

'Dignity is not negotiable'

Rankism is the new bane of society. It's time to make it stop, **ROBERT W. FULLER** writes

Organizations, like organisms, are vulnerable to maladies, especially those endemic to society as a whole.

As long as racism and sexism were undiagnosed and untreated at large, for example, many businesses proved to be hospitable hosts. But in the aftermath of the civil rights and women's movements, most firms became alert to the symptoms of these afflictions. A company found harbouring either today must either fix it or lose business.

There's another malady, still generally unacknowledged, that's corrupting our society and, as a result, our organizations: rankism, the abuse of power by those higher up on the totem pole ("somebodies") against those lower down ("nobodies").

We see examples everywhere: A parent belittles a child. A teacher humiliates a student. A doctor intimidates a nurse. A customer demeans a waiter. A boss bullies an employee. There's corporate corruption, sexual abuse by clergy, school hazing, the abuse of elders.

Today, what primarily marks people for mistreatment and exploitation is not the traits that have singled them out in the past, but low rank and the powerlessness it signals. Indeed, hierarchies are all about rank and power, so it's not surprising that they've become incubators of rankism. The power vested in rank-holders at each level of a hierarchy gives them leverage over those of lower rank, shielding them from the consequences of exploiting subordinates.

The effects are no different than those of the other now-familiar

"isms" based on race, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation: Abuse and discrimination are disrespectful, demeaning and degrading. They distort personal relationships, undermine trust, stoke resentment and indignation, erode the will to learn and tax productivity. And they can cripple an organization, sometimes fatally.

But unlike the other isms, rankism plays no favourites, striking at all levels. Everyone's a potential victim. You can be a "somebody" at work and a "nobody" at home. You can be a "somebody" one day and a "nobody" the next.

In the workplace, rankist practices undermine creativity, productivity, customer service and employee commitment. The result: The victims — from day workers to the highest echelons of management — start withholding their hearts and minds and the enterprise begins to decline.

George Washington had that insight with respect to slavery, one of the most noxious forms of rankism. Today, the inefficiency of slavery is obvious. But to Washington, himself a slave-owner, it came as a surprise. While on a visit to Philadelphia, he noticed that free men there could do in "two or three days what would employ [his slaves] a month or more." His explanation that slaves had no chance "to establish a good name [and so were] too regardless of a bad one" was not that of a moralizer, but rather of a practical man concerned with the bottom line.

Granted, employers aren't dealing with slaves now, though it is sometimes argued that wage-earners are wage-slaves and salaried employees are only marginally

more independent.

Some may suggest that rankism is simply human nature. But consider that not so long ago, it was widely believed that racism and sexism were deemed to be innate, and are now generally viewed as learned. As well, while the impulse to exploit a power advantage for personal gain is hardly uncommon in our species, history shows it is equally in our nature to detest such abuses and to act together to limit the authority of rank-holders. To this end, we have overthrown kings and tyrants and placed political power in the hands of the people. We have reined in monopolies with antitrust legislation. We have limited the power of employers through unionization.

Blacks, women, homosexuals and people with disabilities have all built effective movements that succeeded in replacing a once-sacrosanct social consensus with another that repudiated it and that acknowledged their right to equal dignity.

So why do we tolerate rankism? First, we fear the consequences of resisting: demerit, demotion, ridicule and ostracism. Under duress, we may seem to compromise our dignity, but we are temporizing, awaiting the first opportunity to demand the respect that everyone wants and deserves.

Second — and tragically — we covet the rewards that come with status and power and dream of someday attaining them. Of course, as long as rankism rules, the chances of this happening are slim. In truth, we are supporting the very system that is keeping us down.

It's time to stop. As Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Foundation, says: "Dignity is not negotiable."

At work, early detection and prompt treatment can restore employee morale, rejuvenate execu-

