

## **Editor's Corner -- Do Aggressive Behaviors in Girls Carryover to Adulthood? (If so, what can be done in the work place?)**

**Carol A. Schwab**

Two books published this year have given voice to a reality that's been ignored too long. The books, [\*Odd Girl Out\*](#) and [\*Queen Bees and Wannabes\*](#), describe the destructive behavior of preteen and teenage girls who, from the safety of a clique, target classmates to ridicule, ostracize, and undermine while maintaining an innocent air of being "nice." Dr. Katherine Follett wrote an excellent review of each of these books for this issue of *The Forum*. The books have also prompted several thought-provoking comments from friends and colleagues. Men expressed an interest in reading the books to help them understand women who work with or for them. Also, a number of women identified themselves as targets, not nostalgically from their experiences in junior high school, but in their current work environment.

These comments raise two questions: Do these covertly aggressive behaviors in girls carryover to adulthood? If so, what impact do they have on personal and professional relationships? It shouldn't take a research study to show that these behaviors can be just as destructive for adults as they are for preteens. Certainly, an adult target is generally better equipped to deal with this sort of nastiness, but nevertheless, lives and careers can be altered by mean-spirited pettiness. Let's explore a scenario of how the behaviors described in the books can play havoc in the workplace.

**Scenario:** The ABC Company makes widgets. Its research and development (R&D) department consists of 25 employees. Rose is a senior member of R&D, and she takes on the responsibility of creating a new, revolutionary line of widgets. She chooses a small group of her colleagues to work with her on this project. Minny is upset that she was not invited and resents Rose who is getting far too much credit lately. Instead of confronting Rose and asking her why she was not invited to participate, Minny complains to her friends in the R&D department, a tightly knit clique that includes the R&D supervisor, Bea. Minny and her friends start to ignore Rose, they don't speak to her in the hallway, they ignore her e-mail messages, they do not respond to her requests for help on other projects, they interrupt her at staff meetings, they roll their eyes every time she starts to

speak, they snicker and sneer at her comments, they gossip and spread untruthful rumors about her, they warn fellow-employees against associating with her, and they exclude her from the loop on joint projects. In short, they ridicule, ostracize, and undermine her.

Rose has no idea why her colleagues are behaving this way, and though she has observed them treating others in this manner, she does not know what set them off against her. If she confronts them, they pretend innocence. Being perceived as "nice" and avoiding direct confrontation is all important to the members of the clique. It was an oversight that she was left off an e-mail. The snide remark was a joke. They are just too busy to help. And so on. Because Rose's supervisor, Bea, is also part of the clique, Rose can forget about future promotions, raises, and other opportunities for advancement. The CEO of the company can sense the dysfunction in the R&D department, but can't identify the cause. Everybody seems so nice, but according to Bea, Rose appears to be the center of the trouble, so maybe it's time for her to go . . . .

This fictional scenario takes behaviors described in *Odd Girl Out* and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* and imputes them to adults in the work place. Is it realistic? Several recently published books indicate that the scenario is not farfetched. The book, *In the Company of Women*, by Pat Heim and Susan Murphy, contains passages describing behaviors of women in the workplace that are interchangeable with passages from *Odd Girl Out* describing the behaviors of 10-14 year-old girls. *Work Rage*, by Ronald T. Potter-Efron, describing similar scenarios, addresses how to prevent anger and how to resolve conflict on the job. *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, by Patrick Lencioni, is a leadership fable about uniting a team that is in such disarray that it threatens to destroy the company. All three books illustrate the vested interest an employer has in accurately identifying the underlying cause of "work rage," and in taking the necessary steps to resolve it.

What does this behavior cost ABC Company? Anger, resentment, and hostility can spread until the entire R&D department is in a "state of hate" (Potter-Efron 2000). Productivity goes down; the bottom line suffers. Quality of life suffers; employee morale nose dives. Teamwork is nonexistent because a team does not function well without trust (Lencioni 2002). Valuable employees may be lost, either through termination or resignation, providing only a temporary reprieve until the next victim finds herself in the cross hairs of the clique. The cost to ABC Company is enormous, but until the underlying issues are identified and addressed, the company will continue to pay.

