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Discussing the Human Aspects of Software Development

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We Humans

Random Four — Making Strangers Friends in Your Large Organization

Kaizen and Radical Helpfulness

Interview with Corey Haines, August 2011

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Finding Treasure in Your Coworkers

I recently had lunch with three of my coworkers. Among them was Charles, a quiet and mild mannered man most noticeable to me by his strong southern accent (Louisiana, to be precise). Towards the end of the lunch, Charles mentioned something about traveling and I asked him where he'd gone. His answer blew me away. On his most recent trip, he spent four months solo backpacking in southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and Iran.

I have traveled to several continents, but comparing his courage and adventurousness to my relative timidity had me wanting to bow and exclaim "I'm not worthy" three times à la Wayne's World.

Learning about this side of Charles gave me an appreciation of him as an individual I would never have gotten by merely conversing with him about work at his cubicle. How much we miss when we fail to delve beyond the exteriors of the people with whom we work every day!

The Challenge of Large Organizations

Some organizations are so large that most people know only a tiny percentage of their coworkers. Departments other than one's own appear to be black boxes whose opaque boundaries consist only of unfamiliar email addresses and occasional cross-boundary announcements. Navigating the bureaucracy is done best by those who have been immersed in it for years. Most people are strangers to each other. How unfortunate.

Random Four

Here's an idea that might help address this problem. It works like this:

Everyone who's interested submits their name to a list, with days, times, and possibly places that they're available. For any given time slot, the names of those who are available are selected at random in groups of four. Each group of four meets for lunch.
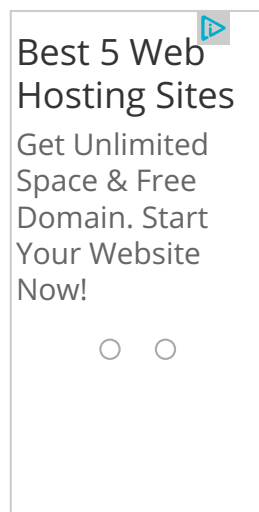
I can't really come up with a name I like a lot, but maybe something that begins with Flash, Random, Surprise, or Friendly, and ends with Four or Band.

Why Four?

That number is not strictly required, but it's a good number, because if it were fewer than four:

- it would take much longer to meet the same number of people; to meet 6 new people you would need only 2 meetings of 4 people, but 3 meetings of 3 people, and 6

meetings of 2 people.

- there might not be as much energy in the group to keep the conversation lively

…and if it were more than four:

- you might not get to know everyone

- it would be easier for some individuals not to participate

- it would be more likely for there to be multiple simultaneous conversations, and these are real unity killers

The optimum size of this kind of event depends on its duration, so while four might be ideal for a lunch hour, six to eight might be fine for an afternoon or evening outing. Of course, larger outings can be good for team building, but probably not as effective for getting to know strangers, since most people will gravitate towards those whom they already know.

Structure

Although this is an informal and optional gathering without any oversight, a little bit of structure may be helpful. Specifically, each person could be encouraged to spend a few minutes talking about him-or-herself — only briefly about their role in the organization, but mainly about things that are not work related. Examples could be:

- recreational interests

- what's on one's mind a lot these days

- - a family situation

  - personal goals

  - talents and accomplishments

  - a dramatic event in one's life

Participants should be careful not to dominate the conversation, and to gently solicit participation from those who might otherwise be too shy to speak up.

Respect

When expressing your opinions, it's important to remember that others may not share them. We want to focus on what unites us, not what divides us — so be tactful and respectful.

This is a great opportunity to challenge our stereotypes and discover the value and merit in people with whom we might not otherwise have sought to meet.

Conclusion

We may not be able to create world peace, but in our tiny microcosm, by challenging our mental rigidity and getting to know each other, we can become better people and make our workplace a closer community — and this will result in more trust, motivation, creativity, productivity, and collective accomplishment.

This is just a first pass at the idea. Do you have any suggestions to make it better?

21. October 2015 by keithrbennett
Categories: Uncategorized | 1 comment

One Comment

writerwoman says *2015/10/22 at 3:39 pm*

I read your blog with great interest.

We all are guilty of underestimating the accomplishments of our coworkers. Our perception of our coworkers is limiting both to us and them.

Even people with little life experiences have much to offer. We all take away something different from what we are confronted with.

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