



Creating a Star Team

A perfect working team is more than a set of great CVs; it also encompasses competent jerks and loveable fools.

While most people are adamant that “competency” is preferable to “likeability” in a colleague, research suggests employees can be more energised and effective when working with people whom they “like”.

The study “Competent Jerks, Loveable Fools and the Formation of Social Networks” found that given a tradeoff between likeability and competence people gravitate towards those whose company they enjoy and organisations which foster positive feelings among employees achieve remarkable results.

But why is “liking” so important to a working relationship? Can it be managed without sacrificing diversity? And can the “competent jerks” really be made more “lovable”?

Balancing familiarity and diversity

“People are social beings so it’s not surprising that the emotional part of our relationships, even our professional relationships, is important,” **Miguel Lobo**, INSEAD Associate Professor in Decision Sciences and co-author of the report, told INSEAD Knowledge. “In some sense our emotions are the lubricants that make relationships work. On the other hand it can mean we disregard the hard competencies that are essential to make successful achievement of tasks possible.”

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There is also the danger that picking staff because of their compatibility can result in a homogenous team, which operates smoothly but lacks spark. It’s generally accepted a diverse team is more likely to think “outside-the-box” - challenge old ideas and produce innovative results. On the other hand, too much diversity – when people don’t get on - can create frustrations, poor communication and tension. To get the most out of a team, says Lobo, managers need to create an environment where both diversity and familiarity thrive.

“Liking” is a very complex thing

Building on the Loveable Fools research, Lobo and his co-author Tiziana Casciaro followed an organisation over three years watching relationships develop, delving deeper into the aspect of “liking” and observing how managers used this knowledge in the workplace .

“Liking someone or liking a relationship is a very complex thing,” notes Lobo. “There is the liking which drives people and the liking which promotes complacency, knowing what the other person is thinking or going to do next.”

Their latest paper, “Affective Primacy in Intra-organisational Task Networks” looks at liking (or affect) in two dimensions: the tone of the

relationship, measured from negative (where there is a great dislike for the person) to positive; and the energy, measured from low to high.

A negative tone and low energy is a feeling of being left deflated, while a high-energy negative tone will be associated with anxiety and anger. A positive tone with low energy creates a contented and comfortable but not necessarily driven relationship, while a positive tone with high-energy corresponds to excitement and the feeling of being energised.

High energy relationship

It's when affect has a positive tone and high energy that excitement kicks in and remarkable things are accomplished, notes Lobo.

"Just feeling that I enjoy working with you, that passive contentment enjoyment, is not going to lead me to seek you out as work partner to deal with challenges. What makes me take action is a high energy positive emotion. This excitement doesn't come from homophily (the tendency of individuals to like similar others), it's a bit of a mystery where it comes from. It is an idiosyncratic thing, but something that often can be managed."

While no-one can be forced to like a colleague, the commonality of shared experiences can create trust. This can be manipulated in many ways, including through team building exercises or redesigning the office space - placing individuals who are likely to work together closer to each other, creating areas where employees can come together naturally.

Of course there are always individuals who don't become more loveable, the "competent jerks" whose skills are appreciated but who constantly create friction and disharmony within a team. In these cases, Lobo says, it's a matter of careful selection of which tasks they are given and approaching them in a more direct way.

It's a skill to "be nice"

"Often these are the people who respond most to incentives," he adds. "By saying 'Look I'm not asking you to be a nice person but having good working relationships is a skill and a professional asset like any other'. You have to make them see it as a goal they need to achieve and reward them for doing so."

Once the ability to get on with people is recognised as a skill, the "loveable fool" becomes a more valuable asset as someone able to smooth out friction and help oil the channels of communication.

"You have to be mindful not to create an environment where you signal competence is not

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important but you can think of the likeable part of their character as one competence," says Lobo. "These people tend to be strong on relationships, so giving them a role that makes good use of that can be effective."

Managers achieve the greatest results, says Lobo, when the emotional life of an organisation – networks such as who works well with whom, who generates excitement within the organisation, or who has the emotional intelligence to work as a bridge in communication – are considered in tandem, with the formal structural design.

"While this may be something that good managers do instinctively," he says, "it's important that managers recognise the ability to manage emotions is a skill that can be worked on, and like any competence, can be improved with practice."

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