Organizational

DYNAMICS

Workplace Envy

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Studies of organizational behavior seldom, if ever, deal with the potentially disruptive role of envy in the workplace. Here is a probing analysis of this pervasive emotion, along with guidelines for avoiding its negative consequences.

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C onsider the ways that envy rears its disruptive head, even in the dispassionate atmosphere of the workplace:

• Chris was recently selected over Lee to attend a prestigious seminar at company expense. Lee has complained bitterly about this decision and has threatened to quit unless the decision is reversed.

• Since learning that Sandy has been chosen to receive a promotion for which they were both being considered, Loren has been especially sullen. At every mention of Sandy's name, Loren makes a disparaging comment about Sandy's qualifications.

• Dale was hired at an annual salary of $35,000 to run Acme Oil's technical services department. From day one, Leslie, who has been with Acme three years and earns $32,000 a year, has been especially irate. Indeed, Leslie has threatened to "get even" unless "corrective" action is taken.

Although envy is a universal aspect of everyday life, we only reluctantly acknowledge the inhibiting and destructive aspects of this emotion in the workplace. Because envy implies hostility, we generally view it as a dangerous emotion, capable of disrupting interpersonal relations and triggering hostility, even violence. Consequently, we may readily acknowledge feelings of pride, shame, guilt, and other less-threatening emotions, but envy is socially disgraceful.

Its suppression aside, envy is a central aspect of consumer-oriented economies worldwide. Advertising copy, in particular, relies on envy to influence consumer emotions. As explained by anthropologist George Foster in his article "The Anatomy of Envy" (*Current Anthropology*, 1972, p. 166), "through advertising, customers are persuaded to feel envy for the Joneses, and simultaneously they are shown how they can keep up with the Joneses, i.e., how they can avoid feeling envy for·the Joneses."

This article deals with the nature of workplace envy. Envy—a pervasive and nor-

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mal human emotion—has important implications for understanding workplace behavior. Ironically enough, the management discipline has ignored the topic. This neglect is particularly noteworthy because envy is especially common in business, professions, and the academic world. The assignment of limited organizational resources—promotions, travel money, salary increases, windowed offices, company cars, secretarial support, prime sales territories, and the like—creates the potential for envious feelings among workplace colleagues. Moreover, any situation in which one colleague gains advantage at the expense of others will inevitably evoke envy.

DEFINITION OF ENVY

Constructing a precise, simple definition of envy is difficult because the term is used in multiple and conflicting ways. People tend to use the words "envy" and "jealousy" interchangeably, even though the terms refer to different experiences. As suggested by the opening vignettes, envy is an emotion that occurs when a person begrudges another for having or receiving something that he or she does not have, and perceives with displeasure the other's prosperity or advantage. Although there are no objective criteria for what prompts envy, to the extent that competence and hard work play a role in each of the opening vignettes, enviousness (as opposed to unfairness) is at play.

Jealousy, by contrast, occurs when a person fears losing a valued relationship with another individual or thing. Whereas envy comes from seeing another individual gain an advantage, jealousy stems from a fear of personal rejection or loss. In this respect, jealousy arises as a protective reaction to a perceived threat—the potential disruption of a marital, platonic, or professional relationship, for example.

As generally conceived, both envy and jealousy are forms of behavior that presuppose a social context. Whereas envy describes a dyadic state, jealousy, by definition, in-

volves three elements: oneself, a person with whom one has a valued relationship, and a third party who one fears will disrupt the relationship. In contrast, envy involves only an envier and a target (i.e., a person whose prosperity and advantages an individual finds displeasing).

Finally, even though enviousness may result from feelings of having been "underrewarded," comparing our own outcomes relative to others' outcomes proportional to inputs ("I worked harder than she did, but she got more") is not a necessary prerequisite for experiencing envy. In other words, envy does not require reference to a norm of equitable exchange, but rather only displeasure with what one perceives to be the possessions or attributes of others.

Malicious vs. Nonmalicious Envy

In Western societies, envy generally has taken one of two forms. Since Aristotle's time, people have drawn a distinction between envy that is socially unattractive and that which is "benign" or best understood as a type of admiration. These forms have been labeled "nonmalicious" and "malicious" envy.

Expressions of nonmalicious envy are commonplace. Consider, for example, the oftheard compliment, "Your promotion is wonderful—I envy you!" Also, think about a situation in which someone expresses "envy" for a colleague who has finished work and is off to play golf. No ill will is either intended or being expressed. In neither instance are the "enviers" really envious. Rather, they truly intend goodwill, reflecting either a determination to improve themselves or admiration for the envied colleague.

