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HIERARCHY

## Another trait for the outlaw list: abuse of rank

Workplace ethicist ROBERT FULLER tells WALLACE IMMEN why there has to be a change in the way people wield power

WALLACE IMMEN

Rank has its privileges -- but all too often, titles and power are being abused on the job, ethicist Robert Fuller warns.

The time has come to openly discuss rankism, and outlaw it in the same way employers have cracked down on racism and sexism, which were once prevalent in workplace, the consultant on equality issues argues in his new book *All Rise: Somebodies, Nobodies and the Politics of Dignity*.

Efforts to crack down on bullying, such as Quebec's anti-harassment laws, are a start, but "rankism is much broader than bullying," says Mr. Fuller, the former president of Oberlin College in Ohio. "It is ostracizing, belittling and demeaning people, and abusing authority."

And there is a long way to go to overcome such behaviour, because many of the abuses go unspoken as victims fear retribution from people who have power over their jobs.

Print Edition - Section Front



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But once rankism is more openly spoken about, he says, "it will basically be career suicide to abuse rank, the same way it is now to be openly racist or sexist or homophobic."

However, Mr. Fuller says he is not advocating eliminating rank, which has its purpose. "It tells us, for instance, who is qualified to fly a plane or do surgery," he says.

"But if the hierarchy abuses its power, people of lower rank who are mistreated are going to be resentful and the organization will be dysfunctional," Mr. Fuller explains.

"When people feel mistreated and left out, they feel justified in sabotaging the operation, slacking off or stealing office supplies because their dignity is under assault."

Openly discussing the effects of abuse of rank in the workplace will make it impossible for people to continue this kind of dignity-crushing behaviour, he argues.

An enlightened boss can be a big part of the solution. "A boss who treats his subordinates with dignity and makes sure that egalitarian treatment happens down the line will reap a payoff in productivity and people loving their jobs."

As an example, he points to the companies that Jim Collins profiled in the 2001 book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't*. In these successful companies, Mr. Collins found that executives were willing to listen to anyone, and tried to treat everyone in the company with equal dignity.

"It's not goody-goodyism, it's self-interest," Mr. Fuller says. When people treat each other with dignity, "it creates healthier employees and healthier and more successful bosses."

So what steps can employers take to move toward a workplace free of rankism? Here are Mr. Fuller's recommendations:

**Encourage questions,**

**protect dissent**

If people feel afraid to raise questions about how others are treated, the workplace ends up being a place where problems are covered up and unequal treatment is condoned, Mr. Fuller says.

To change this requires making corporate cultures more open. And such a shift has to be pushed from the top, he argues.

One of the ways to make it happen is to make more use of 360-degree performance reviews, in which not only managers rate the performance of employees but subordinates can rate and comment on managers.

"People need to be held accountable up and down the ladder," he says. One example he points to in his book is the cockpit safety regulations in the airline industry. Employees are all responsible for safety and anybody at any level is expected to report on conditions that can affect safe operations, such as a suspicion that a pilot is drunk and shouldn't be flying the plane.

#### **Make rank flexible**

The traditional corporate structure, with its strict military hierarchy, can make the decision-making authority so rigid that people don't have to justify their actions and managers may make decisions in areas where they have little expertise, Mr. Fuller says.

But a flexible rank system, as has been used in some technology companies, can change all that. A person who is the expert in one area may be assigned as project leader for a particular task. And after that is finished, the decision-making authority may be reassigned to someone with more experience in that area of the task. This ensures the person best qualified for the tasks is making the decisions, he explains.

#### **Compensate equitably**

"We've created phenomenally huge disparities between the pay of employees and those in higher ranks, and this is creating animosity," Mr. Fuller says. In the long term, there has to be a rebalancing.

This is going to be a tall order because it is hard to cut people's pay. But because the disparities have become so large, he thinks caps on salary increases are on the way, either imposed by government or through the lead of companies who see the advantages of promoting equality.

One way to do this is to create more transparency in the process of setting salaries and bonuses by putting employee representatives on company boards.

"Open that up and it doesn't happen because people are too embarrassed to make outrageous salary increases," Mr. Fuller says.

#### **Delegate power**

In a workplace that is run from the top down, those at the bottom of the ladder can come to believe they are not valued or respected and, thus, will not make the effort to do their best.

"Creating an esprit de corps comes from counting on people and giving them responsibility and expecting them to deliver," Mr. Fuller says.

If managers want to help employees feel better about themselves and empowered by their work, give them more responsibility and the chance to fail or to succeed without getting in their way.

It can be a little risky but in the long run it pays off in people rising to the challenge, Mr. Fuller says.

#### **Recognize everyone**

Very few people in large organizations take the trouble to understand the contribution that others make.

That can lead to cynicism and disrespect for people whose jobs some might consider lower in importance than their own, Mr. Fuller says.

That's a mistake. It's much smarter to create an appreciation of how the whole system fits together and express thanks for what each employee contributes to the success of the organization, he suggests.


This can come in the form of awards or all-staff events or recognition during staff meetings.

"It should be natural and not a big deal, otherwise this can feel phony," he adds.

It all comes down to encouraging open discussion of rank, its responsibilities and limits, Mr. Fuller says.

"Once it is on the table, it's harder to get away with abusing rank."

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