

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

In this job climate, pick battles carefully

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Dear Susan,

I was hired by a big player in my industry two years ago and, at the time, it was one of three job offers I had. To get me on board, the senior managers who interviewed me offered to send me to our annual professional association meetings, and said that I'd be given intensive second-language training. In the past two years, neither has happened. I went to the meeting last year on my own, shared what I learned with my team, and assumed the company would reimburse my expenses. It reimbursed less than half, and gave excuses about why it couldn't pay the rest. The annual meeting is coming up again in May. I think I should go and the company should cover it. Should I speak to my manager and try to force the issue?

- *Left Holding the Bag*



Dear Holding,

You should have had these perks in writing at the time they made the offer. But in the current climate, it might look churlish to insist, like a five-year-old who bellows "but you said!" when things don't go exactly as expected.

If you enjoy your work, are reasonably well-compensated and feel you're generally respected, then think carefully about what it's worth to you to pick a fight.

Still, if you feel they've let you down, you're entitled to some resentment. Your annoyance is legitimate, though you don't have to act on it.

The challenge is to acknowledge what happened - that these guys made assurances that they now find hard to honour - and then try to neutralize your bile.

The best way to do that is to attribute their broken promises to events outside their control. Reframe it as an unavoidable side effect of the stripped-down times we're in, instead of seeing it as a deceitful "bait and switch" manoeuvre.

The reason for this advice is that evidence tells us that pain - whether psychic or physical - feels much worse when the harm seems intended (one reason why con artists like Bernard Madoff prompt more outrage than, say, other fund managers who incurred huge losses due to a series of dumb choices).

Our sense of injury owes a lot to how we perceive it all started, according to a recent study published a few months ago in Psychological Science.

When Kurt Gray, a doctoral student at Harvard University, and psychology professor Daniel Wegner told volunteers participating in a psychology experiment that they'd be doing one of three tasks - a colour-matching test, a number task, or a "discomfort assessment" during which they'd receive a brief electric shock - the volunteers who were told that a hidden partner had chosen them for the "discomfort" test rated the shock as more painful than those who thought that a computer had randomly assigned them to that group. The shock hurt more when people thought they were being zapped on purpose than when they thought it was a fluke.

So what about your case? Most people would agree that the feelings of indignation, shame and profound disappointment induced by being betrayed by someone you trust are more distressing than an electric shock. And the sting feels worse precisely because there's a perception of intent.

Another Harvard researcher, economist Iris Bohnet, and her colleagues at Harvard's Kennedy School, have found that feelings of betrayal are so painful and universally aversive that people everywhere will go to great lengths to avoid feeling like a chump.

In one study, they found that people were more likely to take risks when they thought winning or losing was all about chance than they were to take a gamble based on trusting an unknown person.

And in another, people from six dramatically diverse cultures were more likely to put their trust in the forces of nature than they were in other people. As unpredictable as nature is, it was better than feeling like a fool.

The clincher, it seems, is that we humans are less likely to venture into unknown territory if we think someone might cheat us. As you've discovered, the sting feels worse when we feel betrayed by a broken promise than it would if we had lost money in a lottery.

"Human beings don't only care about outcomes, but about how outcomes came to be," Prof. Bohnet says.

That's because, as social animals, we've evolved to assume some reciprocity, as in, "I trust that if I do this work for you now, you'll do something for me in the future," like reward me with promotions, perks or job security. And our emotions - sympathy, obligation, guilt, anger, shame and gratitude (to mention just a few) - keep that reciprocity ball rolling.

For most of us, these feelings work to police our behaviour by making us feel physically off-kilter when other people stiff us, or when we don't make good on our promises. Guilt feels pretty bad, and so does indignation.

Your goal should be to not let those feelings interfere with your career development. American playwright Tennessee Williams darkly observed that "we have to distrust each other. It's our only defence against betrayal."

But if you want to keep your ideas and networks fresh and can afford to subsidize your conference attendance, it's worth taking the calculated risk that you'll be left holding the bag again.

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

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