

THE WAY WE ARE: OSTRACISM AT WORK**Being voted off the island? Don't ignore it**

BY JUDITH TIMSON

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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

NexCareer, 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 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 Boniferro, a labour lawyer at McCarthy Tetrault 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. Boniferro 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 says, don't ignore the ignoring. You must "document, document, document," Mr. Boniferro 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.

jtimson@globeandmail.ca

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