

LIVING

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Office colleagues who forget their manners are put on notice by **Lisa Belkin**

Terminal boors

Dear colleague, when you can tear yourself away from text-messaging friends during meetings and humming along with your iPod deskside, we need to talk. It's about your manners.

You may have some, but we think you've forgotten to bring them to the office lately. What's with the toilets that go unflushed, the somewhat alarming noises coming from your cubicle (are you really clipping your toenails?) and the science experiments in the office refrigerator that are the remains of last Friday's lunch?

We, your fellow workers, admit we are crankier than usual and more easily annoyed lately. Not only do we arrive hot and sticky and leave under the threat of thunderstorms, but there's this economic downturn that some say could hit Hong Kong, so our days are stressed.

It's enough that you have once again "borrowed" our stapler and desk chair, and helped yourself to the crackers we keep for emergencies. Well, let's just say your stash of purloined toilet paper that you use when the communal supply runs out is in serious danger. (You think we don't know where it is?)

If this is the e-mail you've always dreamed of writing to a selfish colleague, you're not alone. Conflicts between colleagues occur every day in almost every office, but it's surprising how many can involve the repeatedly selfish behaviour of one rogue office worker.

But there are strategies you can follow to make your life – and those of your colleagues – more bearable when dealing with office ogres.

The first thing they must learn is that pushing their colleagues to the

edge has consequences. Take one of our heroines: Lynne R. Viccaro. Every day her work at her former marketing job was made all but impossible by a woman at a nearby desk who had an enmeshed relationship with her cellphone. It was also her home phone, and therefore rang all the time. Its ring tone (*Get the Party Started*, by Pink) was set at rock-concert decibels, and despite direct requests from surrounding colleagues, the woman never changed the setting to vibrate.

One day the offender went to a

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meeting and the phone started ringing on her desk, Viccaro says. In a moment of inspiration, Viccaro took the device and wrapped it in bubble wrap and duct tape until it resembled a noisy basketball, then crammed it into the bottom drawer of its owner's desk.

"The real fun started," Viccaro says, "when she got back and heard the now-muffled sound of her cell." She rescued the phone from its plastic tomb and shouted: "Who did this to my phone?"

Viccaro proudly confessed. "Why?" the woman yelled.

Viccaro's reply? "Because there wasn't an open window nearby." Well done, we say. Well done.

We also applaud Shirley Van Scoyk, a property agent, whose nemesis was not a phone but a coffee mug. A sink full of them, actually.

There are 70 employees in her office, she says, and each seems to believe that a dishwashing fairy comes in the night to deal with the coffee mugs.

"How is it that an adult enjoys a cup of coffee in a mug, then rinses it and puts it, full of water, into the sink and walks away?" she says.

"What exactly do they think is happening to that mug to get it back into the cupboard?"

What is happening now is that the mugs simply disappear.

"I just started throwing the dirty ones away," Van Scoyk says. "Someday, there won't be any. And then I guess we won't have a sink full of dirty mugs."

Not every plan is that effective, unfortunately. Carey Hart and the other employees at BlastMedia, a media relations company, have spent two years trying to stop food thieves in the kitchen their agency shares with other businesses in the building. When BlastMedia employees chip in for pizza and put the leftovers in the refrigerator, the slices disappear. One day all that was left was a single pepperoni in an empty box.

Goodies disappear from the office suite, too. There were eight cupcakes in the conference room when Hart left work one evening. By morning, two remained. There were eight chocolate bars placed as bait on a desk over a weekend. On Monday, half were gone.

Hart and her colleagues have written their names on the boxes, placed polite notes inside and sealed packages with company logo stickers but nothing stops the sneaky snackers.

"We've thought of baking cupcakes with Ex-Lax as revenge," she says, "but we haven't taken it that far. Yet."

Writing anonymous messages, such as the kind you find stuck to the communal refrigerator or the bulletin board, are a timeworn tradition. They are as much a part of office communication as memos or e-mail messages and, at times, probably far more effective.

Nowadays nothing has official standing without a Web presence. Behold, the collection of notes found at passiveaggressivenotes.com. (Warning: some may not be suitable for children or workplace screens.)

Using the site as an unscientific sample, Hart is not the only one with kitchen frustrations. A series of notes, for instance, is devoted to disappearing Hot Pockets, which Kerry Miller, the founder of the website, calls "the car radios of the communal freezer".

