How Did We Get Here, and Where Are We Going?
Chapter 1

HOW DID WE GET HERE, AND WHERE ARE WE GOING?

A WEIRDO IS ANYONE NOT LIKE YOU? Sad, but true. Let’s get this straight right from the start. Which is one reason why there seem to be more and more of them out there. Have you noticed that you can’t even count on people who look like you to be normal (like you) anymore? It’s every man (or woman) for himself.

Whatever happened to the good old days when people just came to work, did their jobs, kept their mouths shut, and didn’t rock the boat? And you could count on them coming back the next day, and the next day, and doing it again and again until they got a gold watch and retired. And why is career success becoming so difficult for so many?

Why have workers and workplaces become so weird? Granted, the older we get, the narrower our definition of normal becomes, but it’s more than just perception. Something is changing, and it’s not just our perception. So what is it? What’s the world coming to?
As Goes the World, So Goes the Workplace

The answer to these questions is that the workplace is a microcosm of society. The more aware you are of issues in modern society and culture, the more you can become a foreseer of workplace trends and challenges. It’s absolutely fail-proof, and history proves it.

But before we go into a history lesson, it’s important to understand that society, organizations, and individuals all follow a similar adaptive progression that can be captured in the acronym STAR: Stifling, Tolerating, Accepting, Rejoicing—particularly when it comes to major cultural shifts, which is what we are talking about here. It may happen at differing speeds, but the steps never change.

Think about it. When a change is thrust upon you that you do not initiate, nor that you want, isn’t your first response to attempt to stifle it, to deny its relevance or its validity? But, once you realize that it is here to stay, you have to learn to tolerate it. That’s just natural human adaptation. Eventually, if and when you realize it isn’t going to kill you, and that you can’t make it go away, for your own good, you must learn to accept it. It’s a new status quo.

It’s the R in the STAR progression, however, that is the most difficult for most people, and must be set as a conscious goal before it can be accomplished. That is, to eventually learn to embrace the new reality and to find a way to actually capitalize upon it for you and your organization’s own benefit and success. It’s at this point that you and those around you can actually rejoice and succeed in the new reality. It’s not easy, and it may not always be possible, but it is always advisable and desirable.

Now, the history lesson. Let’s see how this STAR progression and the fact that “As goes the world, so goes the workplace” has been proven over time, and where it is taking us.
The Age of the Organization Man (Stifling)

Let’s stroll down memory lane for a moment. It was post-World War II when we saw the advent of the “The Organization Man.” There was even a book by that title. If there was ever a period of time that exemplified the opposite of what we are seeing today, this is it. The key to success in the ’50s and even the ’60s was to conform, to blend.

To be the epitome of the Organization Man not only meant adorning the traditional IBM white shirt and tie, but also required a white face, and a set of testicles. It wasn’t considered even remotely discriminatory to hire and promote only white men for the “important” jobs, nor was it considered abnormal to require them to look and act alike, even if they didn’t think alike. Organizations were run like an extension of the military, dominated by white men, and no one complained. Life was good, at least for them, or so they thought. And, in fact, it was probably an appropriate organizational model for the time. Much was accomplished in this period, regardless of how it may look in hindsight. Which is the point. It’s all relative. It doesn’t matter if you agree with reality, it is reality! You can go back as far as you want in history, and this principle applies (slavery, suffrage, prohibition, etc.).

Yes, in 20/20 hindsight, the Age of the Organization Man was a period of severe stifling (on the STAR progression), but back then, creativity was not as valued a commodity as loyalty and harmony. Creativity and innovation, if and when it existed, came from the top (executives), from outside (the military, NASA), or from well-defined, controllable departments (R&D centers). Everyone else checked his or her opinions at the door, toed the company line, and did what they were told, hopefully until retirement.
Team building was somewhat of an oxymoron because in an environment where everyone agrees whether they agree or not, teamwork is confused with harmony. Going along and getting along were the overriding characteristics of a team player. In fact, there was no such thing as team dynamics and team development during this era. It wasn’t needed!

Managing was easy as well. Imagine how easy it would be to be a manager if everyone looked, acted, and thought like you. Imagine if “being easy to manage” was considered a core measure of competency. Imagine if you had no one asking for special rights or privileges. No wonder they loved the status quo. But then things began to change.

