

## *Chapter 7 – Daily Life in the (Corporate) Herd*

“Whatever you are, be a good one.” ~ Abraham Lincoln

You have your new job. You understand your brand and communications. I am confident you have the foundation to be as good as you can be with your work and your brand. It’s no time to be grazing lazily on the corporate pastures. As Mr. Lincoln said, you’re all set to do your job well and that’s all there is to moving ahead in the corporate world, right? Not quite. To be “good”, there’s more you need to know and learn.

You’ll do okay with what you’ve learned so far, but the key is to move ahead *sooner*. To do that, you’ll need some insight about how the corporate world works *and what additional skills you need to move ahead and do it sooner*. You can take advantage of behind the scenes insights as to how a company works. Some insights are unwritten tribal knowledge you may not recognize if it hits you at work; other stuff is surprisingly common sense.

As you graze and mooove your way around the daily herd life, recognize the following lessons: effective culture, good protocol, and take the initiative to pursue the recommended skills.

### **What to Do When You Have Good Ideas**

When my 25 years old niece was telling me about her new corporate job and their weekly staff meetings, I asked the following question: “When you have a great idea, do you share it with everyone at your staff meetings?” “Of course,” she said, “our department is like a family”. She was offended and surprised when I replied that I’ve learned never to share my ideas openly in those settings.

Most of us can’t wait to tell anyone who will listen. It’s an ego rush. STOP! Don’t just blare it out. There is a good time to share your ideas and there are not-so-good times. Recognition for being smart and for being a contributing team member is a great rush for your ego. Control this urge. I strongly recommend you do NOT share your ideas in any group or public setting, such as staff meetings, all-hands meetings, in ad-hoc group settings with fellow employees, or even with employees at

lunch. It's tempting, especially at your weekly or monthly department staff meetings.

When your department manager is discussing company and departmental challenges and goals, you are probably bursting at the seams to yell out your ideas. DON'T!!! I know it is hard to keep quiet if you have a good idea or comment in these situations, but fight the urge. It is much more productive and powerful for your career if you share your ideas with your manager directly in a one-on-one, private conversation.

First of all, you'll get her/his undivided attention. Before your meeting, think through your idea, and better yet, document it. You will be able to discuss it with her/him in detail and perhaps even develop the details and implementation with her/him. You will also have an opportunity to share any research you have conducted thoroughly with them, which can increase the chances of your idea turning into something that is actually implemented with the company.

Secondly, you won't create resentment among your peers, which I've seen happen time and time again to the person who "grandstands" in a public setting to "showoff". It can be annoying to others and even embarrassing for you if your idea is not very well developed or maybe even considered ridiculous or frivolous, as it will probably not be well received by your superiors.

Lastly, it is a great excuse to get a meeting with your manager. In sales, you are always looking for a reason to make a sales call/appointment with a potential client (in this case the client just happens to be your manager).

### **There May Never Be Dumb Questions, But There Is a Dumb Time to Ask One**

"There are never dumb questions. The only dumb questions are those that are not asked." I recall this was a very popular saying in school. This is certainly an often-used phrase in seminars, workplace meetings, and formal business gatherings. I absolutely agree with this phrase. We want our kids to be inquisitive. In our adult corporate lives, managers are grateful to have motivated staff members, and one evidence of their motivation is when they make an effort to ask questions. It's not about suppressing a person's desire for discovery or curiosity. So, the idea of asking a question is not a bad thing whatsoever, my issue and recommendation to you is to watch the timing of your questions. A great golden rule I learned from a local musical

director is – raise your hand to ask a question only if your question affects all of your fellow cast members.

In other words:

1. Don't waste everyone else's time if you have a selfish question or a selfish need to get attention. On a large musical production, rehearsal time is scarce.
2. Think through things before engaging your mouth. Many people have questions when the answer is right in front of them, or they did not pay attention when it was given, or they can logically deduce it or find it in some other way.