Conversely, malicious envy is far from benign. It reflects either the feeling "I wish I had what you have" or "I wish you did not have what you have." For this reason, malicious envy is generally considered reprehensible. Moreover, whereas we may view nonmalicious envy as motivating (the person who says, "I envy your promotion" may be inspired to develop his or her own talents in a similar way), we generally think of malicious envy as an undesirable trait. Malicious envy represents the denigration of others, and envious persons are regarded as possessing character defects.

Confusing the distinction between forms of envy are occasions in which people are unaware of being envious. Imagine a situation in which a person is the last to be aware that envy is motivating his or her actions. Say, for example, that this individual disparages a co-worker's rapid promotions as being gained through brownnosing. Colleagues see no evidence of the co-worker's supposed subservience. In fact, they note ample evidence of the co-worker's hard work. Quite likely, they will judge the individual's deprecating comments as being prompted by envy. The envious individual may be totally unaware that such judgments are being passed—and even be out of touch with his or her own emotions in this regard. Such mismatched perceptions can have unpleasant implications for an individual's collegial relations, as well as for his or her general happiness.

MAINTAINING A WORTHY SELF

We might ask why feelings such as pride, shame, and guilt are more readily acknowledged than envy. Anthropologist George Foster explains the difference by contending that admitting to envy is tantamount to conceding inferiority with respect to another. Such an admission, of course, is often difficult without damaging one's ego.

Avoiding feelings of inferiority and maintaining a "worthy self" through self-enhancement is a natural goal. Foster avers that in wealthier societies, envy is bred not by material belongings but rather by a competitive desire to excel, "to reach the top, to 'prove' oneself in some way." Thus, these individuals do not prize high salaries for their survival value, but for their symbolic evidence of success in a competitive setting. Likewise, in academic and scientific disciplines, recognition and fame in the form of critical acclaim for a scholarly publication (Newbery Book Award or Pulitzer Prize),

coveted honors (being named an Academy of Management or IBM Fellow), and election or appointment to professional offices (National Academy of Science Presidency or National Council of Economic Advisors Chairmanship) are not desired because they are essential for job survival, but rather as proof of scientific merit.

Correspondingly, masked envy explains why colleagues may greet with mixed feelings the news that a fellow scientist has won a professional honor or accolade, and why they seldom give elaborate farewell parties for peers who have accepted positions at more prestigious laboratories. In both instances, the discrepancy between one scientist's accomplishments and the success of another can serve to highlight the first individual's own shortcomings. This can have pscyhological consequences, such as a drop in productivity or an increase in job dissatisfaction.

To avoid feeling envious or otherwise inferior, individuals commonly transfer the "locus of responsibility" for their lack of attainment by blaming it on "fate" or "luck." Being the victim of events beyond our control effectively attributes a rival's success to chance. Thus, our status is in no way diminished, because, by definition, the competition has no legitimate claim to superiority.

Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman, in his classic *Capitalism and Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 166), provides a striking illustration of how transferring and placing responsibility outside our sphere of control can make an inferior position bearable through envy reduction. Though the illustration is set within an academic environment, it can be applied to any merit-type situation.

> The college professor whose colleague wins a sweepstakes will envy him but is unlikely to bear him any malice or to feel unjustly treated. Let the colleague receive a trivial raise that makes his salary higher than the professor's own, and the professor is far more likely to feel aggrieved. After all, the goddess of chance, as of justice, is blind. The salary raise was a deliberate judgment of relative merit.

ENVY OBVIATION

A variety of traditions within Western societies serve to obviate or reduce envy. In organizational settings, these include socialization practices that stress internalizing specific values and manifesting certain behaviors (e.g., new employees cannot immediately displace their more senior colleagues, but can eventually achieve their status by holding certain values); ideas about fair play (e.g., be a good loser); agreed upon "rules of the game" to which competitors are expected to conform (e.g., tacit rules regulating permissible envy and aggression); and beliefs about losing without loss of face (e.g., finding honor in having fought a good fight). Such devices may be so deeply embedded in tradition and convention that they are largely internalized and subconscious.

At the same time, there are also more rigid, institutionalized devices for envy reduction. In complex organizations, "redistribution" and "encapsulation" are commonly used to reduce envy. Redistributive, or siphon, devices serve to draw off excessive wealth from stockholders and to redistribute it among employees.

In market-organized economies, gainsharing programs and employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs) are the principal devices used for this purpose. Both are intended not only to provide a lesson in economics supporting the free-enterprise system and to promote teamwork among employees and stockholders, but also to reduce the threat of envy by reinforcing the idea that there is no double standard. Neither employees nor stockholders will benefit unless the economic circumstances of an organization allow. Thus, both groups have a direct stake in an organization's success.

