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Don't Kill the Bosses!

Escaping the
Hierarchy Trap

For more productive relationships,
only two-sided accountability works

An Excerpt From

Don't Kill The Bosses!
Escaping The Hierarchy Trap

by Samuel A. Culbert and John B. Ullmen
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Preface

When it comes to thinking about difficult situations you face at work, interactions between you and your boss or between you and your direct reports probably rank amongst the most challenging. If you're like most of us, any difficulty can seem like *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* rolled up into one long movie that goes on and on without ending. We know about this because we're in the business of helping people solve the work situations they find most troubling. Even bosses who complacently reason that the absence of smoke means "no fire" eventually discover what this apparent serenity has cost their company. And in almost every instance, their subordinates knew well in advance about the problem but felt at peril to send out so much as a single smoke signal.

Had we done a double-blind study, we couldn't be more convinced of our belief that boss/subordinate relationships constitute the number one selling agent for tranquilizers, antacids, and beta-blockers and probably account for more people losing their jobs than market downturns and personal incompetence. Even people who don't have a problem today will tell you about a terrible relationship they had with a boss or subordinate in the past. They will candidly admit to not feeling out of the woods when it comes to thinking about tomorrow. And we're not just talking about bosses and subordinates; we're talking about all unequal power relationships such as

those between buyers and suppliers and big and small company joint ventures and partnerships. In today's work world, few know how to deal fairly and constructively with a hierarchical relationship in which one party feels entitled to dominate. This kind of relationship poses a continuing threat to your everyday effectiveness and productivity. Like most people, you probably know of few solutions other than fault-finding divorce and resource-defeating breakup. This book gives you a new and far more constructive remedy.

We propose a scheme for humanizing boss/subordinate relationships. We want to make it possible for you to get the troubling issues out on the table where they can be forthrightly engaged. It's a scheme that cuts to the heart of what's wrong in even the most successfully run organizations and companies. We dislike the "subordinate" treatment that most people receive from their boss, but no more than we dislike the "superior" treatment most bosses receive from the people reporting to them, as bosses and subordinates alike confuse such operational basics as responsibility, authority, and accountability. We know there's confusion; otherwise, boss-dominated relationships would not be the default setting behind most managerial interactions.

Boss-dominated relationships! What a strange and nonsensical state of affairs. After all that's been said about the advantages of empowerment, participatory decision making, and team play, how is it possible that we continue allowing bosses to dominate and subordinates to fake acquiescence to the extent that both do today? It's a particularly ludicrous situation when you consider the proliferation of new organization effectiveness models put forth in contemporary management books. In fact every effectiveness scheme we've seen prescribes straightforward boss/subordinate communications, the type that inspires mutual confidence. Some go so far as to propose Sunday school lists for achieving honest, give-and-take interactions that have created more book sales than real-time improvements. None alludes to positives in getting subordinates to knuckle under, view situations as the boss sees them, and generally to do what they are told—conditions rife in today's workplace.

It's a situation we've been analyzing for years, looking for a strategic way of changing things. Finally we uncovered the obvious. It's an idea that will seem so everyday familiar that at first you might think we're merely attaching conceptual handles to what you were on the brink of realizing based on your own experience. But understanding alone will not lead you to a better course of action. To make self-meaningful and organization effectiveness changes, you need to do something more. You need to reconcile the "disconnect" between what you know about human nature and other people, and the illogic that underlies how you actually behave when acting as boss or subordinate or alternating between both. Until you reconcile this disconnect, it'll be boss domination/subordinate submission as usual, with the virtues of hierarchy unrealized.

We hope you find the *Don't Kill the Bosses!* perspective personally clarifying and a resource in making your entire company more effective. Minimally it should provide you a more accurate picture of the teamwork difficulties you've experienced and precisely what about your work relationships needs changing. Maximally it can infuse hierarchical relationships with a real measure of accountability to invigorate and reify team play. Of course, specific uses you make will depend on your role, gutsiness, and the situation.

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Recognizing the Hierarchy Trap

Whether we're talking the boardroom at Procter & Gamble or the board of your PTA, you can count on hierarchy to screw things up. It's a paradox. On one hand, hierarchy provides people a basic orientation—it defines accountability and who has to answer to whom. On the other hand, it perverts relationships, bleeding candor and quality from almost every discussion that's held. As a feature of everyday work, hierarchy is a dimension people can't do without, but one that causes them not to do very well.

There's little question that hierarchy is the backbone of almost every well-functioning organization. It provides the architecture that structures a workforce. It designates authority, assigns responsibility, clarifies roles, and is a resource for settling jurisdictions and disputes. It is the primary mechanism for ensuring that work units set their compasses to corporate concerns and interact constructively with every group, even those units that appear uncooperative. Hierarchy causes people to be productive and efficient, keep their commitments, and stand accountable for errant actions. It authorizes leadership and insures respect for expertise. It specifies organizational purpose, stipulates functions, solidifies order, and provides control.

