
New research shows that when people need help getting a job done, they'll choose a congenial colleague over a more capable one. That has big implications for every organization—and not all of them are negative.

Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools, and the Formation of Social Networks

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Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools, and the Formation of Social Networks

The Idea in Brief

When people need help completing complex projects, they select the colleagues best able to do the job—not just those they like. Right? Wrong. Faced with a choice between a “competent jerk” and a “lovable fool” as a work partner, people usually opt for likeability over ability.

This has big implications for your organization. Good things happen when people who like each other collaborate—projects flow quickly; people gladly help each other. But there’s a cost: people who like each other typically share similar values and ways of thinking—making it difficult to generate fresh ideas. Moreover, most individuals avoid skilled but unpleasant colleagues—leaving competent jerks’ expertise untapped.

How to leverage likeable people’s attractiveness *and* competent jerks’ knowledge? Apply this three-pronged strategy:

- **Manufacture liking in critical relationships.** For example, create cross-departmental project teams to encourage a shared identity based on the project and to de-emphasize functional alliances.
- **Leverage the likeable.** People listen to likeable colleagues, so have widely liked individuals serve as evangelists for important change initiatives.
- **Reform the jerks.** Use coaching, incentives, and interpersonal skills training to burnish competent jerks’ social skills.

Your payoff? Avid collaboration, copious sharing of knowledge and expertise, and exceptional performance throughout your organization.

The Idea in Practice

MANUFACTURE LIKING

To foster positive feelings among people in your organization, use these tactics:

- *Promote familiarity.* Familiarity increases liking, so mix up people’s workspaces to provide opportunities for mingling. Create informal gathering areas where people can engage in water-cooler-style chats. Conduct all-office get-togethers where people from different functions and units can mix.
- *Foster bonding.* You’ll need an aggressive approach if people are divided by intense animosity (for instance, they’re loyal to different premerger companies) or they’ve long competed for resources. In such cases, put people through an intense cooperative experience, such as Outward Bound–type off-site adventures. But make these experiences novel and authentic: they quickly lose their effectiveness if people view them as trite or contrived.

LEVERAGE THE LIKEABLE

Widely liked people are frequently unexceptional performers. But their ability to cultivate positive working relationships between diverse groups can generate enormous value for your organization. To get the most from them:

- *Identify them.* Through 360-degree evaluations and social network analyses, find out who’s best at deflating frustration and anger between groups, insulating people from complaints so they can work undisturbed, and connecting people from different parts of your business.
- *Protect them.* Some managers deem likeable people’s “soft” contributions as less important than more quantifiable contributions. During downsizing decisions, carefully consider the value these “affective hubs” generate for your organization.

- *Position them strategically.* Assign likeable people to roles where they can link people from different parts of the organization who might resist (or never think of) collaborating. For example, have them lead a program to communicate new practices throughout your organization. Others will listen to them and embrace important change initiatives.

REFORM THE JERKS

Link rewards for skilled but unpleasant people to their willingness to improve their social skills. One investment banker who was charming to potential clients but not to coworkers was denied a promotion to a managing director position.

Also use coaching: explain how off-putting behavior is self-defeating. Provide immediate feedback when you see such behavior, rather than waiting for a year-end performance review. After coaching from his boss, the obnoxious investment banker’s behavior improved—and he was promoted the following year.