Write down your questions during a meeting while a presenter is making his/her presentation. If your question passes the golden rule above, then ask it. Resist the temptation to show everyone how smart and attentive you are. If your question doesn't pass the golden rule or you're not sure, follow up with the presenter afterward. You can do it in person and the benefit is individual attention. It's also effective to use email or a phone call after the meeting.

### **Good Ideas Are Only Half of The Puzzle to Getting Ahead**

Here's the formula for moving ahead: **Good ideas + Successful implementation = moving ahead of the herd.** Ideas are "products" you offer to your manager and the corporation. But ideas are not good enough. "Ideas are a dime a dozen" ~ Unknown. Helping to implement the idea, for the benefit for all, completes your true value.

A natural question at this point would be, "What if my manager steals my idea?" You've all seen it in movies or television. Unfortunately, this does actually happen. Again, people can behave badly and some do. I still think this is a risk worth taking, unless you already know your manager is short on integrity. If that is the case, you should look for another department or company to work in or don't share your ideas while you continue to work there. The only reason to share your ideas and help your manager succeed, knowing they are unscrupulous, is for the chance to advance on his or her corporate coattail. The chance of people stealing your idea increases if you blared it out in a group meeting. Remember, it is not the idea that is valuable to the organization; it is the *effective* implementation of that idea (for the benefit of all) that makes an idea valuable. An idea without effective implementation is worthless. Hopefully you will be allowed to implement the idea project; ask for it!

There is a good likelihood your manager will involve you. A manager cannot do everything. Managers have staff because he/she cannot achieve (and implement) all the goals that have been assigned to them. If they could, the unemployment rate would be through the roof and corporations would be comprised entirely of managers.

### **Brown-Nosers and Yes-People Both Get Ahead**

It is sad, but true. I've seen enough examples of both in my career. I will say that being a brown-noser takes a unique talent to do it well and shamelessly. I don't have any advice or insight on how to become a brown-noser: I am not one. Frankly, this style is against my value system. (Google "brown-noser" to get a definition and to find out about its origin because it is somewhat embarrassing to do here). On the other hand, I am advocating that you be a yes-person. A yes-person is someone who will support their manager. Now, I don't mean to imply that you should mindlessly agree with everything your manager does and says, especially if it is illegal or shameless. That's a brown-noser. A yes-person supports their manager by helping them achieve goals. At this stage in your career, I am saying you should say yes and agree with everything your manager says, because I'm assuming you don't have enough experience. If you have input or expertise, it is okay to ask questions and get clarification before engaging in a task or the implementation of projects and policies. But you should not argue with everything your manager says just to show how smart you are or to stroke your ego. Let's be clear on what I mean, we are talking about an early period in your career. As you develop experience and expertise in your career, you can be (and will be expected to be) challenging decisions and ideas and backing up your position with data and alternative solutions. Early in your career, you should agree and support your manager. We will talk more about this in the "Managing Up" chapter.

### **Tony's Stories**

Let's be clear what being a brown-noser is and is not. A brown-noser is someone who says yes to everything her/his supervisor says and wants without any question, shamelessly. Nobody likes to see someone act this way, not even your manager. If you work in a place where this is the culture, look for another company. Sometimes employees don't even realize they're acting like a brown-noser. Managers within these companies, especially high level ones like Directors, VPs, and the President, are viewed and treated like rock stars by employees. There can

also be a sort of hero worship and famous person paparazzi atmosphere among employees. You do NOT have to treat or look at your management in this way. It does NOT get you promoted or ahead of the herd (at least not in an ethical way). Very early in my career I worked at a large, old, middle America based company, and there was a summer picnic at our VP's house for a group of us junior sales reps from all over the country visiting corporate headquarters. There was also other corporate staff members invited. The corporate staff members were older, probably in their 30's and 40's. Some reps and staffers were obviously practicing brown-nosers. They would spend all their time trying to talk to the VP while most reps were playing volleyball, eating, talking with each other, or just enjoying the event and weather. Brown-nosers view these events as business-social, rather than social-business. But the most amazing and obvious brown-nosing was when the Senior VP showed up to the party. This gentleman acted out the rock star role to a tee. He came into the backyard where the party was without saying anything to anyone. He sat down at the far end of a table and simply took out a cigarette and held it out. Before you can say "arrogant", three middle-aged staff members tripped over themselves to light the Senior VP's cigarette. I know, to this day, none of those staff members went much further in their careers at that company. There are better, more dignified ways (and better companies to be at) to move your career forward. I knew after seeing that incident, that this particular company (and its culture) was not the place for me.