The Age of Diversity (Tolerating)


Take a look at this list of social phenomena and think about how all of these trends combined would have impacted the workplace during this period. This was an age of forced tolerance for forced diversity. It was not an organizational strategy. It was an organizational tragedy… for the traditionalists!

Need I say more? This is when the Organization Man lost his mind. The laments of the day were, “The work ethic is dead!” and “You just can’t get good help anymore!” Managing became a nightmare because managers actually had to manage—that is, to make dis-
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Distinctions and difficult decisions, and they just didn’t know how to do it. And they didn’t want to do it! This was the advent of weirdos in the workplace, but at this point, it was just a bunch of square pegs in round holes, and it hurt! It wasn’t accepted; just barely Tolerated.

There were Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, Age Discrimination in Employment, Americans with Disabilities, the Veterans Readjustment Act, and employment legislation out the wazoo. The multitude of laws requiring organizations to open their doors to diversity created great conflict and confusion. And remember that diversity was defined in strict legal terms called “protected classes”: minorities, women, the disabled, and other clearly definable groups.

The sad irony was that equal opportunity measures were actually an insult to those for whom the laws were supposed to benefit. They didn’t seem to realize that not all blacks think and act alike, not all women think and act alike, and so on. It was both simplistic and difficult at the same time.

Organizations hired specialists to work the numbers, called compliance officers (I know because I was one!), more to stay out of trouble than to advance the cause of diversity. It was compliance, not benevolence. Personnel became Human Resources. The glut of regulations also created a multitude of bureaucracies and bureaucrats. And lawsuits proliferated.

But, because this was such a new phenomenon, and it was forced, and still not accepted, these diverse groups learned that, to succeed, it was necessary to continue to try to “blend in” because the Organization Men were still holding the positions of power, and they detested and resisted this invasion of their sacred inner sanctum. They worshiped homogeneity, but were surrounded by heterogeneity. They idolized harmony, but were faced with conflict.

Women tried to become men (behaviorally back then). African-Americans tried to act white. Even WASP male baby boomers and former hippies like me tried to talk the talk and walk the walk of the
traditionalists, not just to get along, but to get ahead. And it was pain-
ful…for everyone!

And it never really worked. It worked in terms of opening the front
door to formerly ostracized and alienated groups, but the doors to the
boardroom, the executive conference room, and other circles of influ-
ence remained closed, and the same agenda remained in place, but now
with some new players on the field.

Eventually, as the economy soured in the ’80s, the traditional value
of loyalty, which was an icon in the Age of the Organization Man, was
forced out the window. And ironically, it was initiated by the Organiza-
tion Men. When push came to shove, reductions in force, and other
downsizing initiatives ruled the day, and sent a chilling new message to
the next generation of workers that it’s every man for himself now.
Diversity was not only here to stay, but now the economy required
some tough choices to be made.

And now the rest of the story.

The Age of the New Economy
(Accepting)

Welcome to the ’80s and ’90s. The last of the Organization Men
were retiring or cashing out with
golden parachutes, severance plans,
early retirement incentive programs,
and other ways to escape the reality
that diversity and technology were
not only here to stay, but were coming of age. Although technology was
not the primary driving force behind the exodus of the Organization
Man, it was a compounding factor. Added altogether, going to work was
no longer fun, and there was no turning back. There were only two
choices, accept it or leave it. And leave it many of them did.
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In the ’80s there were still significant pockets of traditionalists in positions of power and in some of the stalwarts of industry, but baby boomers and other new workers were beginning to acquire greater power, not because they deserved it, particularly in the minds of the Organization Men, but because there was no choice. It wasn’t by design, but by default. Who else was going to succeed them?

And, as we moved into the ’90s, power was no longer rooted solely in position, but also in knowledge and expertise. Power now came with rare and valued talent and skill. New age techies and other high-achievers and talented individuals started to rule the roost, even if it was only departmental. Some weirdness was becoming an accepted cost of doing business and making money.

Combine the so-called new economy with the dot-com boom and the severe shortage of technical and other talent, and companies were now looking purely for talent, and didn’t care what color, shape, or size it came in. Diversity almost became a non-issue because you could be purple with two heads and if you had talent, you had job offers.

It actually got to the point that almost anyone could succeed if they could fog the mirror, because organizations were suddenly desperate for warm bodies. And, because demand outweighed supply, knowledge workers and rare talent were now in the driver’s seat for the first time in the history of organizations. And they capitalized on it.