Hierarchy is part of growing up, learning the ropes, and being socialized. It's internalized in the lessons people learn about deferring to rank and observing rules. Those at the top of a hierarchy are allowed to dominate—to require, specify, and judge. Those lower

down are expected to knuckle under, justify their actions, and stand accountable for results. People are taught that breaking ranks by ignoring hierarchy readily leads to anarchy, chaos, disorganization, and cascading ineffectiveness. And all of this is hardwired in each individual's thinking, even more so than what is specified in the books.

Every organization is layered with hierarchy; we're hard pressed to imagine one that works well without it. Usually, hierarchy flows from the person who is highest on the organization chart and authorized to make decisions. It also emanates from those with expertise, prestige, and image. It's even attributed on the basis of who is considered most socially and physically attractive. There's hierarchy in having money and friends in influential places. In fact, it's hard to think of any situation that doesn't come with multiple hierarchical overlays.

Hierarchy is essential; there's little doubt about that. Without it, work life would be likened to the Tower of Babel, for people would lack the means for reconciling divergent motives and differences in views. In fact, hierarchy is the chief mechanism for achieving corporate focus. Of course, one could always stop to take a vote, and some work groups operate that way. But once there's a vote, without someone to exercise hierarchical authority, integrity, focus, and efficiency are lost.

Notwithstanding the omnipresence of hierarchy and the essential needs it serves, one must also recognize that hierarchy is a cancer that causes human systems to close down. It almost always limits truth telling, authenticity, openness, and give-and-take exchange. In fact, nothing is more hazardous to the spirit of teamwork than hierarchy. Nothing more quickly attacks feelings of camaraderie and self-esteem. Hierarchy blocks originality and causes people to place efficiency and uniformity ahead of functional effectiveness and actual results. In problem solving, hierarchy creates convergence at the very moment problem solvers most need to step "out of the box" to open themselves to possibilities never before entertained. In relationships, hierarchy produces status-dominated thinking, testing-the-waters double-talk, and constraints to people acting sensibly. Predictably, it leads to participation by the numbers, filtered information, cover-ups, alienation, disorientation, anger, and depression.

Hierarchy damages morale and worse—it's dispiriting. Up, down, sideways, or diagonally, hierarchy obstructs, even negates, the possibility of straightforward, open and honest, candid conversations. In short, when it comes to relationships, hierarchy subtracts quality from every discussion and wisdom from the decisions determining the character of results.

HIERARCHY IS AN ORGANIZATION TRAP

The inability to differentiate between hierarchical *structure* and hierarchical *relationships* is precisely what makes hierarchy an organization trap. It needn't be a trap, and wouldn't be, if people realized the importance of making this distinction and had a way of keeping it in mind. As *structure*, hierarchy is the chain of command, the organization chart, and the road map that designates who is responsible for taking what action; who has the authority to make decisions and direct; and who is supposed to oversee and insist on corrective actions when specified results are not forthcoming. As *structure*, hierarchy is an organizational positive, providing the means for accountability and control.

But applied to *relationships*, hierarchy creates a negative dominance/subordination dynamic that works against an organization accomplishing its goals. Suddenly top-down, power-differentiated thinking appears in every interaction, and daily events take on a command-and-control demeanor in which people with more rank act as if they have the authority to require that people with less rank see and do things a certain way, regardless of individual predisposition. And as any parent with a teenager knows, a person not disposed to act as directed can evoke great resistance. Of course, grown-ups not so disposed, by virtue of personal reasoning, expert knowledge, skills possessed, or resources lacked, can marshal even greater resistance, or so it can seem when their reasoning is concealed.

Hierarchical *relationships* contrast with the way cooperating teammates and business partners with a common goal would interact if they were out to capitalize on each person's distinctive attributes

and resources. By hierarchical *relationships*, we're talking most centrally about boss/subordinate interactions, but we're talking about other nonparity relationships as well. We're also talking about relationships contracting firms have with their suppliers, relationships between joint venture partners with unequal resources, and relationships firms have with independent contractors such as specialty lawyers, auditors, consultants, and travel agents. In every instance, when a relationship is engaged hierarchically, the company loses out. Thus, hierarchical thinking extrapolated to a business situation poses a burning-ember threat to any relationship that's combustible.

In this book we group the organization negatives associated with hierarchical relationships into five categories: **warped communication, corrupt internal politics, illusionary teamwork, personal dispiriting, and pass-the-buck accountability**. When it comes to people solving business problems and running organizations effectively, each of these negative dynamics represent significant obstacles to overcome.

We think these negatives are so blatant and onerous that as organization doctors called in to fix ailing relationships, we're constantly on the lookout for alternatives. We seek alternatives to the social conditioning that causes people to be intimidated by rank and stature to the point that they don't clearly say what they think or become self-inflated by their hierarchical stature to the point that they don't earnestly seek alternative views. And the changes had better come before too many more top-level executives and their companies get done in by what lower-level people think but don't dare say out loud and by what upper-level people hear but choose to overlook.

