# Dissent in the Ranks

Difficult employees should be brought into the fold or shown the door   By Dayton Fandray

I RECENTLY STARTED working my way through the 1970s British sitcom *The Good Neighbors* on DVD.

The show features comedian Richard Briers as Tom Good, a middle-aged marketing professional whose midlife crisis sets him off on a belated quest for meaning and fulfillment. While the series focuses mostly on the protagonist's efforts to achieve self-sufficiency in suburban London, what particularly struck me about the first episode is the disruptive effect Good's attitude has on workplace morale. His unhappiness manifests itself in excited outbursts of sarcastic commentary and overt challenges to his manager's authority. And while there is every indication that his dissatisfaction is justified — Briers is the show's star, after all — it is clear that his co-workers wish he would just let them do their jobs in peace.

I suspect we have all worked with people like Tom Good. And to the extent that their assessment of working conditions may resonate with our own, their running commentary on the vagaries of life in the workplace is more annoying than amusing. In fact, by undermining overall employee morale, they only make it that much harder to get through the day.

Fortunately for his long-suffering manager, Good decides to quit his job and strike out on his own. Most bosses are not as lucky as Good's, however. Their problem employees tend to stick around, and the longer they stay, the bigger the threat they pose to the long-term health of the organization.
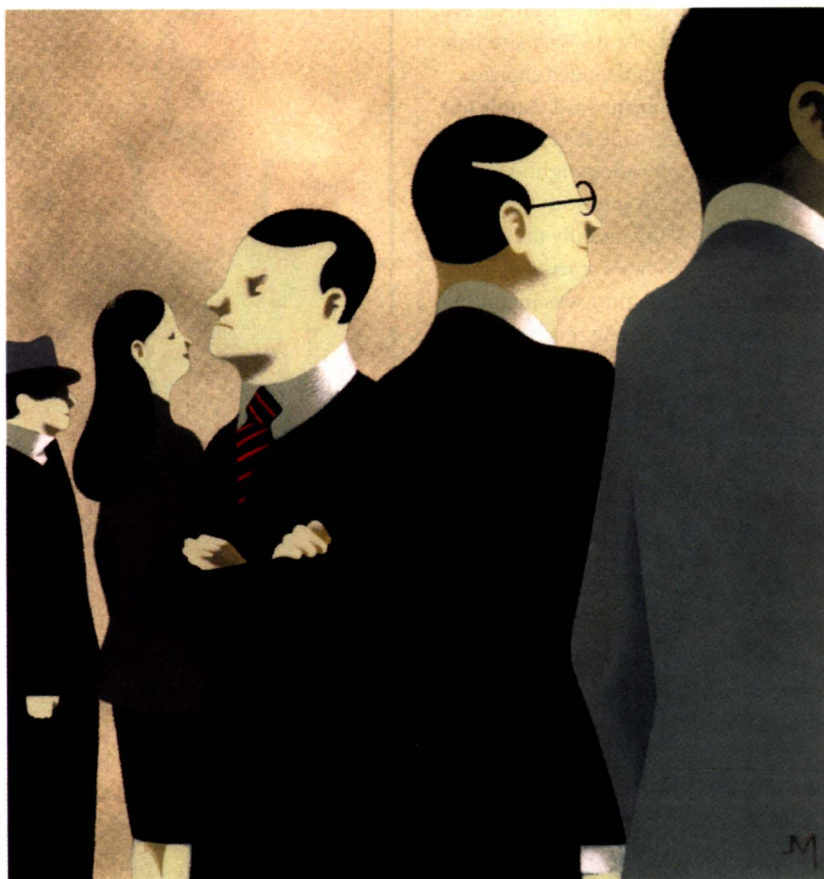
When dealing with difficult employees, the natural tendency is to focus on individual behavior. This obscures, however, the very real possibility that the organization itself might be the problem.

In their book *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization* (Collins, 2008), authors Dave Logan, John King, and Halee Fischer-Wright argue that people naturally organize themselves into tribes of up to 150 members. "The idea is that every company is a small town," explains Logan. "The voices are different. The faces are different. But it really is the same set of issues, the same set of roles, no matter what company you go into. Even when a company is very large it tends to segment into these little social groups."

And it is the culture that evolves within these social groups that shapes the behavior of individual members. If a tribe is operating at a very basic stage of development, individuals often work at

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cross-purposes, promoting their own interests at the expense of the tribe. But at higher stages of development, individuals align their own interests with the interests of the tribe. They realize that by working with their co-workers, pursuing a meaningful common goal, they can better achieve personal goals — esteem, respect, and so on — that tend to create problems when pursued solely for their own sake.

The key is defining a noble cause for the tribe and bringing together a group of like-minded people for whom that cause resonates. This requires paying closer attention to workplace culture than most managers are accustomed to.

"What you're trying to do," says King, "is create the kind of culture where everyone says, 'We will tolerate this kind of behavior but not that kind of behavior,' so that people will migrate out if they're not going to play the game of the culture we're designing."

While most employees adapt to tribal norms if sufficiently motivated by the common cause, some people may still have trouble fitting into your culture. It is essential that you deal with these people as soon as you realize there is a problem. If simply making an employee aware of the problem doesn't change the behavior — and very often it does — try moving him or her into a new tribe, or workgroup. If that fails, connect the employee with a mentor who understands and believes in the cause. Termination may ultimately prove necessary, but that should be viewed only as a last resort.

"It's not usually all or nothing," says Laurence Miller, author of *From Difficult to Disturbed: Understanding and Managing Dysfunctional Employees* (AMACOM, 2007). "The first thing you do is find out if they know how to do their job. If that doesn't work, then you use a progressive system of discipline to show them that you mean business, and that if they can't do their job they don't belong with your company."

Culture counts. No business can afford to tolerate behavior that erodes morale and challenges the validity of its guiding vision. But conversely, in a truly robust culture these problems will not manifest themselves in the first place. Creating that sort of culture is everybody's job. If you're doing your part, discipline problems in the workplace will be largely a thing of the past.

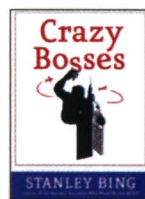*Dayton Fandray is Continental's "Ideas@Work" columnist. He can be reached at fandray@yahoo.com.*

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Communication Is Key

"We're looking at culture," says Dave Logan, co-author of *Tribal Leadership.* "And we're looking at the way people communicate. That's different from how most managers look at it."

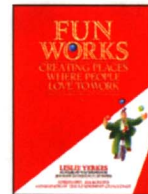If culture and communication are indeed the keys to harmony in the workplace, then when things go awry, managers may well want to take a look in the mirror. That's exactly what Stanley Bing suggests in his book *Crazy Bosses* (Collins, 2007). Bing's wry commentary spotlights some of the most annoying habits of highly dysfunctional managers, and he gives a variety of useful — as well as amusing — tips for effectively dealing with them.

From the perspective of 2008, the idea of having fun at work might seem quaintly premillennial. But even when the job itself isn't fun, happy employees tend to be productive employees. In *Fun Works: Creating Places Where People Love to Work* (Berrett-Koehler, 2007), Leslie Yerkes makes a convincing case for the value of having fun in the workplace, illustrating her points with numerous case studies.   — D.F.