

This incident raises the intriguing possibility that when you are lost, any old map will do. Extended to the issue of strategy, maybe when you are confused, any old strategic plan will do.

Strategic plans are a lot like maps. They animate people, and they orient people. Once people begin to act, they generate tangible outcomes in some con-

text, and this helps them discover what is occurring, what needs to be explained, and what should be done next. Managers keep forgetting that it is what they do, not what they plan, that explains their success. They keep giving credit to the wrong thing—namely, the plan—and having made this error, they then spend more time planning and less time

acting. They are astonished when more planning improves nothing.

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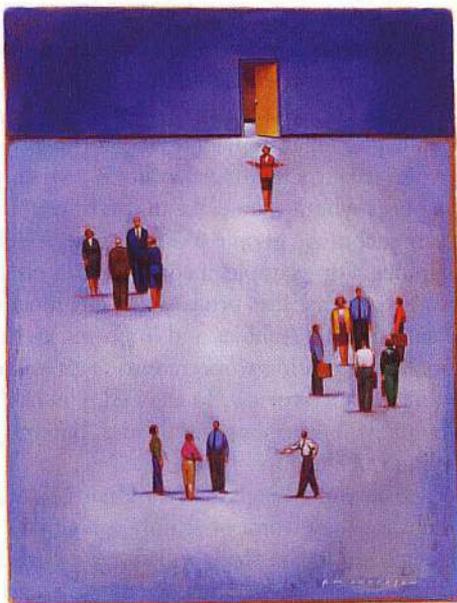
When Office Bonds Turn Sour

By Vadim Liberman

Cliques. In grade school, they may dictate the social structure. In the office, they can have a far greater impact, influencing not just the social interactions within a company but everything from project assignments to promotions to raises. Those who aren't "in" often find themselves out of various opportunities to get ahead, especially when groups are composed of high-ranking executives. Yet because cliques are an inevitable

part of almost any workplace, managers need to be aware of how to deal with them.

Unlike teams, which are formal entities that a manager creates to achieve specific business purposes and goals, cliques are support groups formed casually by people who share similar backgrounds and interests. "It's simply human nature for you to be with the people you like," explains workplace consultant Kate Zabriskie. Such office friendships can sometimes have positive effects, such as making work more enjoyable and boosting morale, as well as bonding people to each other and the com-



A Cliché Event

By Don Watson

Many things that in the past simply happened now happen as events or episodes. Events are to the natural world what outcomes are to the man-made—and like outcomes, they must be managed. When the Meteorology Office predicts weather or rain in Australia, they are now inclined to add event to it. They will say "There has not been a rain event in the northwest since February, but there have been a couple of weather events on the eastern slopes." In the present climate, Gene Kelly would sing "Singin' in the Rain Event" and Billie Holiday "Stormy Weather Event." In the United States, they speak not only of weather events but debris events. Americans witnessed several debris events as the Challenger returned to earth. Landslides and floods are debris events. Hardly a day goes by without one.

DON WATSON is a former speechwriter for Paul Keating, Australia's former prime minister. From Death Sentences: How Clichés, Weasel Words, and Management-Speak Are Strangling Public Language (Gotham). ©2005

Top Ten Causes Of Stress at Work (in Order)

1. Deadlines
2. Customer demands
3. Conflicting responsibilities
4. Budget constraints
5. Number of hours worked
6. E-mail overload
7. Lack of downtime
8. Pressure from above
9. Meetings
10. Expectations of others

From Tough Management: The 7 Ways to Make Tough Decisions Easier, Deliver the Numbers, and Grow Business in Good Times and Bad by Chuck Martin (McGraw-Hill). ©2005

soundings

pany. "When people stick together and channel their efforts and energy in a positive way, they can tap into each others' strengths and understand each others' weaknesses," points out Lauren Dixon, head of a seventy-person Victor, N.Y.-based ad agency. "They know each other intimately and can get things done faster and more effectively."

It's easy to see how such camaraderie can benefit retention and productivity, but "when the bonds of a group become so tight as to shut others out purposefully, then the clique becomes a negative force within a company," says Aaron Nurick, a professor of management and psychology at Bentley College. And that's where problems begin.

"Because cliques form around people who share the same interests and who know the same things, they can become insular in their thinking and don't innovate in productive ways," says Rob Cross, author of *The Hidden Power of Social Networks*. It's also not uncommon for cliques to revert back to teenage behavior, gossiping about other workers and excluding others from professional tasks for purely personal reasons.

So how should you, as a manager, respond when you recognize that some of your reports have formed a destructive clique? You can try to break it up by reassigning people to other tasks, but that's usually a huge mistake, argues Nurick, who explains: "One of the things that increases the tightness of a group is a perceived external threat, like a manager who now becomes the enemy." Indeed, many cliques initially form as a reaction to threat and uncertainty, such as when job cuts loom, or when people feel that there is no effective conflict-resolution process in place. Furthermore, if a clique has been doing productive work, dismantling it simply because it excludes other workers will help neither those

who feel excluded nor the company itself.

Instead, create work projects that will force a clique to work with other employees. "If necessary, tell those in a clique that they are being paid to work with everybody in a company, not just their friends," Zabriskie says. Which is precisely what Sepi Asefnia has done. As founder and CEO of a fifty-person engineering firm in Raleigh, N.C., Asefnia maintains that she always asks both new and old employees for input, and she encourages her workers to seek advice from anyone in the company. By not participating in cliques herself, she works to set an example for her workers. "As a manager, you have to make a special effort to understand your employees' interests and to extend your conversations with them to find out what their interests are," she explains. "It's very easy for a manager to talk only to employees about similar hobbies, but you also have to take the time to speak to those who don't necessarily share your interests. If you do it, then your workers will follow your lead." Often, people are unaware that they have formed an exclusive clique, which is why, Asefnia adds, that all it may take to reel in a clique is to make people aware of their behavior.

Then there are those times when awareness isn't enough. When Lauren Dixon discovered a clique of three people at her agency who were gossiping about others and negatively impacting corporate morale and productivity, she talked to them about it as a group, as well as creating assignments that required them to work with others in the firm. "But they continued their behavior," Dixon recalls. "Their attitude was: 'What is she going to do, fire me?' So I eventually did just that." When another damaging clique of five workers formed years later, Dixon attempted to talk to them on an individual basis; eventually, she once again felt compelled to fire all five. "I just couldn't have them acting that unprofessionally and spreading their poison at my company."

All of which raises the question: Is it a manager's responsibility to legislate friendship on the job? Yes, says Zabriskie, when it starts to affect work. Of course, you can't tell employees whom they can and can't be friends with, but you can encourage people to develop personal ties outside their cliques. For example, a company can create an employee directory that lists professional qualifications as well as information about hobbies and interests. Organizations can also make integrating workers into tasks as part of a manager's performance review. In the end, you can't dictate how a clique will *feel* about an outsider, but you can change that clique's behavior.

A caveat, though: Some individuals are marginalized because they won't or simply can't fit in. Forcing the group to accommodate them will alienate both the individual and the group. Even in your own department or company, social engineering has its limits.



"There are a lot of addictions, but the saddest to my mind is the plight of the confirmed workaholic."

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