TWO-SIDED ACCOUNTABILITY PARTNERING IS THE ALTERNATIVE

Lately we've been using the term *two-sided accountability partnering* as the alternative to hierarchical relationships. It conveys

the image of goodwill reciprocity leading to straightforward communications, aboveboard politics, authentic teamwork, esprit de corps, and the type of accountability that produces high-quality corporate results. *Two-sided* cues people to consider a reciprocal obligation to help one another in the pursuit of company goals. *Accountability* cues people to constrain self-interested pursuits that others might see coming at their expense. *Partnering* indicates a mutuality of interests that sets the stage for effective dialogue and interactive problem solving.

Two-sided accountability partnering contrasts with hierarchical relationships such as boss and subordinate, executive and manager, leader and follower, line and staff, strategist and operative, insider and outsider, central and peripheral, in the know and out of the flow, and so forth, which signal the dominance and superiority of viewpoints and ideas at the top. Two-sided accountability partnering communicates the image of collaborative action and people operating as real teammates—fully expressing themselves, filling in for one another, and jointly standing accountable for outcomes that benefit the enterprise as a whole.

As a means of illustrating the problems that accompany hierarchical relationships and the need for two-sided accountability, consider three revealing case studies. The first depicts the *hierarchy trap* that makes real teamwork impossible. It shows the ease with which hierarchical relationships get stuck in the logic of command-and-control and the teamwork difficulties that result. The second shows how hierarchical relationships warp communication and lead to a corrupt and manipulative brand of internal politics that can devastate an individual's career. The third displays the core dishonesty that shadows all hierarchical relationships and the ease with which positively motivated people become dispirited and self-delude. Taken together, the three cases begin our mapping of the destructive dynamics inevitable in hierarchical relationships and set the stage for appreciating the alternative logic that generates the remedies you'll be reading about in this book.

CASE 1

The Hierarchy Trap Leads to Illusory Teamwork and Ineffective Problem Solving

Here's a case depicting a commonplace business problem that is almost always addressed with hierarchy, seldom with a satisfactory solution. It's a situation we encounter over and over again and is graphically illustrated in a recent experience where we observed a group of top-level executives of a prominent environmental cleanup company. They had invited us to watch them perform their allegedly acclaimed team approach to program oversight and project management.

When we entered the meeting, the project manager was explaining his difficulties with the laboratory contracted to analyze the contamination level that remained in the ground their company was cleaning up. Provocatively he said, "Despite the fact that our company owns Analystat, we've reached the point where we have to fire them and bring in a lab that performs to schedule. We've got to," he grimaced. "We're in danger of losing money and, more importantly, losing the confidence of an established client." He recounted the details.

"About a month ago we saw ourselves falling behind schedule. Anticipating upset, we called our client with a 'head's up.' We told him the lab was falling behind but not to worry, because they had given us assurances that they would shortly be on track. We offered to make up for lost time by working overtime at our own expense. At that point I had already called my counterpart at Analystat who assured me they'd be picking up the slack. I told him, 'You'd better.' Then I explained that overtime was now involved and we'd be billing them our extra costs.

"A week later it was clear the lab still wasn't processing our volume, so I took up matters with my boss Al. Al told me to 'ratchet up the pressure,' which I did by placing a call to my

counterpart's director. The director said he was aware of the situation and assured me that the lab would be back on schedule within two weeks, which was fine with me. That would leave sufficient time to recover. But ten days later it appeared they still weren't gaining ground, so I went to Al, and he called that director. Unfortunately, another week has gone by, and to me it seems they are no closer to meeting their commitments than they were a month ago. That's how I concluded we should find another lab. Biting this bullet may help us earn back some of the credibility we've lost."

The project manager's account of Analystat's nonperformance seemed to anger just about everyone in the room. Suddenly, a red-in-the-face executive stood up and bolted swiftly toward the door announcing that he was leaving to call Analystat's president. He said, "I'm on their board. If these people intend to keep their jobs, they'd better start living up to their commitments." Everyone seemed relieved, as if suddenly they had their solution.

Half an hour later, our hosts asked for our impressions. Fascinated by the bankrupt logic we saw them using, we welcomed the opportunity to comment. On the other hand, we understood. Their response was driven by conventional hierarchical "wisdom."

We began by asking whether anyone saw alternatives to the way the project and program managers were handling their subcontractor problem. And for spice, we added, "... and the way Joe just dealt with Analystat's president?" No one had much to offer. Then we asked what people saw as the *methodology* underlying their attempts to solve the Analystat problem. Rhetorically, we offered that we saw it as problem solving through the use of a hierarchical relationship. We added that it seemed their backup methodology, for use when hierarchy failed, was the invocation of a more intimidating hierarchical relationship. We finished by declaring our belief that such a methodology can only lead to adversarial, close-minded, blaming relationships, introducing the

irony of their acting adversarial with a business unit whose financial performance fell to the same bottom line as theirs.

