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HELPFUL NOTES FROM NICK, VOL. 2: PRIVACY & PREFERENCES

WRITTEN BY [Nick Bachan](#) | FEB 18, 2016

I am excited to once again address your personal, professional, and professionally personal concerns.

This edition features sensory invasions and bureaucratic drama. I know that already seems

overwhelming, but fear not! The insight, humor, and empathy you seek are just a few scrolls away (I've adapted my advice for mobile devices).

SEASONAL SNUGGLE

Dear Nick,

My co-worker and I hooked up after our holiday party. At work the next day, she wore the shirt I wore at the party. Do you think people noticed?

*Sincerely,
Holiday Humper*

Dear Sexy Shirt Swapper,

Since she was probably rocking that wrinkled shirt in an entirely different way than you did the night before, it's unlikely anybody noticed. If the two of you are notably popular, important, or social in the workplace, people *might* have put some theories together from interacting with one or both of you. I can almost guarantee you that everyone was too hungover to play detective.

If there was pre-existing romantic tension between you two leading up to your intimate encounter, then her wardrobe choice may have potentially been a smoking gun in business casual form (I realize that you could be referring to a t-shirt since you might work at a startup and/or be the kind of tech mogul who accessorizes with hoodies, but the same logic applies).

In most cases, once neither of you called attention to anything, the potential for this to be scandalous or incriminating has long vanished. For better or worse, people are just too distracted with other things and/or themselves these days.

Also, I would watch the sitcom episode based on this scenario in a heartbeat. My question for you: was it love at first hookup? I love a good "Will they/won't they/they already did but on the DL."

THE WAR ON TELEPHONES

Dear Nick,

I am terrified to answer the phone at work. It's an issue because I was hired as a receptionist three days ago. So far no one has said anything about the falling call volume but at some point someone might notice. How do I pick up?

*Sincerely,
Straight to Voicemail*

Dear Reluctant Responder,

You are not alone in fearing the especially deafening ring of a phone you are professionally obligated to answer. Even in non-professional settings, it's now common for people to be thrown out of their comfort zones by the mere idea of a phone call. Some companies have started getting rid of voicemail, so phones are probably next. If you can avoid answering calls for five more years or so without anyone noticing, you're golden!

Okay, I know that's not a sustainable strategy. The reality is this: someone and/or everyone will eventually notice if a receptionist is not "reception-ing." You have essentially been hired to be your office's gatekeeper. It's one of those "with great power comes great responsibility" situations Spider-Man's uncle was talking about.

Try approaching phone conversations in a controlled, routine manner. You can probably predict the types of interactions you'll be having after a few instances of trial and (hopefully little) error. Once you're armed with the script for what is likely a monotonous series of interactions, there's no shame in writing down your best lines and keeping them handy. It will all feel more natural in no time.

INSECURITY BREACH

Dear Nick,

My co-worker who sits next to me is always asking personal questions about what I'm doing outside of work. Like, really annoying, prying questions, and he just doesn't know how to take a hint that I don't want to play along. How do I let him know that it's annoying without being insulting?

Sincerely,
Privacy Invaded

Dear Segue Seeker,

I'm not confrontational. I typically operate under the assumption that people will follow certain sensible social protocols, thereby eliminating the need for me to ever have a "serious talk" with them. On that front, human beings often disappoint in a *big* way. Your predicament is a common example. In your coworker's mind, small talk and personal questions are inextricably linked. He would rather talk about your personal politics than your stance on the weather. It's difficult to imagine establishing professional boundaries with someone like that, especially because you have to see them on most days of your adult life.

In the past, my strategy in such situations has been to simply say, "I really need to get [insert work-related task] done by [insert time window that suggests urgency]." You can even mention this arbitrarily in combination with a casual "good morning" before your coworker even tries to talk to you. This will be your ticket to standing your ground when potentially invasive questions arise, without feeling overly aggressive.