Better offers were streaming in, new companies were being formed right and left, stock options were being handed out like candy, and the new worker went wherever the money and opportunity took him or her. Loyalty was now directed toward a profession, not an organization. Free Agent Nation had been born. Employees could truly become owners, even at the entry level.

And guess what these new workers were accused of? Being disloyal! If it weren’t so pathetic it would be funny. But more importantly, with this new era also came new perks, privileges and prerogatives ranging from flex time to casual attire to actually having fun at work.
Blasphemy! The values of loyalty and harmony were now being superceded by the values of creativity and innovation. Ideas and results ruled the day!

This period represented a major transition in the world of work. Regardless of the fact that the so-called new economy may have been a flash in the pan, and that workers may never be “in charge” to the degree they were (which I predict will be true again), there was a new acceptance and a growing awareness of the value of diversity. But now it was going way beyond the traditional, legalistic definition of diversity to become The Age of the Individual.

The Age of the Individual (Rejoicing!)

It is coming. In fact, it is already here, but many organizations just haven’t figured it out yet, or may still be hoping it will go away. Forget about it! Look around. And don’t forget, “As goes the world, so goes the workplace.” New workers got a taste of what it is like to be appreciated for their individual value, and demonstrated how hard they will work and how much they will sacrifice for an organization in which they have a stake and that rewards them accordingly. The work ethic is not dead; it has just been redefined.

In the Age of the Organization Man, the concept of teamwork was irrelevant. In the Age of the Individual, teamwork isn’t irrelevant, but it is becoming marginalized, particularly where high performance and rare talent is concerned. Whoever coined the phrase, “there is no ‘I’ in team,” didn’t seem to notice that “there ain’t no ‘WE’ either!”

If societal trends predict workplace trends, you don’t have to look very far to see where we are going. From reality TV, to “An Army of
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One,” to professional sports, to style and fashion, to music and entertainment, the individual predominates, particularly if that individual is a star, or thinks he is. Standing out is far more important than fitting in, and the rewards are getting greater and greater.

Think about it. Even in team sports, the individual has become king. It may take a team to win a championship, but it’s the individual who is inducted into the hall of fame. It’s the individual whose records are remembered. It’s the individual who breaks them. It may take a team to play a game, but your star scorer can’t score unless she has the ball. Teamwork and the concept of free agency do not mix well.

So why and how can we rejoice in the Age of the Individual? Well, aren’t you one? It doesn’t mean that people don’t still pull together and pitch in for each other. It doesn’t mean that we still cannot accomplish more, and be more creative as a group. What it does mean is that organizations must now learn to identify, recognize, and reward their stars, shift their focus and emphasis on individual achievement and on finding, attracting, motivating, and rewarding as many of them as they can. It also means the end of catering to the middle and wasting excessive time and resources trying to teach a rock to swim. It’s not an option if you strive to thrive in the Age of the Individual.

Understand that when you hire superstars, you do not have a team. You have a collection of individuals. It’s the cold, hard truth. And it isn’t necessarily a bad thing, as long as you have them doing what they should be doing. Ask any high performer what they think about depending on others for their success (i.e., a team), and in their moment of truth they will tell you quite bluntly that they would prefer to go it alone. You will learn more about this concept of “self-efficacy” later, so hold that thought.

Let’s face it, most Americans are not inherently team players. We are not a collective society. Asians are collective. Americans are rugged individualists. We were founded by the malcontents who left the flock. It’s just not in our culture to rely on others unless we have to. People
will play the game and play along if it is necessary for them to meet their goals, but they feel stifled. Because they are!

Don’t get me wrong. It’s not like they want to work in a cave. They still want and need others as resources, sounding boards, and comrades, and they will instantly become a cohesive team in a crisis situation, but they do not want to be shackled (stifled) by being forced to defer to a team or a task force on something that is their true forte. Why?

Because in the Age of the Individual, the burning question inside each person is continually, “What’s in it for me?” That’s not the ethic we saw in the Post WWII era of the ’50s, nor is it necessarily mercenary or narcissistic, but it is a new normal for the realities of today’s world. And today’s world is where we are living. Like it or not, it is what it is. And this is your wake-up call!

Good News/Bad News

Today’s high performers have a free-agent mentality. Even those working for large corporations think and act like entrepreneurs. But the concept is not entirely new. Did you ever hear of Einstein participating on a quality circle team? Did you ever see Edison engaged in a group hug or team-building exercise? I don’t think so! Geniuses and rare talent don’t do well on teams. Never have; never will.

