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ALL IN THE
Family



Your Family Provides Clues to How You Deal With Workplace Stress

BY SYLVIA LaFAIR, PH.D.

The loss of productivity at work due to stress-related factors is estimated at more than \$100 billion. According to a survey of 490 managers by the research firm Raffey Park, office politics has become the greatest cause of present-day workplace stress. Another survey conducted by NFI Research of 2,000 senior executives indicated that the top causes of negative office politics comes from personalities, gossip and a short-term view of conflict. Not dealing directly with the “games” at work leads to low morale, slower paces of work produced and employees who stop caring about their contributions.

EDITOR'S NOTE: With a qualified labor shortage currently affecting the spa industry, making sure your current team works together well is critical. This article, as well as “Operation: Teamwork” starting on page 88, will provide a unique perspective on addressing different personalities and shaping them into a successful staff.

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While large numbers of books and Web sites are devoted to helping people solve the dilemmas of the bully boss, the procrastinating colleague, the sabotaging team member and the "little, brown-nosing tattletale," most of the advice suggests you outwit the opponent, file a complaint with human resources or quit and get another job.

Why Can't We Be Friends?

All companies, large and small, are caught in the daily dilemma of helping people get along better at work. There is a desire to decrease the stress resulting from the micro-inequities of being ignored or discounted, the real or imagined injustices from poor performance reviews, the complaints of impossible workloads and the general dislikes, dissatisfactions and disappointments of everyday working together. Team building off site and communication seminars are standard in today's business environment, and there is an underlying hope that offering these programs to employees will make the annoyances just go away.

Yet, they don't! While internal or external programs do offer some symptom relief, and while tension headaches and emotional bruises tend to diminish in the short term, in the long run, not getting to core issues causes concerns to resurface, often with a vengeance worthy of a Shakespearean drama.

Did you ever return from a workshop vowing to get along with the finger-pointing peer whom you decide to see as a good guy? Your commitment may be to engage him in a positive manner, and that may work, at least until the next time he points that demanding finger at you. Why do even the most talented business folks resort to blaming, escalating, scapegoating, polarizing

or creating "he said, she said, I said" triangles? Why is this game played in every organization, from plush, carpeted Fortune 100 companies to cement floor, garage start-ups?

Here's a hint. Have you ever watched the non-verbal responses in a team when someone says, "You are really like a family to me," or when a boss at a company dinner extols the virtues of his employees and endearingly says, "This is one big happy family?" You will probably see many half smiles, slumped shoulders and glazed, deer-in-the-headlights stares. While organizations are NOT families, they function in a similar manner. There are shared emotional and economic aspects in both settings, and there is constant and ongoing interdependence.

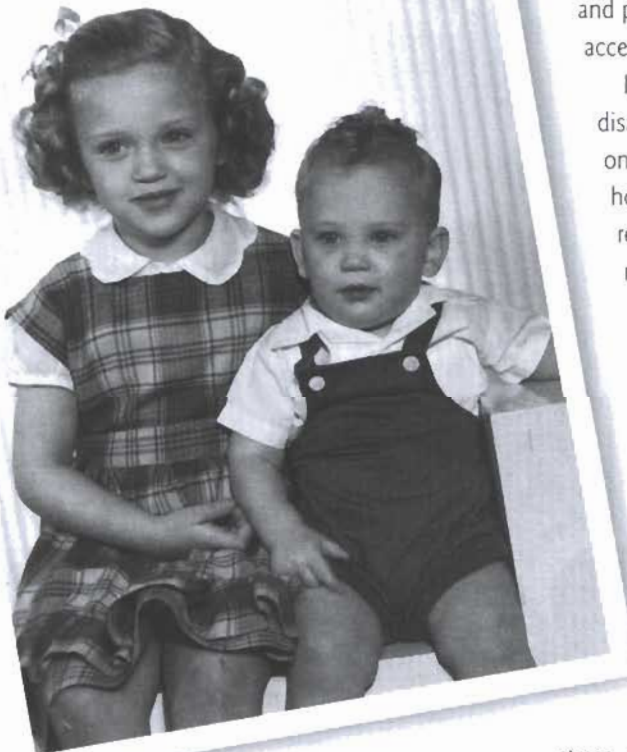
Family Matters

For better or worse, most of the politics at work come from behaviors we learned in the original organization we all unknowingly joined – the family. The word "family" is laden with all kinds of emotional caveats. Stop for a minute and think about your own family. Who comes to mind first? Is it your spouse or partner? Your kids? Go back to an earlier time and envision your parents or caretakers. Bring to mind your siblings or half-siblings or step-siblings. Now, think of a happy time, a sad time, a challenging time, an angry time and a peaceful time. Amazing that in a few, short minutes, you can travel on an emotional roller coaster through time and space. Thinking about your family is another clue to help you see why workplace stress and office politics are so intense ... and so costly.