The beauty of work is that there will always be work to say you're doing. Even if you're not busy, think of the words "I'm busy" as your get-out-of-conversation-free card. Make yourself inseparable from your daily duties in the mind of your coworker, and he will likely remove you from his vocal mailing list altogether. You can still be friendly, but like, "neighbor I see only when I get my mail" friendly. No harm done.

PROMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Dear Nick,

I recently landed a significant promotion—a job that I've been working toward for three years. The only problem is that I now manage three of my former co-workers, one of whom was a superior who had been applying for this role longer than I've been here. Despite my attempts to keep things equitable, his resentment is obvious. He's committed to turning everyone against me and sabotaging all collaboration. I'm struggling to maintain my quality of work (and keep up with the volume of it) while I'm being pulled into HR meetings to fend off complaints every week. I was already putting in over sixty hours a week, and now this. What can I do?

Sincerely,
Victim of My Success

Dear Cautious Leader,

Congratulations on your promotion!

You've already realized this, but assuming a position of leadership amongst former peers is the definition of tricky. You have jumped in rank while outpacing a more seasoned employee. Tenure doesn't always correlate with skill and trust, though, so you shouldn't feel as though your coworker is *owed* more because he has been there longer. I suspect you're not worried about this, but I just wanted to state it for anyone who reads my column.

You are fortunate in that there is a "paper trail" of HR complaints. You can use these to make your hectic, emotionally charged meetings more productive. Better yet, *you* can schedule meetings to chat with your coworker directly based on what works for your schedule. It's important to be patient and rational in addressing what is likely pure bitterness. The name of the game is respectful conversation. Your willingness to get things out in the open may get through to your coworker and make him stop acting maliciously toward you.

For better or worse, perception is reality in the workplace. If you continue to field complaints reactively and consequently fall victim to long-term sabotage, you will be perceived as an ineffective leader. On a more fundamental level, if you work longer hours you'll be less rested and less able to commit to the thing that counts—*the work itself*. You must communicate effectively and remain objective in addressing these tensions. It's a lot to juggle, but these are key elements of succeeding in your new role. You'll be great.

MINTS AND HINTS

Dear Nick,

I'm not sure if my coworker brushes her teeth or not. Her breath is kickin'. We have meetings during the day, and I can't always hear her point because her bad breath is distracting. I've offered her a mint, some gum and even put mouthwash in the bathroom, but she is not taking the hint. What should I do?

*Sincerely,
Assaulted Olfactorily*

Dear Hygiene Helper,

This is all about tact. It's completely fine to politely pull your coworker aside and inform her of this issue directly. Bad breath draws attention to someone in all the wrong ways, especially in the workplace. Since smell is the strongest sensory link we have to memory, it's likely that everyone at your office is noticing what you are noticing.

People aren't likely to say anything about it until they are compelled to do so in a way that is abrasive, but you can be proactive and approach her as an ally before she has a world-shattering experience. If you've offered things to help remedy her bad breath in the past (mints, gum, etc.), those gestures were probably seen as neutral, or in accordance with general politeness. You need to provide some context (maybe by phone?) so that your hints make sense.

IN CONCLUSION

The things about other people that frustrate or scare us are often linked to insecurities about how *we* are being perceived. It's common to think someone is over-sharing if you have felt guilty of doing the same thing in the past. When you notice someone's bad breath, it's a bit terrifying because you feel that person's vulnerability while wondering how many times someone has felt yours.

We approach professional roles differently depending on how much we feel obligated to manage. This is why staying late at an already hectic job to put out imaginary fires feels natural when one is

in a leadership role. It's also why someone in a receptionist role doesn't feel entirely responsible for overcoming a fear of telephone conversations.

Once we remain empathetic to others' human needs, we will always be equipped to navigate both personal and professional interactions productively. Unexpected inconveniences and unpleasant interactions are always a few open-minded conversations away from becoming opportunities to make things better.

Thank you for sharing and reading! Please continue to send all of your personal and professional quandaries to NickHelps@mathys-potestio.com.

Here to help,
Nick

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