

Leaders Must Bust up Cliques

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My business is built on helping organizations build higher levels of trust. One significant trust buster that is evident, even in the best organizations, is the presence of cliques. These informal groups continuously drain the trust from the larger organization by fostering a culture of exclusivity. Since joining together with like-minded people has been human nature back to the “Clan of the Cave Bear,” how can an organization reduce the negative impact of these insular cells?

It is a function of leadership to set the tone of any culture. If leaders either condone cliques or encourage them by participating in them, the cells will continue to enjoy their exclusivity at the expense of the larger organization. The conundrum is that cliques are highly prized by the people in them. The support structure allows all members to poke fun at others who are outside the fence and create their own set of norms. This builds in a kind of polarization that is as uncomfortable to the outsiders as it is gratifying to the elite.

What can leaders do to discourage the formation of cliques?

1. **Be Aware of Cliques** - The first line of defense is to recognize what is going on. I would wager that your work place has numerous little groups of people that form naturally and insulate themselves from others for several reasons. You can see manifestations when the same people sit together in the break room – often in the same seats – every day for years. There is nothing wrong with friends sitting with other friends, but if it becomes an exclusive club, then it can build barriers to effective teamwork. Another easy way to spot cliques is to watch how people on a shift arrange themselves during a shift meeting. E-mail distributions are another dead give away that there are cells of people communicating with each other and not with the general population. Leaders can use many techniques to encourage a more homogenous population.
2. **Encourage an inclusive culture regularly** – If leaders would continually stress that our power is in the diverse thoughts of the entire population and everyone’s input is important, it will send a subtle message that insular groups are not always helpful. Caveat: It would backfire if the leader put a ban on sub-groups because that would either drive them underground or embolden them based on the forbidden fruit logic. Rather, the leader needs to demonstrate by actions and words that a broad representation is most often in the best interest of everyone.
3. **Take a few king pins aside** – in any society there are informal leaders who establish themselves as the “Grand Poobah” of the group. Their words carry the most weight, and they have more than their fair share of say in who is allowed to

join the group. All these pecking order considerations are informal, but they are all in play as the group carries on daily activities. As a leader, you can befriend the informal leaders and ask them to open up the club to new members. I think one way to make progress is to enroll the informal leaders by seeking their advice on how to reduce exclusivity in the organization. These conversations will be tricky, but if handled properly, you can woo these people into becoming forces for the good in your organization.

4. **Mix things up in meetings** – you might have some kind of rotation in seating arrangements or some other mechanical way to get people to mingle in different social arrangements. One way to do this naturally is to have some team building events where the team selection is objectively random. People will accept an arbitrary team assignment if it is obvious there is no particular agenda in the selection process. If you prescribe the seating arrangement to specifically break up a clique, people will push back.
5. **Transplant people** – this is a kind of last resort if all else fails. You can move the job assignments so the exclusive social interfaces are broken up by time and space. Caveat: arbitrary work assignments designed to break up cliques are often unpopular, and you may cause more damage than you eliminate if you use a heavy hand. One antidote is to espouse a strong philosophy of cross training individuals to improve bench strength and provide development opportunities. People generally appreciate these objectives even if they tend to break up historical social groupings.
6. **Inject new blood** – Sometimes the addition of a new strong personality will have the effect of breaking up an existing structure and allow the creation of a new order. Of course, the cure could be worse than the disease, so you need to keep alert that you are progressing rather than retrogressing by bringing in new people.
7. **Reorganize** – Many leaders use a kind of “shake and bake” reorganization philosophy when trying to reduce inbreeding. A new organization really does break up the old gang, but just like transplanting individuals, it is often not welcomed. An effective reorganization takes a lot of study, and you need to have a good justification for making the move other than to break up cliques. Making reorganizations successful requires a lot of energy, communication, planning, and involvement of people. Do not just throw out a new structure as a way to mix things up. Maybe a good analogy here is a garden. If you have a nice flower garden but some of the plants have become root bound, you want to carefully thin things out, not just roto-till the entire garden.
8. **Reward inclusion** – One good way to prevent exclusion is to talk about and reward inclusion at every opportunity. Make it a value for the organization and highlight good examples through the usual communication channels.
9. **Sit with them** – I often found that just sitting with a clique in the break room a few times a week would send a signal that they are not an exclusive club. As a manager you have the right to sit with your people for purposes of getting to know them better. It may feel uncomfortable at first, especially if the clique has an activity to keep them insulated (like a bridge game or something). Just keep looking for ways to interface with the group in ways that show you are interested in their opinions and ideas. Eventually you can gain their confidence, and your

presence will be welcome rather than an intrusion. Then you can invite another person to join the discussion. This method takes time, but it does work.

Reducing cliques in the working world or in social groups is delicate work. Keep stressing that the ideal organization taps into the good ideas of all people. It is the interplay of ideas that creates a healthy organization.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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