

Working lives

The Mayan guide to business

An anthropologist has identified three types of employee - pulsetakers, hubs and gatekeepers. What type are you?

BY SANJIDA O'CONNELL

As a young chemistry student, Karen Stephenson visited the Mayan temples of South America. Despite her science background she had painted since she was a child and was keen to see the Mayan paintings. But what she saw in the jungle reminded her of experiences in the chemistry lab and led to an academic journey in which she made connections between the Mayan temples, maths and business management.

"The Maya, of all indigenous peoples, have a realism, a naturalism, a deliberate line like all great art," she says. "They're beautiful, no matter what your idea of beauty is."

A small, groomed woman with intense blue eyes, she is quiet and steely. She calls herself a "corporate anthropologist" and has a rare combination of skills: she has a PhD in anthropology, a BSc in chemistry, a BA in fine art, an MA in maths and has interwoven all this knowledge to create her own science of business. Through this, she claims, she can explain how businesses work and why some fail.

Businesses, she says, are like cocktail parties. "I confess to having attended countless cocktail parties and continue to be amazed how, after just a few drinks, I end up with people who are like me in some way.

"It's not the alcohol talking, but the ancient drive of seeking similarity," says Dr Stephenson. "When people connect at this basic level,

they are engaging in an embryonic form of trust with each other. What began as a room full of disconnected people may end up as a network of people connected in invisible lines of trust."

This is exactly how businesses work, she believes. There are strict hierarchies in most businesses, but they still

more to collections of people than hierarchies. From her work in chemistry she knew that molecules attached themselves to other molecules according to a pattern — whether there would then be a chemical attraction, an explosion or no reaction.

She wondered whether the same sort of patterns would



A visit to Mayan temples such as these at Palenque inspired Dr. Stephenson's management theories.

depend on trust. We know who ranks above whom, but the work gets done through the knowledge of its employees and their intuition. This tacit knowledge is shared through formal and informal networks that bond and motivate people within the company.

What Stephenson has discovered is not only how these networks operate, but how crucial it is to uncover and use them if a company is to restructure, merge or simply work more effectively.

While in her early twenties, Stephenson realized there was

exist in human interactions. This is why the Mayan trip was a significant experience: her ideas started to crystallize when she first saw Mayan settlements from the air. The houses and roads form the same kind of patterns she had witnessed in chemical reactions in the lab.

She interpreted this as an attempt by the Mayans to facilitate the processing of knowledge and goods. At the heart was a hub, a central collection of houses; the settlements by the river acted as gatekeepers; the people living between the two had their fin-

gers on the pulse of trade. Her research led her to discover that there is a basic kite-like pattern of networks in businesses with these same three types of key players at its heart — hubs, gatekeepers and pulsetakers. Hubs are people who have the greatest number of ties to others. They are multitaskers with strong interpersonal skills. Gatekeepers are connected to one or two hubs. "They're connected to people who are connected," says Stephenson. "Hubs know the right people, and gatekeepers know the people who know the right people."

Pulsetakers may keep in touch with only a relatively few people, but indirectly they're in touch with huge numbers of people: they have their finger on the pulse. "They're the glue in a business," says Stephenson. "They're widely trusted and know a lot about the business."

Machiavelli was a typical pulsetaker, says Stephenson. He knew everything that was going on in the Italian court; he was the prince's adviser. Pulsetakers are often overlooked yet they can be a hidden resource for leadership, either by being a leader themselves or by validating the leader.

About 50 per cent of business leaders fail. "It's hugely expensive to be wrong, and knowing the underlying network allows business the opportunity to improve the odds and to develop people," says Stephenson.

Initially it used to take her a year to figure out the net-



Karen Stephenson believes that there are three types of employee, and that every company needs to understand — and use — them.

work in a business. Now it takes her a week. Each employee fills in an online questionnaire that takes about half an hour and asks questions such as "Who do you talk to about routine work?" and "Who do you talk to about ideas?" The data is fed into a mathematical model using genetic algorithms that create a 3D map of the bonds between employees. Stephenson then pinpoints the key players in the network.

Recently the Post Office was involved in a merger and is reorganizing under the

name Consignia. Stephenson was asked to help to ease this process. In the occupational health section of Consignia she found that two unusual secretaries were acting as hubs, pulses and gatekeepers. As a result, the head of the division, Steve Boorman, will ensure that they become more involved in key meetings.

"It has helped us to understand who are the key players in the team and to identify other development options," says Boorman. "We've found it very supportive."

Stephenson has also been called in to help US Navy

headquarters in the Pentagon in Washington to change from a paper to a digital organization. Admiral Dennis McGinn, the head of the task-force at the HQ and deputy chief of naval operations for warfare requirements, says that Stephenson's initial survey of the staff helped them to work out "who's talking to whom on what general subject matter. We found a lot of time was spent moving information around rather than making decisions."

Understanding this process and knowing how the organization works will help

McGinn to implement a website that will have the right proportions of the web targeted at the right people to cut down on the paperpushing.

Of course there is a dark side to networks. We instinctively stick with people we like and trust and exclude others who are different from ourselves. In terms of business this means that ideas that are different are not heard.

Stephenson suggests using the authoritarianism of the business hierarchy to break up networks so that people who would not normally work together are forced to bond. "Use the hierarchy to override the network," she says. "Homogenous networks can stifle creativity."

She cites one academic institution that approached her after a failed attempt to get colleagues to share information. The in-house tactic had been to give the staff an open-plan office. The scheme failed because the academics built walls around themselves using their books.

If Stephenson gets that contract her solution will certainly be more complex and more subtle.

Now find out where you fit in

1. Do you interact on a one-to-one basis with more than 25 colleagues a day?
2. Will your work suffer if you are absent because no one else can do what you do?
3. Do you enjoy spending your leisure time with a close-knit group of friends and colleagues?
4. Do you have a range of interests and belong to very different organizations (sports clubs, art groups, charity groups, etc)?
5. Are most of your friends very different from you and each other in terms of their careers, tastes in social activities and lifestyle?
6. Are most of your acquaintances unknown to each other?

If you answered "yes" to 1 and 3 you are a hub. Hubs are the team members who seem to know everyone in their department well, tend to know how things are done and are the repositories for local knowledge. They know where the best resources are and they act as clear-houses for information and ideas.

If you answered "yes" to 2 and 6 you are a gatekeeper. Gatekeepers do not have as many one-to-one relationships but the relationships they do have are with central players. They control access to others or serve as bridges between others in order to control the flow of information. They are often aware of their own power.

If you answered "yes" to 4 and 5 you are a pulsetaker. Pulsetakers are indirectly connected to the greatest number of people and have a wide array of contacts that extend beyond the limits of their immediate groups. They have a diversity of interests and are tuned in to the "pulse" of the organization.