

## Standing Up to Creativity-Stifling Mismanagement Will Take Courage

**HUMAN RESOURCES**  
KAREN STEPHENSON

*On Tuesday morning, Delores, who needs critical input from her supervisor, Judy, to continue on a time-sensitive project, asks for a few minutes of her time. "Sure," Judy says, "how about 3 o'clock?"*

*Delores spends the next few hours organizing her questions in order to make the meeting quick, efficient and productive. At 2:15, she notices Judy rushing down the hall carrying her briefcase and hears her tell her assistant, "See you Thursday."*

*Delores dashes out and asks, "Aren't we meeting at 3?"*

*To which Judy replies: "Oh, I have to get on the road for that meeting in St. Louis tomorrow. Your questions can wait till Thursday, can't they?"*

*Delores' spirits fall. Now she is practically paralyzed on her project for three days, and probably longer, since Judy's schedule is likely to be full upon her return.*

Sound familiar? Clearly Judy's behavior is manipulative, whether consciously so or not, and manipulation is all too common—and accepted—in the workplace. Since she became department head, this type of behavior has become Judy's MO. Her employees are consistently frustrated, grumbling among themselves, and they see no solution except to go along or leave the department.

*Guy works in a public institution. When his expertise is needed in another division, he is approached by Jim, the division head, to provide consultation for extra compensation—a routine procedure within the institution.*

*Guy dutifully writes a proposal and Jim approves it. Guy performs the work and invoices Jim for approximately \$4,000. After 30 days and no check, Guy calls to inquire. The paperwork has been misplaced. Guy resubmits the invoice. Another 30 days go by. No check. Guy calls again. This time, too much time has elapsed since the work was performed and he needs to re-invoice for "more recent work," even though the project was completed as originally and mutually agreed to.*

*Guy fabricates a new invoice and resubmits. Another 30 days. No check. He calls again. This time he is told that any amount exceeding \$1,500 is considered a conflict of interest and that he must re-invoice for four installments of \$1,000 each, fabricating a different project for each installment. So Guy fictionalizes four invoices for four different mythical projects at amounts that hover around \$1,000 each. To avoid getting caught, he staggers their submission over three months. One year after the initial proposal was submitted, Guy receives his*

*fourth and final check.*

Time is not the most grievous loss here; rather, it's the psychological energy that could have been spent productively on projects. There is no way to measure how much of Guy's motivation and creativity were siphoned off by the demand for deceit. Even though he had a sporting attitude about it all after 90 days, his creative energy was used to dream up scenarios in order to finesse the rules. To get paid, he was forced to feed the bureaucracy.

What's wrong with the picture in these two true stories? In the first, Judy is a weak person in a high place. Her skills at managing upward were mistaken for all-around good management and resulted in her promotion over others.

At some subconscious level, she may be aware that her position hangs by a thread and is threatened by the talents and skills of those beneath her. She unwittingly weakens them by placing unnecessary barriers in their way to retard the rate and substance of their productivity, thereby maintaining her visible lead in the eyes of those above her. This results, not only in her subordinates' frustration, but also saps their energy over time, chipping away at their motivation. Vibrant employees are gradually transformed into drones programmed to perform routine tasks, and the bureaucracy lumbers on at a glacial pace.

In the second story, we see mature bureaucracy in action, housing employees who feed and service its insatiable appetite. Having forgotten the constituency they are meant to serve, employee bureaucrats are focused narrowly inward rather than broadly outward. This breeds a cancerous narcissism that consumes the legitimate, honest efforts of "naive" employees by asking them to lie by layers.

Bureaucracy is like a coral reef. It builds on skeletal remains until there's a huge monster made up of layer after layer of dead cells of deceit and inefficiency, changing the ecosystem around it. These bureaucracies are an ossified testimony to years of mismanagement.

In its early stages, when people had the chance to chip away at it, they didn't and instead took the path of least resistance by simply adding more layers. Rather than have the courage to face facts, it is easier to lie and be a player.

Although we give lip service to breaking out of boxes, in reality we simply reinforce the boundaries of the box. It is the height of hypocrisy, and we do it to ourselves. By avoiding the short-term pain of standing on principle, we hurt each other and the constituencies we serve by saying to ourselves, "I'll think about it tomorrow," as Scarlett O'Hara

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## BUREAUCRACY: Courage to Break Out of the Box

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did, and simply go along.

So what can we do? In the same way that a coral reef takes generations to form, it will take generations for an organization to self-correct—short of a revolution or nuclear explosion. Why? Because an institution is only as good—or as bad—as the individuals who inhabit it. For creativity to be sustained, individuals must come to terms with the harsh reality that making a difference

may mean making waves.

What is the solution? If I could answer this question completely, I wouldn't be writing this article. But since I asked it, let me answer with three general guidelines. First, true organization can speed the process; there is strength in numbers. Individuals must come together in their resolve to refuse to go along, and instead follow a moral compass. Their success lies in synchronicity, the merging of individual strengths in a timely

way that cannot go unnoticed by the institution.

Second, stay focused on the objective at hand. Heed but don't concede to politics. Remember, it's just as bad not to exercise power when it is appropriate as it is to exercise power when it is not appropriate, and God help us all to know the difference between the two.