Bathroom etiquette is also a popular topic on the site. Because we do bring our manners here to work, we won't describe the unsanitary behaviour prompting these notes in restrooms. One of the few we can quote is a pet peeve of ours, too.

"This is not a reading room," says a page on the door of a men's room at a nonprofit organisation.

"Those who often wait somewhat patiently for the restroom to be free would appreciate it if everyone would keep that in mind."

There are other ways to get your message across, by the way. Lisa Kogan, a columnist for *O* magazine, ranted in the April issue about her search for "The Tinkler". Her nemesis regularly leaves "her Jackson Pollock" imitation across the toilet seat and the stall floor.

"She has become the bane of my existence," Kogan writes.

Three months after the column appeared, Kogan has yet to identify the culprit. But the offence itself has stopped, which proves that humiliation need not have a name attached in order to work.

We are hoping it works on you, Dear Colleague. We will be watching for a change in behaviour. If it doesn't happen, be warned. Hart's laxative idea sounds appealing.

The New York Times

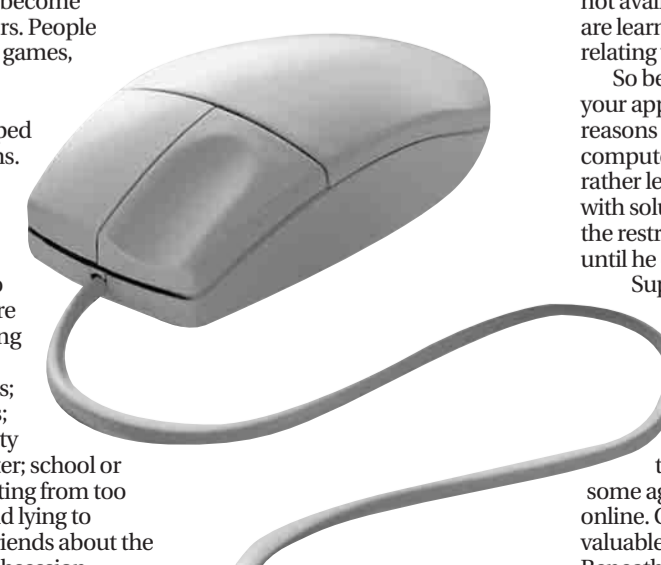


Ask Sharon

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My 14-year-old son is addicted to the internet. At first he was saying he needed to be on there for homework but his school says his work is suffering so he can't be using all the online time on research. He returns from school and stays logged on until dinner. Then he gets back online again. He has a bedtime of 11pm but insists on staying up until much later. He refuses to do anything else. I have tried getting him to do outdoor activities with the family but all he does is complain that he wants to go home and surf the Net.

It is quite possible to become addicted to computers. People become obsessed by games, shopping, gambling, pornography or relationships developed in internet chat rooms. The symptoms of addiction can be a sense of wellbeing, even euphoria, once online; an inability to stop and craving more time online; neglecting family, friends, other activities and hobbies; feelings of emptiness; sadness and irritability when off the computer; school or work problems resulting from too much time online and lying to oneself, family and friends about the preoccupation and obsession.



Because the internet provides a fantasy world, it can be an escape from the realities and difficulties of daily life. This is especially significant for a teenager trying to become a unique individual. The internet helps connect with others in anonymity. He can be a hero, a romantic, a gamesman or a voyeur without his true self being discovered. Social demands, peer pressure, fear of rejection because of age, looks, height or not having a fashionable wardrobe are not an issue online. He can engage in high-risk behaviour with unsavory

people and feel the excitement of breaking rules. He never has to deal with the limitations of his real self, life and family.

As parents it is your job to help him lead a balanced life and become more well-rounded. Your son needs to develop a sense of belonging and connection to others. He needs to feel he fits in whether it is in an orchestra, a martial arts class, or a charity volunteer group. He needs to develop a reasonable assessment of what he is passionate about and of his talents and skills. Social skills to function effectively as an adult are not available on the computer but are learned through working and relating with others face to face.

So be clear and structured in your approach. Let him know your reasons and concerns for limiting computer use. Don't bully him: rather let him help you come up with solutions, but be firm. Provide the restraint and control he needs until he can set limits for himself.

