

## COVERSTORY

# THE OFFICE

## How politics, backstabbing and arrogance can ruin the workplace

By **AMBROSE CLANCY**

**A** veteran devil gives an apprentice in the trade a description of hell on earth, telling him to picture a place “where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance and resentment.”

The devil, in C.S. Lewis’ “The Screwtape Letters,” is talking about a bureaucratic office, and if any of the above dysfunctions describes where you work, take cold comfort. You’re not alone.

Ellen Cooperperson, president of Hauppauge’s Corporate Performance Consultants, said in her 25-year career she’s calculated that 80 percent of offices are dysfunctional, with that figure backed by management research.

We asked her and other experts why good places go bad.

### **NOBODY’S TALKIN’**

Cooperperson consulted on the Bank of New York-Mellon Financial merger in the summer of 2007. A chief concern was how the newly combined company would function once the bell rang on Wall Street. But people at both firms panicked they’d be pink slipped or, if they survived, what roles they’d have, who they would report to, etc. The panic was expressed by deafening silence.

So Cooperperson invited employees into a room where six elephant piñatas hung.

“Literally making them recognize the elephants in the room,” Cooperperson



**Ellen Cooperperson said healthy offices welcome debate.**

said. “After smashing them, everyone’s concerns were addressed.”

She described offices as a “network of conversations,” and healthy offices embrace debate as part of those conversations. Fear of debate means a lack of trust; with no debate, gossiping and backbiting are the only conversations remaining. Therefore managers have to upgrade the quality of those conversations.

Trust has to be established by management, but the employee can take the bull by the horns, said Vicky Oliver, author of “Bad Bosses, Crazy Co-Workers & Other Office Idiots.”

“Nothing’s served by being passive. Don’t ignore situations,” Oliver said.

Matthew Cordaro, dean of Dowling College’s Townsend School of Business, believes in regularly scheduled meetings.

“And nothing should be sugarcoated,” he said, meaning the present and the fu-

ture of the organization must be discussed regularly.

Another toxic form of communication is private huddling and criticizing people not present.

### **FISH ROT FROM THE HEAD DOWN**

Leaders are responsible for an office’s atmosphere, and a poisonous office usually means no accountability at the top, Cooperperson said.

“The ultimate consequence of avoiding accountability is inattention to results until it becomes systemic,” she said. “Goals are not achieved but there are a lot of excuses why.”

Robert Riggio, author of “The Practice of Leadership,” has written about clueless leaders such as the one played by Steve Carell on TV’s “The Office,” who are blind to an awful situation. Then there are managers who simply don’t care. They’re worse, since they delegate poorly and reward incompetency.

Cordaro believes leaders must fight for their people. He recalled 1987 when the Long Island Lighting Co. was melting down, and how employees suffered from the company’s terrible image. Leaders ignored staff morale and that made the situation even more catastrophic.

Another leader working the dark side is one who believes in the concept of divide and rule, said Robert Bornstein, a professor at Adelphi’s Derner Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies.

“Pitting staff members against each other to motivate them creates sibling rivalry and is a great distraction,” Bornstein said. “There’s confusion about roles and responsibilities.”

## IT'S THE SYSTEM, STUPID

Cooperperson once had an assignment to work with an aloof and arrogant manager running sales at the Long Island headquarters of an international corporation. She found a division with such resistance to this manager that people were making fun of him to the point where an unofficial part of orientation for new hires included hearing negative stories about him.

"It was a mutiny, with the office dead in the water," she said.

The solution was to work with the manager, who made amends and then took on the larger challenge of "fixing" the organization.

"When someone says, 'Fix him,' I know it's a much larger problem," Cooperperson said.

