who hired you should present you to the team in a way that obviates any guff.

I learned this from Carol Frohlinger, an attorney and one of the authors of the women's negotiation guide, *Her Place at the Table*. I called her because, notwithstanding the intent, wisecracks in the first days of a job are a way to test your mettle, and she knows something about hazing.

"One way that women get in their own way is not asking for help, because they don't want to look needy," she says. "She should ask her boss for a strategic introduction. There could be 'we're very excited to have Sally in this role because credential, credential, credential.' "

Attributing these clumsy remarks to gender discrimination is a bit of leap. It's also uncommon. Most women see discrimination as a big obstacle for other women, but say they haven't experienced it themselves. Psychologists call this "personal/group discrimination discrepancy." This mouthful stands for the well-documented difference between a minority member's perception of group-based discrimination (most say it's a huge problem), and their recollection of it happening to themselves (most say rarely, if at all).

For about 25 years, researchers have been trying to understand this ambiguity. I asked Don Taylor, the McGill psychology professor who pioneered the first studies, to explain it. He said that discounting personal harm - while seeing other group members as targets - has its protective effects. "Cognitive avoidance is healthier than paranoia, or seeing oneself as a perennial victim. The reason for minimizing is constructive. It allows you a sense of efficacy and control."

That's another way of saying it does us good to see no harm, or as Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet, "for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

Dear Susan,

Supplies have been disappearing quickly over the past few weeks in our office. I suspect that one of our key employees is taking stationery, staplers, CDs, etc. for his personal use. I don't have proof yet, but can get it by installing security cameras in the supply room and office area. It's ironic that one of our most productive people is taking stuff. Should I talk to him first to avoid the cost of installing and monitoring the cameras?

- *Bugged*

Dear Bugged,

Don't confront the suspect. No matter how small, to be accused of a crime when there's no proof is an insult that could be seen as harassment. And don't install cameras unless computers and purses are missing.

It's not a question of lack of privacy, although come to think of it, do you really want a record of who's scratching what body part, or how many times they go for a smoke? It's more about integrity.

Rigging up a third eye to watch over how many pencils people are taking from the premises will ultimately be more expensive. Your entire staff will feel under suspicion and this loss of trust will cost you plenty in resentment. After all, if you don't trust them to use supplies judiciously, why should they believe that your company has vision? If it did, it would value its people more than its paperclips.

I'd like to back this advice up with hard data, but there aren't any studies I could find about petty pilfering. Still, evidence from the U.S. retail sector shows that the handful of companies that empower their own employees with controlling "shrinkage" were the ones that lost the least inventory. Their rates of shoplifting were 40 to 70 per cent below the U.S. average.

A study led by the University of Leicester criminologist Adrian Beck, and Colin Peacock, a director at Procter & Gamble Co. found that companies such as Target, Best Buy and Gap reduced theft by making their own store employees and managers responsible for "shrink prevention," by talking freely about their larger goals, and by leaving staff the freedom to innovate, in one case giving them a share of any savings arising from reduced shoplifting.

Having no confidence has the opposite effect. When people feel distrusted they often try to beat the system. The venerable social scientists, such as Robert Cialdini and Arlie Hochschild, are among many who have shown how internal surveillance and monitoring systems can backfire, causing innocent employees to fear and distrust their employers more than their employers mistrust them.

With this in mind I'd take the mystery of a few missing highlighters over the surprise of a candid camera.

*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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