Support his strengths and abilities. Encourage him to explore other avenues of interest such as sport, drama, artistic pursuits or even cooking classes.

Be sure he has other tasks to complete before he earns some agreed amount of time online. Counselling may be a valuable adjunct to your efforts. Beneath many addictions is pain

and sadness. They have to be addressed.

I have trouble making decisions and choices. Soon after my divorce, I had sleepless nights over big things - like where to send my kids to school or what car to buy. But now it's little things like what type of grapes to get in the supermarket. I can stand there for up to 20 minutes trying to decide. It's become a real disability.

You are describing a pattern of behaviour that is getting more and more out of hand, making you more upset, anxious and less functional.

I sometimes suggest that counselling might be helpful, but in your case it is vital. As you find your world getting smaller and your ability to function and accomplish simple tasks harder, you need help. Your children depend on you and you need to be responsible for them and for yourself as well. Get some support so you don't feel so alone and indecisive.

Talk to your family doctor about a referral for a mental health professional or use the many resources available in town to find a qualified professional.

Sharon Glick is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice. She is listed with the Community Advice Bureau. Send questions to susan.schwartz@scmp.com

Signposts: Confrontation

During coaching sessions with clients, when asked what challenges they face, many talk at some point about having to deal with someone who is "angry" or "aggressive". My first question is, "How do you define angry or aggressive?" Some people use the words interchangeably. Others make a distinction by describing aggression as one person wanting to dominate another.

My next question is, "What is the challenge in dealing with someone who is angry or aggressive?" When we dig deeper, what the client often discovers is a fear of being vulnerable, hurt, rejected, abandoned or ultimately no longer loved by the other.

The most interesting question for me as a coach is my next: "How angry or aggressive do you allow yourself to be?" When my clients are willing to be honest, they become aware that what they dislike in others is often what they are unwilling to accept in themselves.

When Fran started working with me, she revealed that as a child she didn't feel safe when her father got angry with her mother. Not surprisingly, as an adult, she was afraid of anger and conflict. She rarely admitted she was angry and avoided dealing with angry people. She tried to hide her anxiety about confrontation. Yet her stored anger was having an effect on her body. She was exhausted and suffered from throat and bladder problems. She complained that her husband was selfish and aggressive,

that their relationship was unequal. She was afraid to speak up because he "might get cross".

Instead she kept quiet, swallowing her anger and complaining to her friends. She felt trapped in a situation she had created through her fear of conflict. She had failed to assert her personal power, to stand firm and state what she wanted and needed.

I asked Fran to consider whether anger is there to guide you to be true to yourself and help you to have healthy relationships. She told me she valued honesty, so I asked how she could be emotionally honest without expressing all her feelings. And how then could she achieve intimacy? Could she replace the idea of confrontation as an opportunity to clarify? Avoiding challenging conversations with aggressive people holds us back from being true. It means we are not willing to take responsibility and clarify what is possible.

Fran was tired of living a lie and giving her power away. She decided to risk having a clarifying conversation. She used the following skills/tools to move forward:

- She chose to vent her anger. I offered a safe place for her to do that, to honour her feelings and release her pain. I listened without judgment and gave no advice.

- In having the clarifying conversation with her husband, she committed to practise listening so that her husband would feel heard.

- She agreed to be willing not to take anything personally, even if he had different views.

- She chose to say what she thought, felt and needed - and to make open, clear statements, to be specific about requests rather than pussyfoot around the issue. Being specific helps to avoid being judgmental or disapproving.

- She decided to ask how she could support him.
- She was willing to love and respect herself, keep herself safe, by creating boundaries if necessary, remembering that there is never any reason to tolerate abuse whether it be emotional, verbal or physical. When someone dumps their toxic anger on us, there is no justification for this and we get to say we will not accept it.

The last skill I asked Fran to practise was compassion for herself and whoever she perceived to be angry or aggressive. She needed to be willing to see them as innocent, knowing that when people behave in an angry or aggressive way they are simply acting out in fear. Angry and aggressive people simply want love and acceptance.

We had a role-playing session. Fran tried out her clarifying conversation. When the real conversation happened, she was fearless, and the gift was connection.

Glynis Ferguson is a member of The Hong Kong International Coaching Community (info@coachinghk.org).