But now they rule, and they can even rule within organizations, if we let them. They must no longer be confined to working in R&D centers, skunk works or as sole proprietors. And traditional team members don’t really like them. So why punish everyone, including yourself?

Even where artistic and creative genius requires working together, it’s like oil and water. Look at how many rock bands and other performing arts groups, even the most successful ones, break up because of personality differences, clashes in creative concepts, and other non-team-like behavior. Many eventually decide to go out as soloists instead. This isn’t really new, but it is becoming more prevalent in society and there-
fore in the workplace, thus making it necessary to learn how to embrace it in the most productive and profitable manner possible.

Those who know me already know that I not only respect weirdness, but actually encourage it. You also know that my respect for weirdos lies in the assumption that their weirdness is rooted in brilliance, high performance, rare talent, or some added value to an organization and/or to society; that they have tapped their “natural weirdness,” the very essence of why they were added to the human gene pool. But weirdness knows no boundaries.

There are also weirdos who not only bring nothing of value to the game, but are actually a drain, and whose weirdness should not be fostered or even accommodated. We’re talking about the difference between an Albert Einstein and a Charles Manson; a Martin Luther King and an Adolf Hitler. Although they were all weirdos in their own right, that does not necessarily mean they all added value to the world. To quote Albert Einstein, “the difference between stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits.”

The point is that some weirdos are good, some are bad, and some are just an annoyance. Some add incredible value to the world, while others are merely a painful lesson to the rest of it. Some deserve to be loved, some should just be left alone, and others need to be lost forever. You will see all three categories in the cases that follow.

The goal is to win the winners, lose the losers, and learn how to tolerate or relocate those in the middle; but the real challenge is to know which are which, and what to do with them once you know. It’s time for organizations to get tough about the deployment of human resources. Not everyone’s weirdness deserves to be accommodated.

Exalting the Age of the Individual is a double-edged sword. On the one side, it can offer incredible opportunity and rewards to the best and the brightest, but it also requires us to bite the bullet when one’s individuality offers nothing or even detracts from the greater good.
Think about it. What modern technology company wouldn’t love to hire the next Thomas Edison? What sports team wouldn’t jump at a chance to violate their salary cap to recruit just a few Michael Jordans or Tiger Woods? What art school wouldn’t give their left ear for a contemporary Van Gogh or Michelangelo? What recording label wouldn’t sign a bazillion dollar deal with the reincarnated Elvis? (I think one already did.) But once they got them, would they know what to do with them? And could they tolerate the wild eccentricities that can go along with the manifestation of their genius? In the Age of the Individual, we must learn to do so.

Traditionalists and bureaucrats refer to our society and its organizations as a melting pot. I prefer to think of it as a stir-fry, or a tossed salad. No one stands out in a melting pot. In a melting pot, everything is just fused into an indistinguishable blob. In a stir-fry or tossed salad, each individual component maintains its uniqueness, and contributes to the overall experience without losing its distinctive strength or identity. You can still see and taste the red tomato. You can still see and taste the green pepper. After all, you wouldn’t put a bunch of salad fixings into a blender would you? Similarly, there are some things you would never put into a salad or a stir-fry, but they would be perfect in some other dish.

And that’s the point! Everything and everyone has its place, but not everywhere! And, wherever that is, people want and need and deserve to retain their uniqueness. The same is true of organizations. You may not stand out, or excel, in one job or company or industry, but in another, you may develop into a real winner. Same person, different context; same vegetable, different dish. And it’s up to the individual and the organization to participate in this journey.

That’s why you will find tools and techniques in Chapter 4 that address this issue from all possible perspectives (changing others, changing organizations, and ultimately changing yourself).

The bottom line is that the world of work has changed, never to be the same again. From the advent of diversity and equal opportunity in
the '70s, to the tech-nerd boom of the '90s, to the increased emphasis on political correctness and hyper-sensitivity of today, no one seems to know exactly how to act, or even if to act without fear of retribution or persecution. Vanilla has become the safe flavor of choice in many organizations today. And that has to change. It will change.

Please note, however, that in order to maximize and capitalize on this new mindset, both individually and organizationally, does not imply a new laissez-faire management style. With an increasingly exaggerated emphasis on “tolerance of anything and anyone” rooted in a new carte blanche “non-judgmentalism,” combined with the new desire for “freedom without responsibility” with the overarching goal of attaining “self-esteem and fulfillment at any cost,” you have a recipe for disaster. Weirdness for weirdness’ sake is not the goal of a healthy society or organization.

