

Enlightened View

Rankism in the Workplace — The Hidden Barrier to Success

Organizations, like organisms, are vulnerable to maladies. They are especially prone to develop those endemic to society as a whole. For example, so long as racism and sexism were undiagnosed and untreated at large, they found many businesses to be hospitable hosts. In the aftermath of the civil rights and women's movements, most firms became alert to the symptoms of these afflictions. A company caught harboring either of them today faces the choice of remedying the situation or losing business.

There's another malady to which hierarchical organizations are susceptible, but which has yet to be identified and named. It is the abuse of power by those higher up on the totem pole in relation to those lower down. When discrimination and injustice are race-based, we call it racism; when they're gender-based, we call it sexism. By analogy, "rankism" is defined as abuse or discrimination based on the differences of power attached to rank.

New words are often slow to win their way into the lexicon, but once they do, the ramifications can be great. The coinage "sexism" was at first vehemently resisted, especially by those who were practicing it. Isolating and naming a problem can be a big part of finding a solution to it.

Once we have done so with rankism, we see examples of it everywhere. A parent belittles a child. A teacher humiliates a student. Officers abuse suspects. A customer demeans a waiter. A boss bullies an employee. There's corporate corruption, sexual abuse by clergy, school hazing and abuse of elders. All are forms of this insidious scourge.

Since hierarchies are all about rank and power, it's not surprising that they are the primary 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 or shareholders for personal advantage. Sooner or later those with high rank are tempted to use their position for self-aggrandizement and personal gain instead of the institution's avowed purpose. A recent example was the board-approved \$180 million compensation package awarded to the Chairman of the New York Stock Exchange.

The effects of rankism on its victims are similar to those of racism or sexism on minorities and women. Abuse and discrimination feel disrespectful, demeaning, and degrading to victims no matter what the excuse—race, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, or rank. In contrast to the other now-familiar "isms," it plays no



Robert W. Fuller, author of "Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank," taught at Columbia University and served as President of Oberlin College. Article used with permission. Photo credit: Terrence McCarthy.

favorites, striking across the board from day workers to the highest echelons of management.

Early detection and prompt treatment of rankism can restore worker morale, rejuvenate disillusioned executives, and improve a company's bottom line. Maintaining a strong organizational defense 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 protecting their firms from abuses of rank and the indignity such practices sow is the hall mark of great business leaders.

Under duress, people may seem to compromise their dignity, but they are only temporizing, awaiting the first opportunity to demand the respect that everyone wants and deserves. Once the

rank and file begin withholding their hearts and minds—as they do from any organization beset with rankism—the enterprise begins to decline.

Rankism won't yield to preaching, but it will diminish as it becomes clear that rankist practices undermine creativity, productivity, customer service, and employee commitment. Learning not to demean workers is as beneficial to the success of a business as is realizing that "the customer is king."

It is sometimes argued that wage-earners are wage-slaves and salaried employees only marginally more independent. But the negative motivation of the past—fear of penalties or job loss—is now becoming dwarfed by the positive incentive of being part of a team of responsible professionals.

As rankism is identified and reduced, people's energy becomes 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 great benefits.

The competitive advantages of relatively non-rankist hierarchies are most easily discernible in institutions devoted to research and development, where the very purpose of the enterprise is to discover and exploit new ideas. Such organizations are more likely to recognize the stifling effects of rankism and build a culture in which preventing it 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 twenty-year-old can challenge a director of research or

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