Having their attention, we asked, “How might you proceed if you substituted a *‘we can’t succeed unless you succeed’* methodology for hierarchical muscle? What if you thought of Analystat as an operation you wanted to see make money and succeed, and dealt with their managers as if they were members of your own project team? Then their problems would be your problems, which clearly they are, for as you’ve been discussing, falling behind schedule is creating additional costs and negatively impacting your relationship with the client.”

Our suggestion met with agreement, but it was obvious that, in the face of such a business betrayal, no one could envision what a nonhierarchical approach would entail. We offered, “If we thought of them as part of our team and the cause of our nonperformance, we’d be running to their facility asking to eyeball their problems and offering help in solving them. We’d want to see firsthand what they were facing, and we’d be willing to consider taking just about any action that might assist in correcting their nonperformance. For the moment we’d forget about organizational boundaries and absorb whatever costs emerged. Only after the problems were solved would we take time to sort out damages, culpability, and cross-charges. That would also be the time to examine for incompetence and to assess what’s needed to avoid a “next time.”

Our comments put the project manager on the defensive. He said, “What if the people at Analystat won’t show us their problems?”

We responded, “Without knowing your relationship with them or the form their resistance might take, it’s difficult to specify exactly how you might proceed. We’d want to say something like ‘Hey! We’re in this thing together and, speaking as your business partner, your denying us access is

not OK. We can't succeed without you, so the problem isn't yours alone. Our partnership requires that you let us in. You certainly need our understanding, and, who knows, together we might stumble on a remedy. You can't be territorial when the corporation's profits and our relationship with a valued client are on the line."

While the others seemed to be enjoying the impromptu class, we were concerned that it was taking place at the project manager's expense. So we backed off without mentioning the possibility, obscured by the structure of the question, that the lab manager might actually welcome his viewing their problems and his help in solving them. Glancing around the room, we thought almost everyone else understood. We felt the project manager eventually would, too, but first he had to get past his embarrassment. He was feeling "one down," a hierarchical condition that blocks open-minded listening.

CASE 2

Hierarchical Relationships Lead to Warped Communication and Corrupt Internal Politics

Our next case highlights the political maneuvering, deception, and misuse of human resources that, in our experience, too often accompany hierarchical relationships. It shows that calling a relationship a "team effort" or a "business partnership" doesn't necessarily make it one. Our example centers on the relationship between a CEO named Bill and his hand picked choice to head operations, Lee. From the beginning, Bill had referred to Lee as his "business partner." Now if ever a situation could have been staged for a partnering relationship, this one was a natural. As you read along, note how words like *teamwork* and *partnering* were used to camouflage destructively competitive, hierarchical maneuvering. As is usually the case when hierarchical levels conflict, there's a loser and a bigger loser, the latter inevitably being the company.

Bill was the successor CEO to an entrepreneur who used stock swaps and reinvested profits to put together a conglomerate of like-industry companies big enough for listing on the New York Stock Exchange. At the corporation's beginning the marketplace was profit-friendly, and its share price rose. But, during the several years preceding Bill's hiring, the market turned dramatically downward, and an industry shakeout took place. Profit margins became so tight that most firms struggled to survive.

Bill's company was no exception. Survival and waiting for competitors to fold meant operating in and around the red with loss leaders required to keep their workforce occupied. Profitability was further burdened by the high interest rate paid for initial financing and the expense of working capital. Quickly, the price of the stock nose-dived from a high of thirty-five to six, and it went on to drop even lower.

The key to holding on was to redo the company's financial profile. Interest rates had come down, and refinancing at a lower rate was the quickest way to turn a positive cash flow. On the other hand, in order to get that financing, the company needed to show an immediate profit. Cutting costs to get that profit was Bill's immediate challenge, and he recognized the need for help.

Bill's competencies lay in political strategizing, coalition building, financial analysis, strategic planning, and presentations to customers and brokerage house investors. He was the big picture type with limited patience for managing people and attending to operating details. In fact, his best interpersonal skill appeared to be "schmoozing." He smiled a lot, took pains to appear personable, and had a flair for building up people when he needed them thinking positively. He exhibited many acts of personal and civic generosity that fed an affable, all-around good-guy image. Nevertheless, we also saw a person who was extremely self-focused, stubborn, and overly concerned with public face and who constantly substituted panache for substance.

To reduce costs, Bill quickly recruited an executive named Lee with a business background comparable to his own. Convincing the board to approve a half-million-dollar-a-year salary package, he told them, "I've finally found a fiscally tough COO to be my operations partner. This will allow me to concentrate on refinancing and bringing in new business." Then he told Lee, "This is just the beginning of our partnership. The next step is to move you up to president as I become chairman of the board." That exciting prospect persuaded Lee to leave a secure, albeit staid, job.