The perceived politically correct need to treat everyone “equally” has resulted in the institutionalization of mediocrity and to the spinelessness of decision-makers. The era of the meritocracy (i.e., an organization in which one’s success or failure is dependent upon his/her contribution and value) is long overdue, which exemplifies the underlying purpose of this book: to recognize, value, and foster the beneficial side of weirdness, while putting the brakes on “anything goes at anyone’s expense.” It’s time to get real!

**Why Are So Many High Performers So Weird?**

Since understanding high performers is one of our goals, let’s learn more about what makes them tick. We will go into much greater depth and detail on this subject in Chapter 3, “What’s IN With High-Performers?,” but for starters, it will help to understand a couple of basic psychological concepts specific to rare talent.
Many high-level thinkers, creative types, geniuses, and results-oriented individuals are low in something called “self-monitoring” behavior. In other words, they do not look in the mirror and ask themselves, “How do others see me?” They don’t care! It rarely even enters their mind. They focus almost exclusively on one, narrow area of their expertise or their interest to the potential detriment of how the rest of the world may perceive them.

I admit that I have been as guilty as anyone of this so-called shortcoming, resulting in the occasional social faux pas. I have even rationalized it afterward by saying things like, “I wasn’t really looking for new friends anyway.” Rejecting others before they reject you is a form of self-defense and self-preservation. You will see this behavior in many individualists, and particularly in those who can “afford” to be different later in the book.

Some high-profile, easily recognizable examples of successful low self-monitors include the historic figures we’ve already mentioned, like Albert Einstein and Thomas Edison. But there are plenty of more contemporary weirdos like pop-singer Michael Jackson, the legendary Elvis, shock-jock Howard Stern, and even Herb Kelleher, long-time former CEO of Southwest Airlines. I’m sure you can think of many more in everyday modern life.

Some are respected and even admired, some are disdained, but all are highly accomplished, celebrated, and rewarded in their respective fields and equally odd and curious in many ways. Ironically, they succeed both in spite of and because of their low self-monitoring behavior. Isn’t it strange how we are rewarding the most antisocial and perceptually abnormal among us? This is a key principle for you and your organization to understand in order to be able not only to tolerate, but to maximize the value of rare talent.

Traditionally, we think of actors, artists, athletes, and scientific geniuses as the most stereotypical examples of brilliant or talented, but bizarre individuals. But today, that same human enigma is penetrating the everyday workplace. In some cases, the weirdness may not even be
exhibited on the job or even in appearance, but rather after hours in the form of weird hobbies, diversions, perversions, or other kinky outlets pursued to fulfill some latent, unsatisfied need.

Case in point: Google, the highly acclaimed web-search engine company, is a case study in savvy management, a company filled with cutting-edge ideas, and an anomaly in the here today, gone tomorrow world of digital technology. Google spends more time on hiring than on anything else. They look for young risk-takers. They define smart as, “Do they do something weird outside of work, something off the beaten path?” They believe that this translates into people who have no fear of trying difficult projects and going outside the bounds of what they know. They do not fear experimentation or change, but initiate it instead. They live and work outside the box.

But is it an employer’s business to concern itself with employees’ private lives? It isn’t, unless it impacts job performance, the business, co-workers, and/or customers, in which case, it does become the employer’s business and at which time the complexities of managing become immense. It also takes courage and creativity to do it right. You will see quite a few examples of this in the upcoming case studies, from the commonplace to the bizarre.

Another psychological commonality of high-performers is something called “self-efficacy” (also called internal attribution), which means that many of these “types” perceive themselves as having greater control over their lives and the lives of others than the average person. They rarely see themselves as victims of circumstances. Rather, they are usually the perpetrators of circumstances. They have a greater than usual tendency to “attribute” success or failure to their own actions rather than to external factors.

They accept responsibility, grab it by the horns, and find it next to impossible to conceive or concede that they may not have, or deserve, complete control. They can be boat-rockers, rebels, and malcontents. This is a wonderful and valuable attribute for an organization that rewards results and change. But it is a not-so-great attribute for those
who do not share these traits, or have to work with, for, or over them—especially in situations in which they do not or should not have control. Again, you will see some examples of these in the upcoming cases, as well.