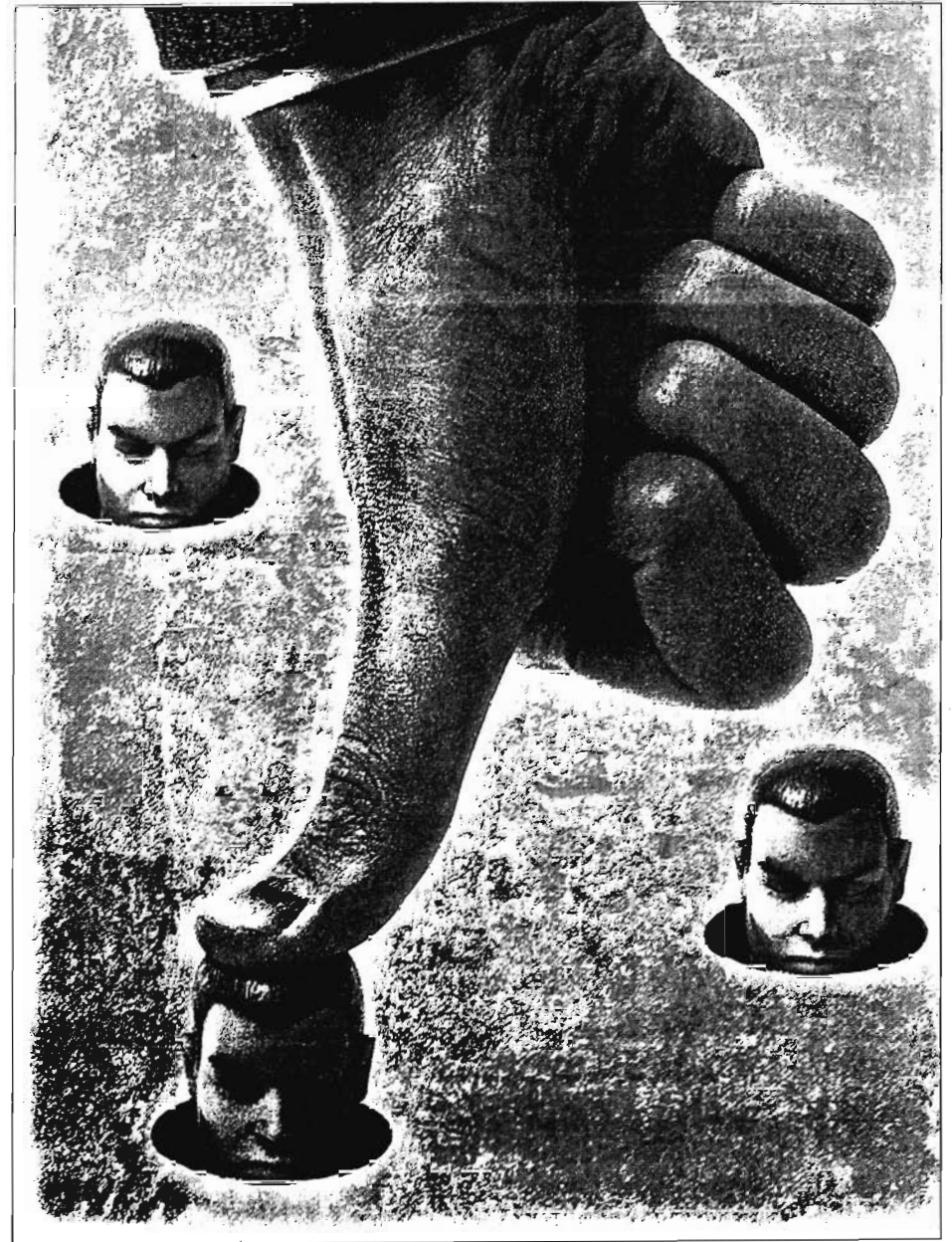


ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC FIELD/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

tives and improve a company's bottom line. Maintaining a strong organizational defence against rankism is practically synonymous with good management. In *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't*, Jim Collins makes the point that pro-

tecting their firms from abuses of rank and the indignity such practices sow is the hallmark of great business leaders.

As rankism is identified and reduced, people's energy is catalyzed and engaged. Employees who feel recognized as individuals and who

feel they have a fair chance at promotion give their companies their best. Organizations that figure out how to give their workers a voice in management and a stake in its profitability reap the benefits.

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Good managers prevent abuses of rank

RANKISM *from page C1*

The competitive advantages of relatively non-rankist hierarchies are most easily seen in companies devoted to research and development, where the very purpose is to discover and exploit new ideas. Such organizations are adept at making the distinction between rank and rankism, and have built a culture in which this distinction is paramount.

For example, Intel, like many technology firms, operates with the explicit understanding that any employee is free to call into question any other employee's professional views. A newly hired 20-year-old can challenge a director of research or the CEO. The policy of open, free exchange regardless of rank is seen as a vital part of keeping the company a creative, productive place. Rankism is perceived as a threat to research. Condescension and arrogance are out. Open, reciprocal interaction is valued over pride of position.

This doesn't mean that we do away with rank. That would make no more sense than trying to do away with race or gender. When earned and exercised appropriately, rank is a legitimate, virtually indispensable tool of organization. The problem is not with authority per se, but with its abuse.

Making the distinction between rank and rankism actually revalidates rank when it has been properly earned. Sorting out the proper and improper uses of rank restores to it the respect it deserves. In the

absence of rankism, presidents, CEOs and leaders of every kind regain the recognition that is their due — no more, no less. The only real "boss" is a better idea or a better question.

As with most revolutions, the young are leading the way: The generation now entering the workforce is already making the move to pull the plug on rampant rankism. Today's young — mobile, resourceful, multi-skilled and ready to take chances — are less willing to put up with unfair treatment than previous generations and are groping toward a new set of principles that downplay rigid hierarchy and status, and affirm the notions of equality, teamwork, and a more equitable distribution of rewards.

These attitudes will herald a major transformation of the workplace. Just as in the civic realm, where subjects evolved into citizens, at work we can anticipate employees evolving into partners.

In a post-rankist workplace, rank will be awarded and held in relation to a particular task. Recognition will be given when the task is completed, and rank then reassigned as needed for another project.

The correlation between decision-making and salary will be re-examined. Asking a good question — one that spurs the firm the consequences of a bad decision — is as important to the bottom line as is making a good decision.

To retain the loyalty of workers, executives will neither show favoritism to those of high rank nor abridge the privileges of those low-

er down. Companies will take pride in being places where everyone experiences equal dignity, has equal opportunity and receives equal justice. The mallroom-to-boardroom story will become less exceptional; employee co-owners, with a share of the equity, will become more common; and the income and equity gaps between the highest and lowest paid will narrow.

Firms of the future will incorporate into their business plans scenarios for their employees' advancement. Personnel will be seen less as workers holding down a job and more as learners progressing to different levels. To create room at the top so others have a chance for upward mobility, resources will be devoted to "graduating" executives. Personnel officers will assume responsibility for seeing that everyone in the firm has somewhere to go, whether inside or outside the company, and assist them in the transitions. Job tenure is an inherently rankist benefit that has outlived its usefulness.

Although rankism can't be eradicated overnight, it's time to put it on notice.

Authority can be democratized while increasing organizational efficiency, from our civic institutions to our workplaces, through a broad-based "dignitarian" movement dedicated to overcoming rankism. That's democracy's next step.

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Somebodies and Nobodies:
Overcoming the Abuse of Rank
(New Society Publishers, 2003).