As initially introduced in the United States in 1794, gainsharing was seen as an "extension of democracy in industry." In other words, it was a means for forging an employee link to

profits and ownership. Only more recently have gainsharing programs such as those of Scanlon, Improshare, Rucker, profit sharing, and various hybrid programs like Motorola's Participative Management Plan been viewed as devices for stimulating employee output. Even so, gainsharing programs are not typically incentive-oriented, in that they are not generally based on measured *individual* output or contribution. Thus, gainsharing programs may not eliminate envy, but they do seek to minimize hostility by distributing wealth more widely.

ESOPs were first developed in the 1950s in response to the "people's capitalism theories" of Louis Kelso. Like gainsharing, they represent a conscious effort to reduce envy by joining individual and organizational goals. ESOPs allow corporations to annually set aside shares of their stock for employees, typically distributed according to a predetermined payroll-based formula. Employees thus have an opportunity to share directly in a company's success by earning an ownership stake. ESOPs serve to obviate envy by fostering a feeling of partnership between owners and employee-cum-stockholders, giving members of both groups an opportunity to profit by cooperating with rather than competing against one another.

Encapsulation, as a device for envy obviation, refers to the creation of distinct social units, each with its own rights, perquisites, and obligations. Such social units are generally delineated by psychological, cultural, and even physical boundaries. Encapsulation in organizations takes the form of separate entrances (e.g., plant gate versus front lobby), segregated eating areas (e.g., employee cafeteria versus executive dining suite), distinct parking arrangements (e.g., open lot versus heated garage), restricted lavatories (e.g., student versus faculty), private clubs (e.g., nonmanagerial versus managerial)—all means for reducing contact between individuals of unequal status. By incorporating implicit premises about the nature of labor and management, as well as explicitly negotiated, legally binding procedures for handling contract provisions, union contracts also typical-

ly foster (and enforce) an encapsulated workplace. Similarly, cultural traditions such as "no brownnosing" (or conversely, "Don't fraternize with the troops") further encourage an encapsulated workplace.

Finally, in delineating psychological boundaries between social units, encapsulation provides benefits for both employees and managers. By creating social units in which the "average" member ideally has equal access to the so-called "good things in life" (e.g., home, health, clothing, cars, and travel), encapsulation minimizes relative differences *within* subunit bounds. It likewise reduces the visibility of single individuals *between* social units, because the group members lack distinctive attributes that would set them apart from their colleagues. Subunit members may thus freely enjoy their material successes without feeling vulnerable to the latent envy of others. Hence, by minimizing feelings of deprivation on the one hand, and fear of envy on the other, encapsulation contributes to the psychological well-being of all parties.

In recent years, some organizations have moved away from encapsulation as a means of envy obviation. Moving toward an "us" rather than a "we-they" mind-set, such actions are reflected even in the language they use. Organizations such as Du Pont, McDonald's, Disney Productions, Wal-Mart, and J.C. Penney steer away from the use of "employee" in favor of "associate" and "team member." Perhaps no organization, in an effort to reduce labor-management envy and build team spirit, has moved away from encapsulation as decidedly as Semco S/A.

At Semco, some 20 percent of the employees set their own salaries. Believing that pyramidal hierarchies emphasize power, Semco is designed as an organizational circle composed of three concentric rings staffed by "counselors," "partners," "coordinators," and "associates." People are paid according to their knowledge rather than their titles or ranks. Monthly financial reports are available to everyone, and all know that 23 percent of after-tax profits is theirs to be shared. It seems unlikely that Semco will soon serve as a blueprint for other organizations, but it is an

example of future changes that are possible, as organizations strive to minimize envy and foster a feeling of partnership between labor and management.

PERSONALITY CORRELATES OF ENVY

Though there is a normal human tendency toward envy, certain people are either seemingly extremely envious or virtually without envy. It is generally believed that a confused mixture of personality factors is associated with excessive envy. Recall, for example, the link between excessive envy, feelings of inferiority, and personal inadequacy mentioned earlier. Similarly, psychologists Ralph McCrae and Paul Costa, in their article "Validation of the Five-Factor Model of Personality Across Instruments and Observers" (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1987, Vol. 52, pp. 86-87), have identified inordinate envy as one of a variety of negative traits that are central to neuroticism (defined by self-consciousness, insecurity, and temperamentalism).

Neuroticism, in turn, has been related to irrational beliefs such as self-blame and the use of inappropriate coping responses (e.g., open hostility). Analyses of "entitlement" (i.e., the belief that one deserves an outcome) and discussions of so-called "entitleds" (i.e., those who seek to exploit others) both reinforce the notion that extreme envy is correlated with an irrationally held sense of deservedness that begets feelings of resentment. Like entitleds, envy-prone individuals view life as unfair for denying them their due. In addition, both entitleds and the extremely envious may employ rancor, backbiting, defamation, and hostility to enact their will.