In any event, they can be dealt with, managed, and even capitalized upon. There’s energy there that can be directed to awesome ends. That’s exactly why some weirdos can be a blessing in disguise. The key is to know who they are and how to realize their value by not stifling it.

By the time you finish this book, you will be able to identify where, when, and how to focus your attention on unusual workplace behaviors based upon whether they have relative value or potential to the organization. You will be able to recognize alternative approaches and to select one most appropriate to you and your organization’s success. And ultimately, you will have an increased understanding, acceptance, and appreciation for the ever-changing world around you, be able to see it coming, and hopefully be on the road to tapping your natural weirdness to become a more valuable member of the Age of the Individual.

What Will This Book Do for Me?

Weirdos in the Workplace will change the way you think and act about worker behavior, and will empower you to take appropriate action where necessary. You will learn that it is high time to recognize that discrimination is good!

The concept of discrimination has gotten a bad rap in recent years, and as a result, has been misinterpreted as a bad thing. If someone says you have discriminating taste, it’s a compliment! It says that you are able to make worthwhile distinctions and decisions, and that is what is called for in the Age of the Individual. In fact, discrimination is not only good, but it
is right and it is necessary if you expect to have any hopes of thriving in the Age of the Individual.

So, why write a book that chronicles and analyzes weird behaviors at work? Well, there are several reasons. On the broadest, most prurient level, people just enjoy observing the human condition in its most rare or extreme form. Look at what sells on radio, TV, and the movies! Think of it as a form of societal/organizational voyeurism, like peeking at an auto accident, or watching reality TV. The cases alone make for a fun, and sometimes distressing read.

On a more focused and pragmatic level, however, since most of us have to spend over half our waking hours working with and for other people, it could come in handy to have a handbook or reference guide for survival and success. At one end of the spectrum, we need to learn how to understand and deal with those who cause us the most challenge, pain, or frustration, while at the other end, we need to learn how to accommodate, retain, and elicit excellence from the most powerfully talented of them all.

I recall in my earlier career as a corporate recruiter how candidates in job interviews would always say, “I like to work with people.” I got so fed up with this moronic cliché that I got into the habit of following up with the question, “As opposed to what? Dogs?” I hope you like to work with people, because there are an awful lot of them out there! Regardless of your occupation, you can rarely escape human beings! And remember, a weirdo is anyone not like you. Thus, this book!

Finally, and most personally, once you realize the value of “tapping your natural weirdness,” you will want to become a high-performing weirdo of worth, if you aren’t already. Chapter 4 covers a concept called AIM, which represents the quest to identify and target the intersection of your Abilities, your Interests, and the Market.

*Weirdos in the Workplace* is an anthology of real-life case studies, showcasing some of the most bizarre behaviors at work, as well as some of the more common, but still challenging, weirdness that occurs
in many workplaces, but for which most of us have no clear solution. It is, however, more than just a compilation of workplace horror stories, and it is *not just another management book*.

It is intended to transcend the pure human resource, management, and business genre to have general appeal and value to anyone who enjoys studying the human condition and anyone who wants to survive and thrive in today’s world of work. In order to make this a truly experiential learning activity, I have collected and compiled a diverse portfolio of real-life workplace cases, which you can read, ponder, and then try to come up with your own solutions. Following each case is an expert analysis, accompanied in Chapter 4 by some universal tools and techniques that can be used to approach virtually any behavioral or organizational challenge.

It’s a whole package. In Chapter 2, we start with the challenges created by individuals within organizations and offer some solutions. Then, in Chapter 3 we identify the five initiatives for creating a successful organization in the Age of the Individual. Then, in Chapter 4 we move to the dynamics and conditions of individual behavioral change, followed by a “how-to” tool and process for identifying, categorizing, and initiating organizational change. We will finish with a very personal section on how you, too, can become a high performer, which should be one of your goals while reading this book. As you will learn, the more you’re worth, the more you can be weird!

In terms of the cases, as a general philosophy, it helps to understand a basic tenet that I teach students of organizational behavior: “contingency theory,” which means that the answer to almost every human challenge is “it depends!” There is almost never just one solution, almost always a second right answer, and always more than one wrong answer, as well! That’s what makes it so frustrating and so interesting at the same time. That’s what makes management as much of an art as it is a science. It is also what makes it not for everyone. Managing today is not for the timid, the uncreative, or the lazy, particularly in the Age of the Individual.
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Let’s try a few on for size. Is body odor protected by freedom of religion? Which restroom should a trans-sexual use, particularly during their gender reassignment? May an employee moonlight as a stripper? What if the CEO is one of her patrons? Is it sexual harassment if I like it? Tough questions! Do you have solutions?