Almost from the beginning Lee complained that Bill was not cutting him sufficient authority to operate. This struck people as odd, because Bill had little patience for details and was known to practice "extreme delegation" management. Privately, Lee said, "Bill, you've got to stop micromanaging me." But that didn't seem to budge him. Lee couldn't figure out whether Bill was all hands-on or simply didn't trust him. As it turned out, it was the latter, although it took almost a year for Bill to sort out precisely what made him uncomfortable. While he felt it, he didn't have a handle on the fact that his and Lee's philosophies of management were dramatically different. People in the know wondered how Lee could go so long deferring to Bill, not confronting him about his lack of authority.

Lee wanted to centralize power, constrain local options, and install cost controls that were similar to the system used at his former company. In fact, everything he advocated was prototyped to how he operated there. People were irritated by his constant references to "how we did it at International." Always loquacious, Lee described his strengths as "I have a good understanding of where profits can be extracted and where leakage occurs. I know which human tendencies precipitate the leaks and what management needs to do to prevent them." To control against profit seepage, he argued, key corporate support functions such as Accounting, Human Resources, and Marketing should be realigned to report directly to him. Instead of stating directly that he favored a

decentralized model, Bill would periodically counsel Lee, “Don’t be in such a hurry to consolidate. Give the operating divisions time. Eventually they’ll come around.”

The resistance to Lee was great, but Bill never told him precisely what he wanted or coached him on how to build credibility. Instead of setting his business partner straight, Bill used hierarchy to constrain Lee’s authority. Bill knew that people in the operations chain perceived Lee’s “command-and-control orientation” to be ill suited to their business and antithetical to the autonomy they prized.

A couple of significant background factors contributed to Lee’s entrenchment. The first was a management review he had received at his former company when he was given an elevation in title to mask a functional demotion. At that time he was told, “You spend too much time in the ‘gray’ and lack decisiveness.” That may have been the case at the time, but no one saw evidence of anything like that once he took the job as Bill’s COO. In fact, some joked, “If you want to see something that’s quick, watch how fast Lee shoots from the lips.”

The second factor was Bill’s precarious political position with the board and his desire not to provoke Lee to break ranks. Setting an example, Bill always supported Lee with the board. He had to; he didn’t want board members viewing his first significant hire as a half-million-dollar-a-year flop. When the director of human resources resigned, stating she couldn’t do her job with integrity reporting to an overbearing COO, Bill maintained his support of Lee by not contradicting Lee’s circle-the-wagons response that claimed her resignation stemmed from having a husband with a lower-status job who was uncomfortable with her travel. Thus, in the short run, the Bill/Lee partnership depended on Lee’s looking like a contributor and making positive statements about the company’s financial prospects.

It took the annual strategic planning process to force exposure of Bill’s and Lee’s differences. Bill was firmly lined up

on the side of giving authority to operating unit heads so that he could hold them accountable for results. Lee, on the other hand, was pushing for uniform business practices, centralized controls, and “feet to the fire” management. Of course, this was the way he had always operated and was consistent with how he saw his mandate to get profits up by cutting costs.

Now seeing Lee as a liability, Bill used the strategic planning process to revamp the organization chart. Inserted underneath Lee were two strong-willed managers who, on the surface, appeared to be adding a level of hierarchy but who people in the chain could see as essential buffers. Quickly they caught on. Lee had been “elevated” to supernumerary. If Lee was reading the writing on the wall, no one in the company heard him divulge it. All that remained was the politically convenient moment when Bill could ease him out. That moment came three months later.

In response to the revamped organization chart, Lee began contrasting his role as “chief operating officer” with the roles of his two deputies, whom he called his “operating chiefs.” Then Bill asked Lee to prepare a list of goals that he would take personal responsibility for accomplishing. Lee came back with three big-ticket items: he would create systems for lowering receivables, reduce indirect expense, and improve the format used for reporting financial results. Later on Bill confided, “While I didn’t say anything at the time, from the beginning it was clear that Lee lacked the ability to achieve any one of his goals.” Some onlookers got it right away. They joked that Bill had handed Lee a rope and sent him out to find a scenic view for the hanging.

Meanwhile, an “amazingly convenient” surge of business and profits occurred, just in time to establish the financial profile needed for refinancing. However, this spurt was immediately followed by a business “downturn” that caused the next two quarters to be spent deep in the red, causing many to wonder about the bookkeeping. Discussing the financial

downturn with the newly elected board chairman—the second one in a year—Bill said, “I guess the time has come to cut the expensive staff and managers that our business can no longer support.” He added, “Of course, such a fact will not be credible without taking a hit or two at the top.” Then he offered up Lee, explaining that Lee was failing miserably with the three assignments he had taken on.