BEHAVIORAL IMPLICATIONS

As noted, envy can have unpleasant implications for individuals' interactions with others and for their own general happiness. Because they persist in comparing their own situations with those of others, enviers seem to experience unflattering comparisons with greater frequency than their less envious counterparts. Moreover, because they must deal more often with hostile emotions, envy-prone individuals tend to experience greater environmental adversity. Of particular note is research suggesting that coronary-prone individuals are especially drawn to evaluation, achievement, and social comparison with others, uncovering a potential link between cardiovascular disease and enviousness: cynical hostility, a typical feature of entrenched envy, is highly correlated with the incidence of heart disease.

Beyond hostility, other behaviors associated with enviousness also have unpleasant implications for interpersonal interactions. In an effort to protect themselves from being demeaned, envious individuals may venture to undercut their rivals by disrupting the efforts of competitors, negatively distorting competitors' successes, or positively distorting their own accomplishments. Such predatory tactics have long been associated with the so-called "professional ambush" and are particularly common in fluid settings where aggressive "comers" challenge their more senior colleagues. Indeed, in his article "Professional Jealousy and Backbiting" (*Industry Week*, July 15, 1992, p. 30), Linn Thomé, a former vice president for a nationwide convention service, relates a case in which a highly regarded new employee was "done in" by his two immediate supervisors. Feeling professionally threatened by the employee, who in fact was breathing closely down their necks, they took every opportunity to ridicule his work and vilify his personal integrity. The unrelenting pressure soon became overwhelming and the newcomer resigned.

DEALING WITH WORKPLACE ENVY

Dealing with workplace envy can challenge virtually any employee—novice and oldtimer alike. By following various guidelines, however, an individual can gain a degree of protection and, in effect, avoid being "done in." In all instances, a person encountering work-

place envy is advised to take a proactive, rather than a reactive, stance. Five guidelines help in this regard:

1. *Be a strong team player and adhere to unofficial workplace rules.* Astute workplace denizens will quickly learn to put a check on possible enviers by being a strong team player and adhering to unofficial workplace rules. Being accepted as a team player may require modestly responding to praise or compliments (never boasting), as well as downplaying any special abilities or talents. Viewed from a psychological perspective, such modesty and denial constitute a defense against envy. As for unofficial workplace rules, be alert to institutionalized practices intended to obviate envy. Being oblivious to a tradition of salary secrecy, for instance, can lead to personal conflicts that would best be avoided.

2. *Don't reveal too much information about yourself.* This will require keeping interactions aboveboard and on a professional level. Never dwell on your weaknesses or, for that matter, advantages over others. This is not meant to inhibit an individual from being a strong team player or imply that colleagues will always try to counter your strengths and play to your weaknesses. However, revealing too much information about yourself can make it irresistibly easy for others to use the information as leverage for their own career advancement.

3. *As your career progresses upward, avoid becoming a target for others' envy.* Never boast of property or make an ostentatious display of wealth. Whereas colleagues may see a new car, learn of a new home, and admire a new wardrobe, they may well overlook the years of overtime, lost weekends at the office, and late-night flights with connections directly to the office. In such cases, a certain degree of envy is almost inevitable. Moreover, though some of these same colleagues may not be willing to make such sacrifices to get ahead, they may be willing to retaliate by disrupting efforts and negatively distorting successes.

4. *Use mediation if it is available.* Realizing the destructive impact of workplace envy on employee attitudes and productivity, an increasing number of companies have insti-

tuted counseling programs that target enviousness behavior. Through such employee assistance programs, employees can learn to deal with the destructive effects of workplace envy in a positive and cost-efficient manner.

5. *Exit from "sick systems."* When workplace envy occurs, assess not only the motives of the individuals directly involved, but the entire work environment as well. In some instances, the problem at hand may be larger than a single individual, reflecting a system-wide disorder. A "sick system" encourages adversarial relationships and distrust, while providing insufficient support for career success. In such an environment, dealing with a single envious colleague may be no more effective than putting a Band-aid on a severed artery.

CONCLUSION

Both individuals and organizations would be wise to recognize and monitor the dynamics of workplace envy. Although a natural and understandable emotion, envy is capable of not only destroying the envious, but their targets as well. The judicious use of the preceding guidelines can aid in avoiding such destruction, as well as contribute to an organization's long-term success.

The existence of workplace envy, and the accompanying consequences, have long been affirmed by common experience. Accordingly, the study of workplace relations, including research on interpersonal processes, social learning theory, socialization theory, and personality theory, could benefit from examining the dynamics of such a pervasive aspect of organizational behavior.

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