These are just a few of the unusual and challenging real-life case studies that are profiled and analyzed, but I have not overlooked the fact that there are more common, but almost equally as challenging people problems that can rear their ugly heads at work, so I have included those types of cases as well, such as the employee who buries porno movies on his expense report, the customer who’s not always right and whose tirades are not worth the business, and the employee who is always poking at the system for attention.

Just chronicling bizarre and eccentric behavior in the workplace would be an amusing read by itself, but please understand that voyeuristic titillation is not the goal. Whether you agree with some of the weirdness that is becoming ever more evident in our world is not relevant here. This book is not a statement about religion, politics, or morality. It is a book about reality. It’s a human resources serenity prayer.

Whatever your religious, political, or societal values and convictions, you cannot escape the reality that we are not all the same, and that society, particularly American society, is increasingly encouraging and even rewarding individuality and extreme behavior—a “new normal.” That can be a good thing or a bad thing, which is a fundamental premise and message of this book.

The definition of “weird” is changing as well. The more weirdos there are, the fewer you actually see. For example, weirdos are more visible in Pittsburgh than they are in San Francisco. Why? Because the definition and perception of “normal” is much narrower in Pittsburgh than it is in San Francisco. Because weird has not become the norm in Pittsburgh.
And, like it or not, our laws, our media, our educational systems, and just about every other symbol and institution of our society are moving toward embracing this “new normal.” The “normalization of weirdness” is in process right now, and if it is a given, we have no choice but to create new rules and tools to cope with it, deal with it, and to succeed because of or in spite of it. We cannot change reality. But we can change our reactions to it.

This book is not intended to be politically incorrect, nor offensive. In fact, I think you will find that it is actually just the opposite. It is honest and direct, which may be considered politically incorrect by some. But, once you understand that in the purest sense, everyone is a weirdo, including you; that the healthiest and most productive definition of diversity is individuality, not race, sex or some other governmental/regulatory definition; and that we must learn to make distinctions based on this new awareness and value of individuality, then you, the organization in which you work, and society at large will all be better for it.

And finally, the disclaimer.

Please note that the names of people and organizations, as well as some of the circumstances referenced in this book have been changed to protect their privacy. The analyses and commentaries are provided as general information and are not a substitute for legal or other professional advice. Neither the author, publisher, nor any other party to the publication or dissemination of this book may be held liable for the use, misuse, or misunderstanding of its content.

Note

Individuality from Soup to Nuts
This section presents a series of real-life cases of behaviors and circumstances ranging all the way from just plain annoying to downright astonishing. Your challenge is to ask yourself what, if anything, would you do to address them.

If you are the type who does crossword puzzles with one finger on the answer page and the other on the puzzle, you may want to peruse the Tools and Techniques section (Chapter 4) beforehand, so you can have a leg up on the possible solutions. You will learn either way. In this case, it’s not cheating, as long as you’re learning!

If you are not that type, you can learn as you go by coming up with your own approaches and then comparing to the expert analyses. Your approaches may very well be better than theirs! Remember, there are almost always several right answers in the world of weirdness.

The Tools and Techniques in Chapter 4 can also serve as a validation and reinforcement of what you have learned and provide you with a nice,
Blue Suit Bob

Bob was a brilliant, high-potential, entry-level college graduate engineer, hired to work in the corporate headquarters design department of a leading Fortune 100, transnational manufacturing company. He was recruited on the campus of a prestigious engineering school, and made it through all his interviews with flying colors—primarily blue. He made the right appearance, wearing a standard-issue, conservative blue “interview” suit, blue-and-white power tie, and shined shoes, was clean cut, and came across as a “good fit” for this conservative, professional image-conscious organization. He got the job offer!

Bob was the type who kept to himself, spoke only when spoken to, and was clearly not a boat-rocker. Several months into his tenure, however, people started to notice that Bob was more than just the stereotypical introspective technical type, which they were all used to. The grapevine had him clearly labeled as a weirdo, not only because he seemed the stereotypical eccentric analytical, but particularly because he was never seen wearing anything but his original blue interview suit. Every day. Every week. Everywhere.