“Lack of progress on your special projects” was the story Bill took to Lee. Lee protested, saying he had been given six months to achieve his objectives and only three had elapsed. Bill countered with, “If you leave now we can give you a year’s salary and a positive reference. After all, everyone understands that downsizing and politics at the top are the no-fault grounds for involuntary dismissals these days. If you fight us, I can’t predict what we’ll be able to do.” Demoralized, Lee took the half million dollars. He also sold himself on the illusion that by going quietly and papering his actions with a constructive appearance he could retain the image of positive contributor. Nevertheless, everyone in upper management realized what had transpired. Several took it as an object lesson of what could happen to them either at this company or elsewhere.

Despite a profusion of words, at no time did we see anything resembling the type of honesty and respect for differences that one expects from a true partnering relationship. Instead we saw a hierarchical relationship enabling an insecure CEO to use deception to cover over a personnel mistake. Hierarchical relationship protocol caused Lee to go a year without comprehending that his and Bill’s managerial orientation were 180 degrees apart. We can only speculate about the role hierarchy played in achieving the positive quarterly results that paved the way for enterprise saving refinancing. Understandably, we never heard anyone openly debate whether this was a business or spreadsheet accomplishment.

Hierarchy allowed Bill to perform face work on Lee and Lee to perform face work on himself. Politically insensitive and isolated

from the views of others, he was hierarchically deferential to the point that he got taken in by a partnering scam. Coalition building, collusion, and manipulation led to Lee's demise. Bill took all the power, even when Lee was issuing directives to levels below, while the two of them exchanged goodwill to maintain the illusion of harmony.

CASE 3

Dishonesty Shadows All Hierarchical Relationships Leaving Participants Dispirited and Self-deluding

Whether we're talking top executives or recent university graduates, most people come to work wanting to be part of "the team." It would seem that all a newcomer needs to convert positive intention to behavior is a little guidance and reinforcement. Certainly this is the thinking that most executives possess when starting a new job or new assignment, and it's what most young people believe when entering corporate life.

But something happens. Newcomers "learn the ropes." They encounter people who appear to be "bad guys," and out of what they perceive as a necessity, they take "precautions" that ultimately undermine their instincts to be team players.

Of course, most alleged corporate bad guys also began their careers expecting to be team players. But their survival and progress in the system have required political safeguards that alienated coworkers. Their words have been experienced as deceitful, image managing double-talk. Their actions have been seen as manipulative, heavy-handed, and backstabbing. While most of them would say that their behavior has been necessary, few can clearly remember how they got into such a mode. Consider the situation faced and survival lessons learned by one of the brightest and most positively intentioned engineers we've ever met when, in her first major managerial assignment, she attempted to express her genuine partnering spirit and team-play mind-set. Keep in mind, each of the people thwarting her positive efforts used to be a good guy, a team player just like herself.

We met Karen when the idea of being a partner and teaming up with people was front and center in her mind. Recruited directly out of college, Karen had worked for her company ever since. That was eight years ago, and recently she had been advanced to the fast track. Now she had a high profile managerial assignment, and the company was funding her time and tuition in UCLA's "MBA Program for the Fully Employed." Hearing about our work, she called for a consultation. Teaming up was getting her down.

Karen described how she had been made assistant director for a large technical unit that serviced and repaired sophisticated electronic equipment. She characterized her Director as "the mentor type: a person who shares departmental leadership by involving me in all facets of management and operations." Listing her unit's problems, she said, "When it comes to production, scheduling, quality, or costs, things couldn't be worse." Using impressive MBA nomenclature she explained the situation: "We're doing a poor job managing our growth. We don't keep time commitments, and we make too many errors. We're constantly in crisis playing catch-up and needing to hire more people than we had planned for. Then, because we're behind, we don't have time to do a decent job training those we bring on. Making matters worse, throughout the company people are worried about downsizing. And senior management has exploited this insecurity. They've replaced high-paid supervisors with less expensive lead technicians who are no longer paid hourly; they receive a fixed salary. All of this was decided by higher-ups without consulting my boss or any other midlevel manager. The result is demoralization and a deep-seated distrust toward all of us in management.

"So I'm left with a poor to no-leadership situation beneath me. The new unit heads and technical supervisors have yet to receive supervisory and managerial training, and we're hard pressed to provide it since we're under the gun to keep expenses down. And, of course, our emphasis is on catching up."

We asked Karen, "What are you going to do?" She responded, "I'm going to tell my unit heads to go all-out

superhuman to catch up and create some time for training.” We responded, “Before doing that, why not ask them for their view of the situation?” “There’s no need to do that,” she said, “I already know how they see it. They favor training first and then production, but we already know that this is totally unacceptable to upper-level management. Asking them will serve no constructive purpose.” We replied, “The theory suggests that the best way out of your morale and confidence crisis is to partner up with the people you work with—up, down and sideways.” Skeptically she rebutted, “After being sold down the river, I can’t see the unit heads and technicians going for that one again.”

