



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: RELATIONSHIPS

Double trouble: Spouses vying for a job

SUSAN PINKER

spinker@globeandmail.com

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Dear Susan,

I am applying for a major promotion at work and have learned that my new live-in partner, who works for the same company in a different location, is also applying. This is a plum assignment that I really want. So does he. We are both qualified. The stress of the application is creating tension in our relationship. What should happen next?

- *Divided Loyalties*

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Dear Divided,

This job opening is really a test of your mettle as a couple. Opportunities come and go but how you solve conflicts will colour your relationship as long as you're an item. Airing who knew about it first, who's best prepared for the position, and who will derive the greatest benefit - within the context of your joint life - are ways to consider this issue.

It's not just what you say, but how you say it that counts. This is not psycho-babble about letting it all hang out. There is good evidence that the way new couples solve problems predicts how long their relationship will last, says John Gottman, a University of Washington researcher.

Prof. Gottman studies marriages the way biologists study ecosystems, and his ability to briskly suss out patterns got him immortalized in Malcolm Gladwell's bestseller Blink. Having observed hundreds of newlyweds and tracked their progress long-term, now all he needs is three minutes to tell which couples will make it and which ones will divorce - an outcome he foretells with 87-per-cent accuracy.

"The biggest lesson to be learned is that the way couples begin a discussion about a problem - how you present a problem and how your partner responds to you - is absolutely critical," he says.

Like any good scientist, Dr. Gottman needs data to reach his conclusions, so he puts couples in an apartment-lab wired for sound and video, and observes how they interact. He records what they say, their tone of voice, the direction of their gaze, how much they fidget, even physiological measures of stress, such as heart rates and sweaty palms.

He discovered that women initiate discussions about 80 per cent of the time and one clue to how long a union might last was a woman's opening salvo. Categorical attacks, such as "you never ..." or "you're such a ..." did not bode well. But neither did ignoring requests for information, or for connection - which characterized the response of 82 per cent of the men who eventually were divorced.

"Women need to learn how to soften their approach when they bring up a problem," said Prof. Gottman's colleague, Sybil Carrère, while men need to learn how to accept what their wives are trying to tell them.

In contrast to the early flameouts, couples who could respond to each other with the give-and-take equanimity that Prof. Gottman calls "bids and turns," are able to regulate their conflicts, avoiding defensiveness, and damping bad feelings that may persist.

From Prof. Gottman's research, it seems that marriages are like most living things - they thrive on homeostasis: that is, two mutually dependent organisms react to changes together - or they die. In your case, if you tender your candidacies for the promotion independently, then avoidance and competition may well characterize your union. The more aggressive member will be the one who gets the goodies; fairness, loyalty and responsiveness will then play bit parts.

Your relationship is an organism with a life of its own. It will evolve its own M.O. - and may indeed self-destruct - if you two don't establish some rules of engagement.

Dear Susan,

I'm a manager working for a multinational and often feel challenged beyond my skill set; as a result, I consult senior management a great deal and take a long time to make decisions. In a recent evaluation, I was informed that I have to be more decisive if I want to advance. I wonder whether this is management's way of telling me to leave, and if I should look for another position.

- *Waffling*

Dear Waffling,

Proceeding slowly with decisions reflects a low tolerance for risk. Far from being a personality flaw, this is indeed human: Social scientists have long known that people fear losing what they have far more than they covet some uncertain new thing or experience to replace it. This is one reason why most of us would refuse to gamble our entire life's savings - even if we had a very good chance of doubling it. And it helps explain why some of us languish in ruts, while those who can make sound decisions with dispatch become leaders with star status.

As you've discovered, the reception to "approach with caution" can be mixed. Avoiding disasters is a great incentive, to be sure, but there can be a huge cost in lost opportunities. If your superiors are chiding you for being too cautious, then your task is to investigate ways you can become - or at least appear to be - more decisive. And, I would say that cleaving to your way of doing things, or leaving your job, are greater risks than trying on a new style of problem solving.

Where might you start?

Instead of instinctively canvassing others when you're at the next crossroads, use pencil and paper to graph out the pros and cons, and give yourself a firm deadline for making a decision.

Tell yourself that the consequences of individual management decisions are rarely dire, and everyone - including the most successful leaders - makes mistakes on the way up, learns something they didn't know, and tries again.

If you'd like another point of view at the office, choose just one person to consult - as polling others leaves the impression that you'll ask anyone who breathes for their input and don't value the expertise of any one mentor. (Still, the insurance, public health and environmental industries are built on the meticulous assessment and quantification of risk, so this trait is valuable in some contexts.)

Keep a log of your thoughts and fears as you move closer to a decision. If you're ruminating on failure - despite your current experiences of success - consider rewriting this negative script with the facts on the table. You've risen to a position of responsibility: This was because of your talent and judgment, not luck or having promotions handed on a silver platter.

Always considering the worst possible scenario is what psychologists call defensive pessimism, when it's mild, and "catastrophizing," when it's severe. Both interfere with one's happiness. If you recognize yourself, a few sessions with a cognitive therapist would be helpful; cognitive techniques help someone recognize their internal script of worrying and self doubt, and recast the message in more hopeful terms that allow for change. A book that champions its methods in the workplace, *The EQ Edge, Emotional Intelligence and Your Success*, by psychologists Steven Stein and Howard Book, might be of assistance, too.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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