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THE WORKPLACE

Here Comes the Grooming

By Steve Johnson and Dusty White

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# here comes the grooming

This is another in our series of articles about the many ways that organizations resemble other living things. As we pointed out in our last article, since people are primates, organizations are particularly likely to display primate-like behavior. Today's column involves grooming behavior. Monkeys spend a lot of time grooming one another. They do indeed pick out the occasional burr or louse from one another's fur. Those who study primates believe that grooming behavior also satisfies deeper emotional needs, bonding individuals together for mutual care, and, ultimately, mutual protection. Monkeys do it because it makes them feel good.

So it is not surprising that we find grooming behavior in organizations. It can be rather subtle, however, and even metaphorical in some ways. The yearly performance reviews that many organizations carry out are a kind of grooming behavior. The organization examines itself carefully, cleaning house as needed, and smooths its corporate fur. And collectively it feels better when the job is done.

More subtly, many individuals every day do things that enhance and support the organization. At one company in a state of rapid change, it seemed every meeting started with 20 minutes of news and gossip, as people found out who was doing which job, who had left, who had changed jobs, which projects were slipping, etc. It was

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almost impossible to start the business of the meeting until this had been gone through. When it had, however, people relaxed and felt better, and they could focus on the subject of the meeting.

Organizations also encourage grooming behavior among employees. In fact, we may speak of someone who is being “groomed for upper management.” The organization has singled out this individual and is taking particular care to get the burrs and lice out of their fur. Employees groom their managers, very obviously in the case of some “brownnosers” or by more subtle use of body language, inflection, and voice in the manager’s presence.

Look at a company just after a major reorganization is announced. The topic is on every lip. There is discussion of the causes, who knew about it early, who anticipated it, who is now “out” and who is now “in,” who is doing which job now, and so on. The monkey just got his fur ruffled and needs some serious grooming. Over the next several days, the organization gets its new coat of fur in order and reverts to more ordinary behavior.

Sometimes, this grooming goes to remarkable lengths. One of us once attended a meeting with 150 or so people who had been flown in from 10 states and three foreign countries. The content of the meeting was well known and understood by all the employees. I personally learned not one single thing at the meeting. The big-cheese manager spoke along with all of his direct reports. The most favored of his direct reports spoke for nearly an hour. Others spoke for less time. When I realized that my boss was only allotted 12 minutes, I knew his days were numbered (he was demoted three months later).

At the time I was stunned that an otherwise sensible and profitable company would spend the better part of a quarter million dollars in salary and travel money to have an all-day meeting that conveyed no new information. And then I realized — this was grooming the organization. The big cheese had his cheeseness acknowledged by his entire organization. The smaller cheeses had their places validated in front of the whole organization. The attendees overcame their jet lag and ennui enough to be treated to several good catered meals. Grooming.

When monkeys groom one another, they aren’t out gathering bananas. When companies groom themselves, they are not building product or satisfying customers. Grooming probably does make the organization stronger in the long run, if not carried to excess. In any case, a certain amount of it is probably inevitable, and worthy of the same kind of amused tolerance we give our appendix and coccyx – holdovers from our animal ancestors, of no particular utility, but easy to live with when not broken or infected.