



Office politics don't take a break at lunch time

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Nearly every day in elementary school, I bought hot lunch, and many of those days, I jealously watched the cool kids as they unpacked their lunch boxes.

Eventually I persuaded my mom to buy me a lunch box, just in time for me to observe the cool kids switching to brown paper bags.

Turns out my tuning in to everyone else's lunch behavior was good practice for the office.

Career experts advise that although you might think you're off the clock for lunch, office politics haven't taken a break.

It's good to observe what everyone does at work and mirror their behavior, says Penelope Trunk, CEO of Brazen Careerist, an online community for young professionals. That goes for how they dress, what time they arrive and what they do at lunchtime.

"Our real job is to monitor company culture and to fit in," Trunk said. "Some people get good at it the rest of the day and then just don't get it at lunch."

Trunk suggests watching senior management, who probably use lunch to recharge and to network, then emulating your boss and your peers.

But what if you work with "I'm much too busy for lunch" types and your stomach is growling? Or what if everyone else goes out for lunch and your budget urges PB&J from home?

"Work is not a place to be a revolutionary," said Trunk. "People get hired for their skills and get fired for their fit."

I sometimes get nostalgic for my old office, where nearly every day many of us would informally gather at the conference room table and eat together. It didn't matter if you brought your lunch or got takeout.

It appears we were the exception to the rule. A 2005 workplace survey by the office furniture maker Steelcase found that the lunch "hour" was actually half an hour or less for most of the survey respondents. A 2006 survey from the American Dietetic Association reported that 75 percent of office workers ate lunch at their desks as often as two or three times a week.

Michael Crom, executive vice president and chief learning officer at Dale Carnegie Training in Hauppauge, N.Y., urged managers to take the lead on fostering a positive lunch culture. Managers can set the tone by example, and by refraining from doling out assignments that demand working through lunch.

In a tough economy, Crom said, encouraging people to stop and eat is one way to prevent burnout.

Crom cited one department at Dale Carnegie that frequently eats together. They informally discuss problems they're working on, and the lunches are an opportunity to get to know each other on a deeper level.

Unlike Trunk, Crom said employees can effect change if the current lunch culture isn't working for them, but should do so gently and with sensitivity. Talk to your boss about research that connects taking breaks with productivity, for example.

If the challenge isn't the boss but colleagues, you could try to gently persuade them. Crom advises that's best done by action - inviting someone to join you, for instance - rather than by criticizing the status quo.

"Allowing others to arrive at your conclusion and point of view on their own will position you as a natural leader, rather than a person who unnecessarily stirs the pot," he suggested.