### **To Get Ahead in the Herd, Network All the Time Within and Outside of Your Company**

When people refer to "networking," they are talking about networking with people outside of your immediate work area. Regardless of how large or small the company, I suggest you network with fellow employees. I'm referring to employees you don't normally or naturally work with as part of your job or departmental function. Specifically I'm referring to the following departments: IT, Facilities, and Finance people. They're the first to know what the company leaders have decided to implement. I'm talking about things like new acquisitions, forced reductions/layoffs, company expansion, selling of the company or division, facility relocation, and so on. Notice I did not include HR in that list? The HR people are naturally secretive about the plans. But in my experience, the people in those other functions are more apt to reveal the plans. By learning of plans sooner, it may serve your career and help you or others through the change in management process that will follow.

It may seem obvious while you're reading this that the Facilities people would know of any plans that involved facilities. I would venture to say that in your daily workings, you never really thought about this. If you did, you would have friends in Facilities at this moment. Do you? My bet is you don't. Well, you should. The Facilities department is engaged in the early planning stages of any business expansion or contraction and relocation. A great way to network with people in other parts of the corporation is to participate in company social events, such as company softball teams, charity events, even company choirs (which I did when I was at Hewlett-Packard, even though I didn't know how to carry a tune...I learned something about singing and reading music from the experience besides meeting people in other functions of what was then still a very large company).

### **Tony's Stories**

When I was at Sun Microsystems, I knew nearly a year in advance about a pending move of the entire Customer Service group (2,000) people from Northern California to Boulder, Colorado. I used that information to secure a job and location of my own choice because I did not want to move to Colorado. In every case I was involved in an acquisition, the acquiring company I was a member of told the target companies that everything would stay the same, including their facility. However, I learned in advance from my Facilities contacts that the executives had plans to close or relocate the targeted companies. Whenever there are decisions about people, the IT people are the first to know because they have to organize network access or plan for the installation or reduction of networks. The Finance Department is also involved in just about every plan because they are modeling the various options for analysis.

### **Hard and Soft skills You Need That You Did Not Learn in College**

Sure, you've spent years in college and probably spent time as an intern and held jobs all throughout high school and college. You may even be a mid-career person with experience in the corporate world. You have skills. The question is: do you have *all the skills* to get ahead in the corporate world? I am confident that you have *not* developed the necessary hard and soft skills that will help you get ahead in the corporate herd, sooner. How do I know this? Because they're not typically taught. Where in your life have you learned the following:

- to be an effective presenter
- to really understand corporate finance and departmental budgeting
- to sell
- a variety of other soft skills including interpersonal communications, leadership, active listening, etc.

Although these skills can be learned early on, such as during college or sooner, I doubt most people can and will learn them at that stage, if ever. They are not in any curriculum or requirements. Rarely does someone assign you to learn these skills. Even if you knew about them, you probably were not motivated or didn't see the need. That's all fine because you had a lot of foundational things to learn. Now you're in your 20's or 30's and it's high time that you learn and develop these vital skills.

In the corporate world, managers refer to an employee as having hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills are the specific knowledge or ability to perform the job in a satisfactory manner. Hard skills can be learned. Examples of hard skills include writing, programming, operating a fork lift, using Microsoft Excel, etc. Hard skills are the minimum criteria managers and corporations look for in an employee. It's a "me too" item, meaning that everyone must have an acceptable level of that skill to qualify. Again, the good news is that hard skills can be learned. You can take a class, read a book, or have someone teach them to you.

