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Revealing one's faith at work can be positive step for all

By SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I am a professional whose family came to Canada when I was a child.

I am in the first year of a job where people know my family is from Iraq (they asked) but they don't know that I am Jewish.

I prefer it that way because I have heard people make occasional nasty remarks about Jews and I don't want their prejudices to affect how they think of me and my work.

Although I am not very religious, my family is, and would like me to spend the Jewish holidays with them.

How do I ask for time off without revealing too much?

--Mr. Incognito

Dear Mr. Incognito,

Why would your employer give you two days off on consecutive weeks in October without a good reason? While your employer has an obligation to allow you religious observance, as long as it's reasonable, his or her hands are tied if you insist on wearing a bag over your head to conceal your identity.

There is nothing shameful about your background. You need to overcome your reticence and ask for time off. Len Rudner, the national director of community relations for the Canadian Jewish Congress, acknowledges there's no bulletproof way to do this.

"So no one will ever know? I'd say that's impossible. The employee's responsibility is that the employer knows what he needs. It's the role of management to accommodate," he says.

It's also management's responsibility "to make sure the atmosphere is not poisonous." About malignant jokes and comments, he says, "this kind of noise distracts people from the work at hand. It's bad for productivity and bad for business."

It also tears a strip off the veneer of a civil society. In Canada, there are laws to protect you from hate-mongering, harassment and discrimination.

That's not to say that hostility doesn't exist. B'nai Brith of Canada tracked 857 anti-Semitic incidents in Canada in 2004, a 46-per-cent increase since 2003 and the highest number since it started counting them 22 years ago.

Admittedly, these numbers are a little depressing but "coming out" is not hopeless. People form stereotypes by paying attention to information that fits their theories and ignoring everything else as inconsequential blips -- a phenomenon psychologists call confirmation bias.

That's one reason people hold on to racist views even when contrary evidence stares them in the face.

But these stereotypes can change. A team of cognitive psychologists at Dartmouth College recently did an experiment that showed that people (even scientists) will initially discount any data that doesn't match their theories, chalking "rogue" findings up to error. But after seeing inconsistencies again and again, they'll change their minds and start to see them as real.

That's where you come in. You're real, an individual, not a caricature or an inconsequential blip.

Muster up the nerve to come forward as an individual.

You may not only get what you need from your boss, you may just be the first person to challenge your co-workers' assumptions.

Dear Susan,

Some of my colleagues still exist on coffee and cigarettes and this aura is always around them.

How do I signal to them that some people find their odours objectionable in these days of sealed, air conditioned offices?

--Lost in a Cloud

Dear Lost,

There's no polite way to tell someone he or she smells.

Even though noxious odours top the list of office irritants -- old fish, burnt popcorn, wet dog, sewer gas, Italian dressing, strong perfume, sulphur and body odour are just a few of the contenders -- it's almost impossible to alert co-workers to the fact that they reek.

Like bullying bosses, the odour theme surfaces regularly in the column because, like doing a bully's bidding, inhaling bad smells signifies an employee's lack of control. And studies show that the less control and fewer alternatives one senses, the more stress one feels.

I remember the feeling. In one job I had, there was no control over deadlines or workload, with assignments coming from unpredictable sources and an office ethic that outlawed the word no.

Employees gulped coffee and ate fries at their desks and smoked cigarettes in the hallway because there was no such thing as lunch or a break in the sweatshop.

Not surprisingly, the office smelled like a cross between a locker room and a deli. I thought I hated the air but what I hated was the atmosphere.

If it's co-workers' coffee and ciggies that bother you, buy a plant or an air purifier. But if the trigger is larger, look for fresh air elsewhere.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

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