What can an employer do to counteract this type of destructive behavior? First, careful choice in leaders is critical. People who engage in these behaviors rarely make good leaders and generally do not put the interests of the organization ahead of their own personal agendas. In the book *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*, John Maxwell lists "character" as number one because

followers neither trust nor follow a leader whose character they know to be flawed (1999). Employers need to understand the dynamics behind a lack of trust between a supervisor and employees and recognize it as a warning sign. A leader who either condones or participates in these destructive behaviors is a liability because a dysfunctional work unit can drag down the entire organization.

Second, employees need training in conflict resolution where they can learn healthy and productive ways of handling conflicts to avoid "the state of hate" that unresolved conflicts and indirect aggression can generate. This does not mean exercises in team building, because until there is trust, building a team is nearly impossible, and the effort only wastes time and money. The members of the clique are not necessarily bad people. They simply are unable to deal with conflict in a productive manner, so they "awfulize" and "devilize" people whom they perceive as threats or whom they perceive as having wronged them. Because they demonize their targets, they feel justified in abusing them (Potter-Efron 2000). Some members of the clique participate in the abuse because they fear that if they don't, they will become targets (Simmons 2002). Helping employees identify destructive behaviors and teaching them productive ways of handling conflict is the goal of conflict resolution training and is the first step in building trust and ultimately in building a team.

Finally, an employer must have conflict resolution procedures in place that are designed to handle the type of conflict described in the scenario. This does not mean a formal, legalistic process that can drag on for months, but an informal, rapid response to conflicts before they escalate. The Faculty Senate at NC State envisioned such a process when it created the [Faculty Mediation Team](#) which consists of faculty volunteers formally trained in the mediation process. The goal of the mediation team is to promote collegiality and improve the quality of campus life. However, for programs of this nature to be effective, certain criteria must be met.

- First, mediation must be available immediately. Delays only permit the conflict to escalate, and the longer the delay, the more difficult it will be to resolve the issues.
- Second, the people involved in the conflict must maintain confidentiality after the request for mediation is filed. Confidentiality ensures that the conflict is confined to the key players and avoids the tendency for a party to enlist the support of others. *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons 2002) discusses how girls build alliances in the midst of a conflict because they believe that the winner will be the party who has the most allies. Alliance building unnecessarily spreads the conflict and can lead to a "state of hate" within an organization as people line up to take sides.
- Third, the mediation process must remain unhampered by bureaucratic red tape. The process should be informal and remain confidential, with little or no paper trail.

- Fourth, mediators should be chosen carefully to match the skills and knowledge of the mediator with the issues in conflict. A mediator's role is to help the parties find creative ways to resolve a conflict, and a knowledgeable mediator will be more likely to assist the parties in finding workable solutions.

Both employers and employees have a vested interest in finding peaceable ways to resolve conflicts in the workplace. Destructive behaviors of both men and women that breed "work rage" need to be identified and actively discouraged. The books *Odd Girl Out* and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* create a framework within which to understand the socialization that may be behind aggressive behavior in some adult women, and perhaps more importantly, the tools to identify the behavior for what it is -- covert aggression designed to intimidate, control, and destroy. Armed with this knowledge, the targets of this behavior, as well as employers, are better equipped to respond and prevent the damage that this behavior can do to the overall quality of life in the workplace.

**Please note:** This article is an editorial. It is not a research paper. It is intended to raise questions -- not answer them. Nor is it intended to imply that all women behave in the manner described.

Footnote 1: This scenario is fiction. All names, places, characters, and incidents are entirely imaginary, and any resemblance to actual events, or to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Footnote 2: The National 4-H Youth Development Program created programs about ten years ago to teach children productive methods of conflict resolution: Talking with TJ Program, Conflict Resolution Series, 1994, and Teamwork Series, 1993, Hallmark Corporate Foundation, Kansas City, Missouri.

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