Soft skills are those that are difficult to learn even if they can be taught. Soft skills are more of art than a science. You will likely be good at some soft skills and not as natural with others. Soft skills require more experience than hard skills to master. Examples of soft skills include: attitude, creativity, friendliness, personality traits, interpersonal interactions, dependability, conscientiousness, leadership, coaching and mentoring, motivating others, active listening, negotiations, and many more.

Most manager say if they had to, or given a choice between qualified candidates, they would hire for soft skills even if the candidate does not have the hard skills. Managers and their companies can teach the hard skills, not soft skills. Soft skills cannot be easily learned, but don't despair because I've seen people improve soft skills, and one component of this is to recognize you have a need to improve. The other component needed to improve a soft skill is the motivation to actually do it.

Here are three essential ones you should work on early in your career:

## Be a Great Presenter

There are not many hard skills I will stress in this book as being important to your corporate career, but one of them is to be a good presenter. I know, you hated the communications class in college and you dread public speaking. You better get over it! Presentation skills will help you project a confident, professional, knowledgeable presence, even in small gatherings. Of all people, I dreaded presenting. I was not born with this skill so I needed to learn and practice this skill. Early in my career, I was awful. Maybe it was genetic. Maybe many young people have the same problem. I didn't know either way. Looking back, I'm embarrassed to recall how geeky I looked, how fast and jittery I spoke, and how I did not enunciate well. In short, I don't believe people had a very high professional opinion of me. It was tough enough, as an Asian, to project maturity because we are ethnically younger looking compared to the image people have of a professional in the corporate world. Nevertheless, I didn't know this. Nobody told me. And I didn't even know the questions to ask to gain knowledge of this skill.

### Two things finally alerted me to this handicap:

- At Apple Computer, we had a required presentation class for everyone in my department. We had to present in the class to fellow classmates. You would think that would provide some comfort, but it was nerve-racking. The real shock came at the end of the class when we were videotaped and the instructor spent private one-on-one time with each of us to provide valuable feedback. Want to be humbled? Try a video analysis exercise and you will be. Fact is – we don't learn to be good presenters. It is not a natural trait. From what I've seen, this skill is not a common gene in our DNA makeup.
- The second time that helped to reinforce the need for me to work on becoming a better presenter was also when I was at Apple Computer. I learned that John Sculley, President and CEO of Pepsi who came to Apple to become President and CEO, had a coach to help him improve his presentation skills. He was not very good. I saw him present a lot and so I was (and wasn't) surprised he had a private coach. He presented at company all-hands meetings. He presented at MacWorld and the Developer's Conference, and many, many other conferences Apple participated in or sponsored. It was painful and sort of embarrassing to watch him. Granted, technology was not his cup of tea, so perhaps he was simply



nervous because he was not comfortable with the subject. After all, he spent his entire career at Pepsi, a sugar water company, and there's not much technology involved in that product aside from the bottling process. At Apple, he had to talk about the vision of personal computing, bits and bytes, integrated circuit speed, and stuff that hadn't even been invented yet. He had to and did learn facts and concepts, such as the computer and technology stuff, pretty quickly, but he needed help with the one hard skill that I found I was missing too – presentation skills. You would think a guy who was President and CEO of Pepsi, a multi-billion dollar corporation, would have had lots of practice, right? Well, apparently he didn't and was able to get around this issue all this time. However, he practiced, got coaching, and soon he improved his presentation skills 300%.

What is the lesson to learn here? Well, you too can learn and practice public speaking and how to make good, effective and impressive presentations. Join a local Toastmasters club. Get yourself videotaped and work on being smooth, practice good posture, proper gestures, learn to use notes, and improve your appearance. Get someone to give good, honest, tough-love feedback. For me, that person was my wife. I knew her constructive criticism was just that, constructive. It wasn't a personal attack. She helped me immensely with my enunciation, pace of speech, eye contact, and she pushed me to practice, practice, practice.