To her pessimistic view we responded, “Karen, it’s not the people below you we’re worrying about right now—it’s you and the treatment you and your director are receiving from your upper-level managers. We see you about to betray yourselves by being positive with workers and getting your own hopes up in reaction to a problem that your top management has caused. From what you’ve described, it’s not clear that your management will back you if, through your earnestness, you succeed in convincing your workforce to go all-out. Before talking with them, see if you can get your uppers to buy in. You don’t want to betray lower levels again by promising solutions to problems your management refuses to have.”

Noticing that we had run way beyond the allotted time, we invited Karen back for another conversation but failed to set a date. When we didn’t hear from her, we put in a call that she failed to return. It was several months before we heard from her again. She reappeared enrolled in a leadership course we were teaching. A couple of weeks later she asked for a meeting.

We began that meeting by asking, “What’s up? How are things going?” Karen replied, “While production problems continue, my director Paul and I have now created bonds of trust and openness with our unit heads.” She said, “We did so by taking a page out of your book. We went around, told them we were interested, and just plain listened. We’ve now spoken with all of our unit heads and lead workers as well as many of our two

hundred-plus technicians. From them we've learned how our organization is structured to make it difficult for people to do what seems right or even to just make positive suggestions. We've discovered that we're much too centralized. Few seem to have the big picture, and no one has an accurate idea of what our customers say they need. In response Paul and I are now holding what we call a "Tuesday Open Lunch," a time for anyone who wants to discuss improvements and the big picture. The problem is that despite improving relationships, we have yet to change anything substantive."

Karen went on, "Paul and I have now held a couple of very disappointing conversations with his boss, Stan, and we're really frustrated. We know precisely what needs to be done, but Stan is blocking us. At the first meeting we simply described what we had learned and the remedies we wanted to take, but Stan was totally negative. He never even said what he didn't like. In fact, I still don't know. The least he could have said was, 'You've got some good ideas here, and these are my problems with what you suggest.' But instead he went command-and-control saying, 'I don't want you proceeding this way,' and completely killed our motivation. All we did was present him a plan for collaborating with the only people who can improve our deteriorating situation!"

Continuing, Karen said, "We left that meeting in a state of shock. But our disbelief about what happened was too great, so we decided to schedule another session. That one was much more polite and surface-friendly, but still we made no headway. Stan was positive and had some good ideas, but he never once engaged our premise of letting the people who perform the work be involved in the thinking. I still don't see how you can go in with a modern management theory and twice have the boss tell you back 'I don't care.'"

At this point we apologized for not being clearer in our initial discussion. We said, "This bears on a point we tried to make last time. To us it sounds like Stan hasn't bought your framing of the problem. He's working off a different formulation. It sounds as if he believes you need to exert greater

control of your workforce while you are out trying to partner up with them.”

Karen responded, “Oh, I heard you clearly enough, but I didn’t like your message. Now I have no alternative but to face what’s going on.” We replied, “It appears as if you and your direct reports have similar problems. Both of you are receiving visuals of your management being concerned, but you are getting lip service without real partnering. Of the two varieties, we prefer your position with Stan, because at least you accurately know what’s being done to you. We’re afraid that the openness and goodwill you’ve extended to the people reporting to you may cause them to feel betrayed once again.”

Searching to find any avenue of hope, we asked, “Who does Stan report to? What’s that person’s rank, and what’s he or she like?” We were exploring the treacherous idea of an end run. Perhaps Karen, a female engineer in whom the company was investing to the tune of an expensive MBA, could get the big boss’s ear.

Karen responded, “Stan reports to Phil, the division president. And the best way to describe Phil is that he’s a clean-desk type. He’s ex-military, likes order in the ranks, and likes to say ‘Yes, sir’ to his boss. If you’re suggesting that he might be an open ear, I don’t think it’s going to happen.” After hearing her description, we didn’t, either. In our minds the prognosis was “terminal.”

A week later Karen was back, this time upset to the point of tears. She told us, “The other shoe just dropped. Two days ago Stan confided that upper management has completed a deal to move our technical operations to a recently closed military base in Indiana. He says we’ve got a captive community there with a skilled, unemployed workforce that gladly will work for lower wages. And, to boot, the situation comes with tax credits. He thinks he’s a genius. In one fell swoop the company lowers its costs and rids itself of a major morale problem.” Reflecting for a moment, we added, “And they seem to have found a way to keep their dominance model intact.” In response, Karen told us, “I’m so upset. While we were going all out to win people over by teaming

up with them, our management was negotiating to close down our operation. Now we're pledged to secrecy lest our workers get wind of this and begin quitting before we're finished with them." Full of emotion, she paused.

Continuing, Karen said, "I have worked hard for this company, and I want to be loyal. But apparently that's not the relationship they want with me." For us that translated as "How do you partner with people who won't partner with you?" We kept quiet; there was nothing for us to say. Karen was receiving on-the-job reality training. It was one of those sobering moments where you begin to see what previously you didn't want to see about the way a hierarchical relationship works.

