

III OSTRACISM AT WORK

Being voted off the island? Don't ignore it



JUDITH TIMSON
THE WAY WE ARE

Already feeling insecure in the midst of a company overhaul, a senior manager recently walked by her company's boardroom and noticed that every senior person but her was around the table at a weekly planning session she'd always attended.

Figuring it must have been moved to a new time, she approached the boss's assistant and said, "I guess I was so busy I didn't see the e-mail. I'll just go on in."

But the assistant cleared her throat and uneasily replied, "Actually, uh, you're not on that meeting list any more."

The manager was not only mortified but terrified. She hasn't been able to figure out whether she's paranoid, permanently persona non grata or both, and her colleagues aren't being particularly helpful.

Chances are she is feeling the effect of ostracism — a brutal psychological and social tool that, according to one U.S. expert, is "more powerful than ever" in our modern world.

I believe it. Why else would such cruelty-based reality shows as *Survivor* have become so wildly popular?

I remember first thinking about ostracism while watching the original *Survivor* television series. It both horrified and, let's face it, thrilled me every time someone was voted off the island. It was the ultimate shunning.

Teenagers loved the series because it felt just as cruel as high

school. Now it often seems as if the rest of life has become as cruel as high school.

Ostracism can take place on a highly public level. Whatever you think of her convoluted and questionable involvement in the weapons-of-mass-destruction scandal, recently "retired" New York Times reporter Judith Miller has felt shunning by her colleagues ever since she got out of jail.

In Canada, our new governor-general, Michaëlle Jean, has ironically been given the cold shoulder by both sides of the separatism debate — shunned by Quebec separatists and, last week, reportedly given the cold shoulder by some war veterans who perceive her to be a separatist.

In the workplace, ostracism can be a sly backroom tactic that companies use to ease people out the door. The reason for its impact today is that many people actually have fewer support systems to call on when faced with exclusion in relationships, the workplace or even on Internet chat rooms, says Kipling Williams, a professor of social psychology at Indiana's Purdue University and the author of several books on the subject, including *Ostracism: The Power of Silence*.

Indeed, cyber-ostracism is now very big — as any parent can attest after hearing their kids moan that they've been "blocked" by their friends on chat rooms. In the workplace, cyber-ostracism can be as simple and as deadly as "oops, guess we left you off the group e-mail list," or in having a superior or colleague repeatedly not answer your e-mails.

"It's the uncertainty that beats people up," says Tim Cork, an executive coach and president of Nex-Career, who says ostracism goes on in every company. Tony Kerekes, a partner at Nvision Consulting, adds that ostracism also happens to new employees who may not



MICHELLE KUMATA/KRT

initially fit into the culture and who find themselves ignored to the point that "a high percentage of new hires, especially at more senior levels, fail."

More inadvertently, it also happens to temporary employees, who

often feel invisible to regular staff. And, of course, whistle-blowers suffer from it as well.

Prof. Williams said in an interview that he first became fascinated by ostracism after watching a 1978 documentary about a West

Point cadet who was ostracized by his superiors and fellow cadets "after not putting down his pencil at the right time." The cadet stuck it out and graduated, even though for two years his friends "were ordered to get up and leave when he came into the lunch room."

Prof. Williams concluded that ostracism "is a powerful social tool — one that we don't study enough."

He recently conducted a study in which participants in a lab played an invented game called cyberball that researchers manipulated so that the subject was never thrown the ball.

From clinical observations, the researchers concluded that "just being ignored or excluded for as little as four minutes activates the same region of the brain that is activated when you experience physical pain."

Ostracism hurts. It lowers your self-esteem and, "if you're not careful, you internalize it and begin ostracizing yourself," Prof. Williams says.

Even those doing the ostracizing are hurt by it, he adds. "It's an addictive behaviour and ostracizers report discomfort when they try to stop."

The difficulty with ostracism, he says, is that it's a "legal safe way to punish people."

You can get away with it. It's hard to discipline someone for ostracizing because, as he says in a particularly Kafkaesque turn of phrase, it is "really a series of non-behaviours" — no eye contact, being left off the meeting list, being ignored in the lunch room or being passed by in the hall.

But is it legal in the workplace? Yes and no, according to Paul Boniferno, a labour lawyer at McCarthy Tétrault LLP. He acts for management in disputes over ostracism, which, he says, is more commonly known as "general harassment." The difficulty in these cases, Mr.

Boniferno says, lies in determining whether an employee is being managed for poor performance or whether, indeed, he or she is being ignored and frustrated in his or her work to the extent that what the company is doing amounts to "constructive dismissal, in which case the employee is then entitled to notice and severance."

Employees, too, can manipulatively claim they are being psychologically damaged by ostracism when, in fact, they've had a justifiable but undesirable change in status or duty.

If you think you're being ostracized at work, the experts say, don't ignore the ignoring. You must "document, document, document," Mr. Boniferno advises.

Be precise, Prof. Williams adds. "Keep a list of all the incidents of non-behaviours — for example, yesterday I walked into the lunch room and people looked away and didn't speak to me."