Let's go back to the concept of stress in the workplace. What really causes the tensions and tantrums? Did it ever occur to you

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that so many of our present-day responses to excessive stress are merely more sophisticated variations of the original "mad, sad, glad" behavioral reactions we learned in childhood?

All families develop patterns of interaction to deal with stress. Every family has a toolkit of strategies for deactivating tense situations. For some, it is denial as in "what problem?"; for others, it is avoidance as in "gotta go"; and others will create the "fight and make up" syndrome. At work, we can all handle some degree of stress with relative ease, and we can be supportive and productive. In fact, up to a certain point, stress helps us access creative, new ideas and "a-ha" solutions to problems.

It is when juggling the demands of difficult deadlines, disappointed bosses or disappearing staff hits the red zone on the stress meter that coping mechanisms from childhood patterns click in. Instinctively, we reach for the remembered patterns that helped us and our family regain a modicum of control and security.

With all of our advanced technology (ever see office politics played out by e-mail?), when fear and frustration cause us to hit the panic button, we all tend to repeat our patterned and predictable behavior. It helped us survive until now, so why mess with the formula?

Once again, we find comfort in the familiar; we return to the role of rebel or victim; we become procrastinators or pleasers; we take on the mantle of martyrs or rescuers. We take the roles we played at home and bring them to work. No wonder office politics ranks so high as the cause of workplace stress. While we're all dressed in our grown-up clothes, our behavior is like the 4- or 8-year-olds we were.

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taking the family to work

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Putting It in the Past

There is a route out of the office politics whirlpool. When business people learn to connect the dots from family patterns to work patterns, there is an opportunity to consciously choose a new path.

Take Bob, for example. He grew up in a family where finances were the overriding concern – too many kids and too little money. He was a clever youngster who had not one, but three, after-school jobs. He was the super achiever, always there to get his family out of a financial jam. Fast-forward 20 years. Bob is a high potential on the fast track. He is respected for his drive, yet mistrusted by his peers. He is known as someone who will step over or on anyone who gets in his way. While people talk about Bob's bloated ego, they cannot see the frightened little boy still determined to outrun the financial fear of his childhood.

Given the opportunity, Bob can untie the "knot" from his youth. We all have them – the "have not, cannot, should not or not like me" beliefs deeply embedded in our memories. The "have not" embedded in Bob's memory was necessary then. He courageously took on the role of super achiever at home to deactivate the family stress. With some insight and a willingness to review his role in the family, he can now begin the steady climb out of his old, outmoded patterned behavior and move from a self-serving, solo player to a "creative collaborator." Asking for and offering help will be like learning a foreign language for Bob. Yet, once mastered, he will be less lonely and able to build trustworthy relationships at work.

While it is hard to believe that events from a long ago childhood are, in fact, still very much alive in our present work settings, there is real power in connecting these dots. This is the way out of the downward spiral of the blame games and shame games that limit productivity, creativity and collaboration.

One 'Big, Happy' Family

Once the behaviors and patterns that get the organizational "family" stuck are acknowledged, new possibilities open up to create a work environment designed to help people "clear the past to free the present" and ultimately grow to their full potential. Leaders who can become self-aware of their own patterned reactions and who have the courage to change can model the mechanisms for decoding office politics. The climate in the organization changes to accentuate cooperation and, ultimately, profitability.

We all work. We all have families. If we can see stress from this new vantage point and learn to observe, understand and transform outmoded family patterns, we can win on two levels: we can bring new, mature interactions to work and we can also take these new, more effective ways of relating home. ■

SYLVIA LAFAIR, Ph.D., is the president of Creative Energy Options Inc. and developer of Total Leadership Connections, an innovative leadership forum. She is an executive coach and consultant to family firms and global corporations. She is presently writing a book, "The Gotcha Game: Helping Leaders Decode Office Politics," and can be reached at sylvia@ceoptions.com.