Part of being a good presenter has to do with the content, not just the presentation itself. It's one thing to be a good presenter, but you will still not be as effective if you do not present your material in an organized and convincing manner. It would be sort of like making a movie with the latest special effects, lighting, audio, and music track, but the movie has a terrible script and it's edited poorly. A Senior VP gave me an invaluable tip that I will share with you. He gave me a book that apparently all consultants consider a must-read, *The Pyramid Principle*, by Barbara Minto. Since the purpose of most presentations is to convince people of something, such as a proposal or position, this book teaches a useful, structured approach to organizing the content to help you achieve approval or support for your purpose. I found Ms. Minto's approach very useful for proposal presentations. For more routine presentations, such as operational reviews and status reports, another Senior VP taught me a useful approach that is a short cut way of thinking in preparing the presentation. He called it "story telling." What is the story you want tell? Everything is great and here's how we did it and the results? Or, things didn't go as plan, and here's why

and what we're going to do about it. There's your structure. Now just fill in all of the details.

### **Know the Numbers of Corporate Finance**

You're wondering, "Why do I need to learn Finance? I'm a \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with any major other than Finance) major." Wrong my Padawan (An apprentice of a Jedi Master – yes, I am a big Star Wars fan). I thought the same thing early in my career. My undergraduate degree was in Marketing with an Associates degree in Electronics. When I went back to school to get my MBA, I focused on Finance because I saw that effective corporate leaders had a deep understanding of finance. They knew the numbers, and I am not talking about accounting. There is a marked difference between Accounting and Finance. Accounting is simply the tracking of business transactions and journal entries. Finance is looking at the compilation of those transactions in the form of the Profit/Loss Statements and the Balance Sheet. Moreover, finance involves the analysis of the numbers and the cause and effect of the numbers.

As I progressed in my career, I found that my finance knowledge was inadequate. It was partly due to the poor education I had received in college; it was also a lack of motivation. Okay, maybe it was more the latter. Numbers and analyzing them did not excite me. If I enjoyed it, I would have majored in Accounting or Finance; at least that was my thinking at the time. I'm sure many of you reading this can admit the same thing. Together, the result ended in moments at executive operations meetings where I was clueless as to what was happening in the overall business, while peers and superiors around me were talking about it like they were playing fantasy baseball, discussing the stats and interpreting the possible causes from the background data. They were on top of just a sample of the following: monthly and quarterly results, what it was against year-over-year, quarter over quarter, month over month, the top line number, by product line, gross margin, cost of goods sold, SG&A (sales and general administration expenses), EBITA (pronounced *ee-ba-ta*, Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, and Amortization), and net profit. The moral of the story is – learn finance in general and be comfortable with the financial scorecard of your department and of the overall company business.

### **Selling**

You're in sales. Most of you are saying to yourself right now, "No I'm not! Yuck, who wants to be a salesperson?" It's unfortunate that the

sales profession has such a stigma attached to it, which is mostly proliferated by extreme examples of hard-selling characters. Our culture has stereotyped the over-the-top extrovert car salesperson hovering over you on the car lot and the smooth talking insurance salesperson. Most sales positions are not so extreme. Nevertheless, you should be using some of the sales techniques because you are selling all the time, either professionally or personally. Selling occurs more often than you would imagine. Any interaction with a fellow human being involves “selling”. It’s just not called selling. However, words like “persuasion, motivation, influence, leadership, evangelize, induce, sway, control, pressure, transform” and so on are all forms of “selling” someone on something. You’re selling yourself (a.k.a. your brand). You’re selling ideas. You’re selling to customers. You’re selling to vendors. You are selling when you are persuading fellow employees and friends to support your cause or even to someplace that you’d like to go for lunch. Selling skills have parallels to successful negotiations.