## NO PLAN STAN

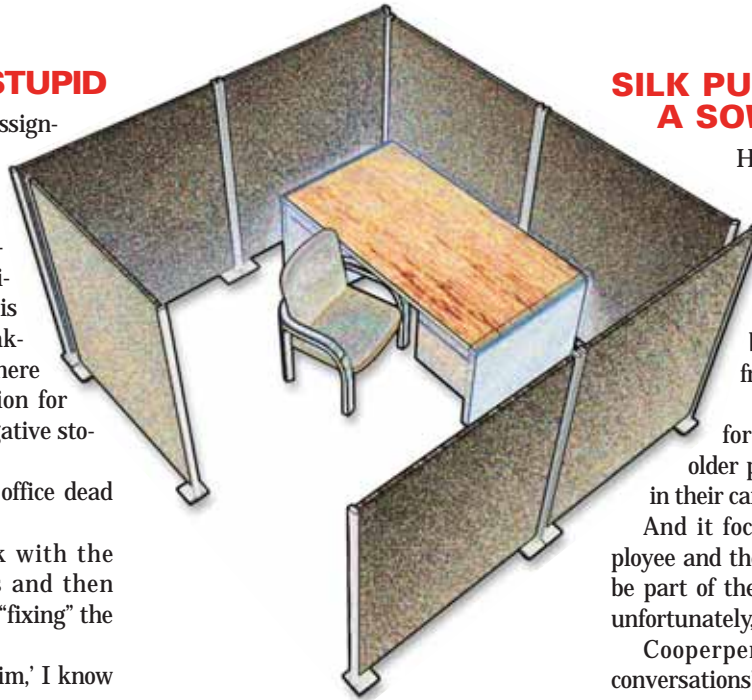
"A good office takes a lot of work, but it also takes a theory," Bornstein said. "It's not just being clear, communicative and consistent in your behavior, but having an underlying framework for what you do."

There are two successful approaches, he added, one Japanese and one American.

"A successful Japanese office is where everyone is nurtured," Bornstein said, referring to studies published in "Psychology Applied to Work," by Paul Muchinsky.

A successful American model is one where goals are crystal clear and incentives are completely spelled out and delivered.

In an MBA program run by Professor James Freeley at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University, students study Continuous Process Improvement, a technique that constantly identifies the causes of problems, avoiding the need to merely put out fires all week long. One of CPI's



tenets is a Japanese principle known as "kaizen," which means every person in the office is involved in problem solving. Most importantly, no blame is assessed for problems. The focus is entirely about finding a solution. CPI is also forward looking, and thus helps avoid dead ends or over-the-cliff disasters in offices. It also strives to remove all work that has no positive impact on the organization's goals.

But office systems are like exercise; no matter if you practice yoga or jumping jacks, it's not going to work unless it's done every day and reviewed regularly.

## PRINCIPALLY IT'S ABOUT PRINCIPALS

Leaders have to set an example by acting ethically, not only with all of their employees but with everyone who interacts with the office, Cordaro said.

"Being successful is of course essential, and having a good reputation as a principled company creates a good working environment to achieve that success," he said.

## SILK PURSE FROM A SOW'S EAR

How do you remediate a toxic office? Author Oliver believes offices should start with the concept that youth must be served. Serious mentoring programs should be installed to keep the office from devouring its young.

"It's enormously important for a young person to find an older person who takes an interest in their career development," she said.

And it focuses both the veteran employee and the newbie. "Mentoring should be part of the organizational system, but unfortunately, in most offices, it's not."

Cooperperson believes "courageous conversations" should commence immediately.

"People are scared in the beginning," she said. "It's, 'Oh, my God, we're going to have to tell the truth?' But you must get the old conversations, the old stories out of the way and put them to rest to make way for the future."

Paul Brennan, Prudential Douglas Elliman Hampton's regional manager, said a real estate office differs in some ways from other offices, but there are enough similarities to learn something. "Changing an office full of wounded egomaniacs is difficult," Brennan said. "You have to be an example and practice humility to keep people's egos in check."

If the theory of squeaky wheels getting the grease is in place, it will be a chaotic mess. "That's a nightmare when everyone catches on to it," Brennan said. "You have to be fair to everyone and turn it around by again acting with some humility."

And if that doesn't work?

"Get yourself into therapy," Brennan said.

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