Several days later Karen dropped by to tell us that she had decided to look for another job. We liked her conclusion. She hadn't given up looking for a system that worked differently. She hoped to find a situation where real teamwork was possible, where she could avoid taking the route that her company predecessors had taken when their corporate experiences brought them to the point of making peace by buying in.

Certainly we could see the logic of the path taken by executives at Karen's company. They had the opportunity to trade an expensive workforce for a motivated new group that would accept even lower wages and tax credits that would offset the costs of training. Nevertheless, we left Karen's saga wondering how long it will take for management's newly found human assets to begin feeling like the former group. How long would it take for them to fathom that they are in an "object" relationship, seen as human resources to be deployed and moved around to fit management's objectives, despite a profusion of words about their essentiality and membership on the company team?

SUMMARY

We've presented three cases to illustrate the destructive dynamics produced by hierarchical relationships, even when "team play" and "partnering" terms are used. Each is an instance of people exercis-

ing hierarchical power, comprehending neither the competitive forces their actions provoke nor the alternatives at their disposal. In each situation the participants easily rationalized their actions as essential to the corporation.

The first case depicts a line of managers stuck in a hierarchical trap, futilely attempting to create teamwork using the logic of command-and-control. Graphically, it illustrates how people caught up in hierarchical thinking have a difficult to impossible time seeing how to team up and partner with one another. Above all, it demonstrates a *without-exception principle* that we'll emphasize over and over again in this book: **whenever hierarchical relationships flourish, the company loses out.**

The second case presents a deeper view of the command-and-control dynamics that accompany any relationship steeped in hierarchy. Dramatically, it illustrates **the ease with which hierarchical relationships lead to warped communication and a corrupt and manipulative brand of internal politics that can devastate an individual's career.** It demonstrates the importance of not being taken in by illusions of team play and partnering and of figuring out whether someone's partnering talk is actually being walked.

The third case illustrates **the core dishonesty that shadows all hierarchical relationships and the ease with which positively motivated people delude themselves.** It shows how the tension of being part of a teamwork sham can become so great that it leaves an individual with but two alternatives: to become depressed and dispirited or to go into denial about his or her conspiratorial role. Our student was dispirited; her bosses were in denial. We think denial is a particularly amazing response when you consider that almost every hierarchical superior is a junior to someone else. As a superior he or she knows how often reality gets spun for consumption by the ranks below. As a subordinate he or she knows how often facts are withheld and personal perspectives suppressed in order to self-promote the image of good guy and loyal team member.

Why do people persist in reasoning and acting hierarchically? For many reasons, starting with a very basic and elementary one. Hierarchical relationships feel like a contour fitting baseball cap so comfortable and familiar that a person loses track of having it on.

It's a relationship that's automatic. We've been socialized in a culture where people in power are able to dominate to the point that the dominated secretly dream of eventually having the same type of power, all under the guise of issuing directives that promote corporate effectiveness and efficiency. None of the three cases described achieved that result.

We are guessing that each of these situations feels familiar to you—less for their specifics, more for their runaway dynamics and logic. We're also guessing that many readers will identify with feelings of being both a hierarchical relationship perpetrator and a hierarchical relationship victim. These are but the beginning of a collage of cases that will illustrate what's off about the way relationships get conducted at work. They introduce our explanation of what's needed for teaming up and partnering with people above, alongside, and below you in any hierarchy.

Our overarching goal is to reset relationships currently structured for hierarchical mischief. We want to provide insight into the dynamics provoked by hierarchy and to explain what's needed for making the transition to a much different mind-set, one with a reciprocal accountability orientation. We're out to show you how to redirect the hierarchical, command-and-control reasoning that blocks you and your organization from delivering more of what people require to operate at peak effectiveness. In Chapter 8, we propose a corporate solution for modernizing relationships aimed at systemically righting what we find wrong.

Making the transition to a two-sides-accountable mind-set requires adjusting your perspective on human nature to include what probably you almost know but fail to utilize in daily interactions. We know adjustments are needed. Otherwise, you would already possess a sufficiently deep appreciation of the havoc wreaked by hierarchical relationships to put more effort into avoiding them. Modifying your perspective will allow you to uncover teamwork opportunities that are there for the taking, regardless of how others are initially inclined. Minimally, you'll be able to clarify the force field in which you are operating and learn ways of taking relationships to a more open and candid place. However, like all

modes of operating, no format or plan works with all people or in all situations. That's where more consciousness of what's going on comes in. We think increased awareness of how candor, truthfulness, and robust give-and-take are perverted by hierarchy will prove a practical tool.

Thus, in addition to providing you an alternative to hierarchical relationships that is far more strategic for you and your company, we think exposure to cases describing hierarchical relationships will cause you to reflect on like situations that you have experienced and equip you for sidestepping hierarchical entrapments. The fray is taking place. We all need ideas for avoiding it so that we don't fall victim or worse. What could be worse? "Worse" is falling into dominating or subordinating patterns with people on whom you'll want to depend, either presently or in the future, for high-integrity, straight-talking teamwork.

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