Just as important, Mr. Cork says, are "those three little letters — ASK. You must, in a non-aggressive way, confront your employer and directly ask what is going on. If you don't get a satisfactory answer or cannot resolve it, "then you know you have a serious problem and it's up to you whether to go to human resources or get legal."

You can even try to ride it out. But if that's what you're going to do, make sure you have a support group either inside or outside your office, Prof. Williams advises.

And here's a slightly reassuring note: There is life after being exiled in your office to the village of the damned. "People do make it back," Mr. Cork assures.

That's one major difference between real life and those reality shows, in which the exiled ones almost never make it back. So I guess there's hope for civilization yet.

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Rising stars get chance to shine

TALENT from page C1

Managers at MDS encourage high-potential employees to join a company-wide committee or a special project that will let them learn about other parts of the company. It also reimburses tuition of employees who want to take university courses to improve their skills.

MDS is so interested in securing talent that, even when there isn't a position open, it will hire someone seen as a great talent from another company and make him or her an "executive in residence," given a special project to manage until a role comes up, Ms. Federau says.

Some companies, including Bank of Nova Scotia, have broadened their development programs to include those of any age who show talent.

"We are working to identify leadership potential even in people in their 20s. You can see the energy, enthusiasm and desire and, when you see that, you don't want to wait," says Pat Krajewski, Scotia-bank's senior vice-president of human resources.

"We believe the best experience comes from right on the job," she adds. "We supplement with some external learning, but we find the best learning comes from moving people between jobs and between divisions to give them the broad experience and the network they need to become leaders in the organization."

A program Scotiabank launched in March also gives high-performing employees an opportunity to work directly with executives on projects.

The "business-driven action-learning" program places junior employees it believes have the competencies to be potential leaders on project teams with high-level executives for four months to plan and prepare new initiatives.

While there is no guarantee that the experience will lead to an executive position, it prepares people to be confident working with executive teams and encourages them to take on more responsibility in their jobs at the bank, Ms. Krajewski says.

For Laura Isidean, the chance to leave Scotiabank's trading desk in

Toronto to participate on one of the executive teams came as a surprise.

"They said, 'you've been nominated by a roundtable of executives who meet regularly to talk about high potential candidates. Are you interested?' I was all over it — it was just a great opportunity."

Within a couple of weeks, she had packed up and moved into the "executive project office." Working closely with executives has given her a close relationship with management.

"Now I feel totally comfortable picking up the phone and seeking their guidance on issues, and they are very accommodating," Ms. Isidean says. And it led to a promotion. Her current position is director of foreign exchange sales.

The leaders of all these programs say they can only work if there is a structured process in place to identify and track talent.

At MDS, for instance, a talent review committee of managers and executives meets annually and ranks the top talent in each of the company's four divisions.

"Talent profile," the equivalent of

What it takes to get noticed

When companies size up employees to be future leaders, what do they look for? Personal skills and a willingness to expand their range are every bit as important as technical prowess, talent development experts say.

When Bank of Nova Scotia set up its current development program in 2002, a group of executives was asked to name the most critical competencies needed by potential leaders, says Pat Krajewski, Scotiabank's senior vice-president of human resources. Their opinions focused on four areas:

- **Strategic skills:** Leaders need to have an ability to grasp the nuances of a problem and come up with potential solutions. They must also be able to exert strategic influence on decisions made.
- **Communications skills:** A leader must be an effective communi-

report cards, tracks their accomplishments and development goals for the next year. About 200 among the 10,000 employees in the company worldwide are in the senior leadership development program.

catior and able to clearly define goals and roles.

■ **Personal and team skills:** That includes the ability to lead and motivate a large and diverse team and a determination to focus on a result.

■ **Breadth:** That means a willingness to take on and succeed in a range of work experiences.

"The keys are aspiration, attitude and success," says Sean O'Sullivan, chief operating officer of HSBC Bank Canada. "You have to be willing to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty and take on risks continually."

Personal skills count. "If someone doesn't like to deal with customers, it limits their potential."

Visibility is vital too, so make your aspirations known to management, advises Mary Federau, senior vice-president of talent development at MDS Inc.

She says young people who want to grow get experience and exposure to senior executives by working on committees and special projects.

And anyone who aspires to be a chief executive officer should plan to move through several business units, Sun Life Financial CEO Don Stewart says.

Mr. Stewart says he originally had misgivings about some of his most career-broadening experiences. In hindsight, he is glad he had a manager who encouraged him to expand his horizons.

"I was made the head of information technology in 1987 and at the time I was the most vociferous critic of IT. It was an eye-opening and broadening experience to have to supply what I had previously been demanding of others."

Wallace Immen

Despite the high profile of these programs, the leaders say they hesitate to give employees too much information that could create a "spoiled child syndrome."

Many of those being tracked by MDS, for instance, are not aware of it, Ms. Federau says, because "we don't want to create a culture in which some people feel they are special and others feel their potential isn't being recognized."

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