Three key elements to effective selling:

1. **Identify the hot buttons.** A hot button is a sales terms to describe those features and benefits that will persuade a person or organization to “buy” into what you are offering or proposing. You’re probably thinking the primary hot button is usually price. Not true. Price can be a primary factor, but in most cases there are other factors, such as features, convenience, reputation, etc. Sales people are trained to identify the hot buttons, then focus on the features and benefits that match up.
2. **Handling objections.** Effective probing is what separates the good sales people from the not-so-good ones. People don’t just tell you what their buying hot buttons are or why they won’t buy. Even if you ask, what they tell you is not reliable as the “truth”. Many people don’t know what they don’t know. There may be features and benefits they did not think of that will matter. The key to effective probing is uncovering objections. When a person has objections, they are essentially highlighting a hot button. Once the objection(s) are uncovered, you can address them.
3. **Go for the close.** When you have someone convinced, secure it. In sales, it’s called “close for the order”. You don’t need to preach to the converted. When the person is nodding their head or they actually say something like, “I like your idea,” they are telling you they support your plan. After you confirm their

support, move on to discussing the mechanics of the purchase or the implementation.

Always be ready to answer the silent question in a potential customer's mind: the "so what?" or "what's in it for me?". As long as the potential customer has objections, you have not translated a feature into a benefit that is important to the customer. Here's a real life example – selling someone a hybrid car. Hybrid cars are hot, but people still need to be convinced. A hybrid car is not a slam-dunk purchase decision. A small percentage of people who are very technical might buy the car, regardless of the price, simply because they like the technology. Chances are you will have to tell people what the price benefits are along with other benefits, depending upon their hot button – lower maintenance cost, lower fuel cost from less gasoline usage, good for the environment because of reduced emissions, music sounds better because the car is quieter, fewer stops for refills because the car has a longer range, and so on. The same process can be used for communicating (selling) your messages to your staff, to senior management, etc. There are great books, seminars, and information on the Internet about sales techniques. Go learn this skill as soon as you can.

### **Don't Leave Dead Bodies**

Getting the job done and getting it done right are two different things. "Getting the job done doesn't count if it's not done right". This was one of the sayings from a General Manager I reported to in reference to achieving your goals and getting credit for it. He said that just because you hit (or exceed) your goals, it doesn't count if you accomplished it through methods that are illegal at worst, and at best, got everyone around you pissed off. Having co-workers upset or irritated in the wake of your work is the proverbial "dead bodies." The illegal part is easy to understand. Laws are black and white. You either take a bribe or you don't. The other "right ways" are subjective and gray. The point my General Manager was trying to make was – you need to go about your business adhering to a set of business and cultural values and moral standards. Many of the values are grounded in humanity. Non-business people would say these values are common courtesy and common sense. It's all of the above. Some companies put values in writing. A few companies include values in a person's annual performance review.

Here is a sampling:

- Win-win
- Teamwork
- Credit where credit is due
- Professionalism
- Customer first
- Integrity
- Financial success
- Respect others

We've discussed poor behavior in people in earlier sections and we'll have more later in the book. This is a tricky subject. What's "right" to some is not so "right" to others. People working in groups create many dynamics. It is not my place here to make black and white what is generally many shades of gray when it comes to human behavior and human interaction. I will direct you to the following perspectives so you can decide for yourself:

1. What does your upbringing and your heart tell you?
2. What is your manager's philosophy?
3. What is your company's or industry's culture and practices?

### **If You Get the Boss From Hell, No Amount of Money Is Worth It**

I used to hear about the Boss from Hell (BFH) through news articles and magazine stories. I didn't believe they actually existed. Those stories about the psychotic boss that yells at people or gives absurd orders sounded like it only happened in movies. I've never seen or had a boss like this. It may happen, but I think these physical behaviors would not be tolerated into today's policy-laden work environment. The type of BFH who can operate undetected uses psychological weapons, not physical ones. They make your life miserable in a subtler and far less visible way, like being condescending and critical. You never seem to do anything good enough, no matter how much instruction you get from them. They are very anal and detail oriented. They demand to know everything you are doing, when, how, and why. They want weekly status reports and they pick at every report you turn in including the report format, even though *they* gave you the format to use.