Finally, always have compassion for but expect better of people who float down the chan-

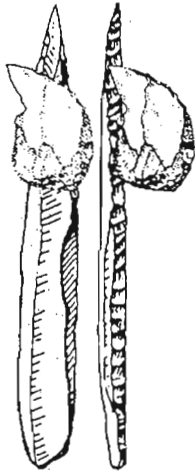
nels of least resistance—the weak or tired who give primacy to the ordinary over the extraordinary. The ones who make a difference are those who, under threat of reprisal, do not give away their integrity. They persevere on principle.

My guesstimate is that the ratio of the weak to the strong is about 10 to 1. Where are you?

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## The Cutting Edge

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### Tracking Networks

By Karen Stephenson (UCLA)

The term *network* has three meanings in social life and research. The verb *to network* refers to social discourse, hence the endless jabberwocky about networking in both popular psychology and business press. In organizational behavior *network analysis* refers to an analytical tool in search of a theory. In management science, things are more complicated: the noun *network* exists only at the level of metaphor with minimal regard for rigorous empiricism.

My first brush with networks as nouns occurred not in anthropology but in physical chemistry and quantum physics. If, according to Feynman and physics, the source and course of subatomic travel can be traced via networks, can the anthropologist look at the archaeological record the same way? What if we could "trace" ancient trade networks and deduce dynamics of dynastic expansion? What if these ideas were not artifacts of the past but scientific organizing principles? If so, could they be applied to contemporary settings?

Instead of tracking family lineages, I set out in the corporate jungles to track "financial lineages," following the money to unravel present-day management and moral mazes. To date, I have collected empirical data on networks from over 200 companies, both profit and not-for-profit, large and small, in what is the most comprehensive database on business networks in the world. This research is the result of long stays in both metaphorical and real jungles.

### Elementary Structures

My most valued insights stem from Lévi-Strauss's own failure to find a real "atom" of kinship. His suggestion

that we should be less concerned with theoretical consequences of a 10% increase in the population in a country having 50 million inhabitants than with the changes in structure occurring when a "two-person household" becomes a "three-person household" (1955) is a calculated statement about the relative importance of structure over scale. It is true that scale (ie, going from 1 million to 10 million to 50 million) can and does make a difference. Just ask Donald Trump.

But what if there were an iterative pattern to the structuring of the 5 deals that produced Trump's \$50 million? What if there were a structural principle at work *in work*? For Lévi-Strauss, the original idea of an elementary structure or atom of kinship was more provocative than practical. It turned out there was no reliably repeating structure in the biological or fictive family. But what if there exists an atom of organization, a recurring structure of how people organize?

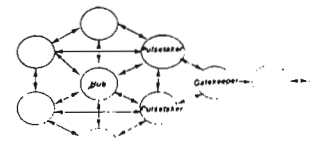
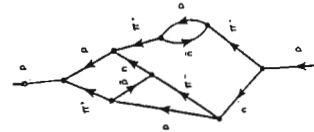
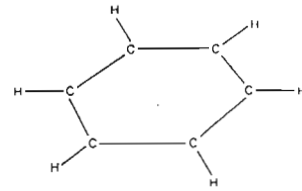
### Emergent Patterns

If we closely examine the patterns in ancient trade networks and settlements, for example, we don't find a carbon copy of benzene, but we do find a constellation of three prototypical patterns. These patterns emerge from the remains of past civilizations to tell us why certain people traded with certain partners. From the remains of daily routines, these same patterns arise again to tell us how people organize around workplace issues. To share the same patterns with our ancestors is a hint that humans are responding to scientific principles of organization.

The first repeating pattern is to be central, like the hub in a hub-and-spoke system on a bicycle wheel. This pattern represents an optimal distribution system for trading, settling in the flat lands and centralizing work processes. The second pattern is the gatekeeper on the critical pathway between hubs, a position that serves to connect hubs to each other. Gatekeepers serve as bridges between parts of a society or an organization. The third pattern is the pulsetaker, someone maximally connected to everyone via the shortest routes. The pulsetaker knows what everyone is thinking and feeling. Machiavelli was a pulsetaker: someone behind the scenes but all-seeing.

These three "culture carriers" resist change and can catalyze change rapidly if they are strategically leveraged. Once identified, culture carriers can be used to retard or speed the rate of assimilation in a merger or acquisition of another company, map a restructuring or divestiture or communicate a message efficiently and effectively.

If a message needs to be sent to 500 troops, for example, enlist the help of the hubs to broadcast the message. While the hubs are so deployed, likewise attend to the gatekeepers, being sure they are working with, not against, the plan. Once three months have



A benzene ring, the 6-carbon building block of organic compounds (top); the Feynman diagram, a scatter map of a subatomic collision (middle); and a social interaction diagram showing 3 culture carriers

lapsed since the first message, touch base with the pulsetakers. If the original message sent was "apples" and the pulsetakers report "apples," the message was accurately and uniformly received. We don't need to ask all 500 troops, just the pulsetakers: if they know, rest assured that everybody else knows. If the message reported back

was not apples, but "oranges," we know there is a problem with the gatekeepers. Damage control consists of resending the message through them.

### Social Benzene Ring

By adding these three structures together, we come close to approximating the "benzene ring" of social structure. It may not be the atom of kinship Lévi-Strauss envisioned, but it is a highly charged molecule of social interaction. This molecule of interaction appears in both extinct and extant records and confirms my deep belief that there is hardwiring embedded within the softness of social capital. And that's no metaphor.

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