The dilemma was that he looked just fine. His attire was not only perfectly appropriate, but would actually be the quintessential “dress for success” look that every conservative corporate headquarters would love to clone. But please! Every day? Eventually everyone but Bob seemed to be aware of the situation, which eventually led to his manager coming to the Human Resources Department for guidance.

 Appropriately so, the HR representative suggested a one-on-one, diplomatic, confidential discussion between the manager and Bob in which the manager should mention the situation, and the fact that, as a highly paid professional, he should be able to afford more than one outfit.
The manager did exactly that, to which Bob responded quite glibly, “But I do have more than one outfit! I have five!” They are all blue! Five blue suits, five white shirts, and five generic blue-and-white ties.

When the manager asked why he had such a “weird” wardrobe, Bob said that since his college placement counselor indicated that this was the most appropriate business attire, and since it apparently worked for him in the interview, he decided to just buy multiples of the same outfit. This way he wouldn’t have to think about what to wear every day, could interchange them, and therefore apply his brainpower to more important things, like design engineering. Kind of like Einstein! What now?

**Analysis**

There are a couple of approaches one can take next with Bob. The first one is to do nothing—just leave him alone. In Chapter 4 (Tools and Techniques) you will find a decision-making tool called the Behavioral Change Map, which would have led you to this conclusion. Let’s begin by looking at the first step of the Change Map (Figure 2.1) to see how it applies to Bob:

![Figure 2.1 First step of the Change Map.](image-url)
If you follow this logic and ask, “What’s the problem?” you are really asking “What is it costing the organization?” or “What is the harm in Bob wearing blue suits?” It has no legitimate bearing on his co-workers, as long as he and his blue suits are clean, right? Is he reliable? Is he contributing? Is he doing his job? If so, the first approach is to focus on what Bob does for a living, and let him live.

There is a critical learning point here. Many people, and especially managers, obsess over things that don’t deserve that much time and attention. In fact, many times the cost of intervention exceeds the cost of the perceived problem. This is where you learn to let go.

If, however, you determine that the cost/benefit of doing nothing is out of whack (customer complaints might be an example), then it would be within the right and purview of the employer to counsel again with Bob, and you might request that the next time he goes suit shopping, since no one can wear the same five suits forever, that he jazz up his wardrobe a bit.

You might even give him a complimentary copy of a dress-for-success book; or better yet, spring for a one-time personal fashion consultant to take him shopping. Most of the finer department stores offer this service for free, since they are going to make money on the purchases they select.

As you will discover throughout most of these cases, this is a case where maintaining one’s self-esteem is essential. These counseling sessions should be conducted behind closed doors, and no one but you and Bob need to know that he is receiving such guidance. It is appropriate, however, to let Bob know that his co-workers (without naming or revealing anyone’s identity) and your customers have lamented about his weird fashion statement, thus making it job-relevant, and not just a personal attack on his lack of good taste.

Finally, if he really wants to hold onto his Einsteinian logic for choosing his attire in the morning (i.e., requiring no thought), have the fashion advisor teach him how to label or color-code his wardrobe so
that he automatically knows that if he chooses to wear suit “A” that
there is a corresponding tie, belt, shoes, socks, etc., all labeled with a
corresponding “A” so all he has to do is pick out all the “A” clothes and
put them on. Left-brainers like Bob love this idea! Voilà! Solved!

Hey, you may even want try this yourself! Saves a lot of early-
morning brainpower!

**A Boy Named Sue**

Sue was born Stu. A rough-and-tumble boy who became a rough-and-
tumble man. He was a real man’s man—a Harley-ridin’- beer drinkin’-
ass-kickin’ dude who had a knack for fixing engines to the point where
he became a professional mechanic, working on the big rigs as a career.

But Stu had a secret. A deep, dark secret. For years, he yearned to
be a woman. Not just a cross-dresser, but a full-fledged woman…physi-
cally. Eventually, his medical advisors agreed to support his need, deter-
mining that it was in his best interests, psychologically, to pursue the
long and difficult process of “gender-reassignment” (i.e., a sex change).

Together, they petitioned Stu’s employer and ultimately won
approval for his surgery to be covered by the company medical plan. Stu
was on the road to becoming Sue. So, what’s the problem? As word got
out and the process had progressed to the point where Stu was receiving
hormone therapy, it could no longer be kept a secret. Issues arose
among Stu’s co-workers. One can only guess the number and types of
issues, real or imagined, but we are going to focus on the first one.

One of the first issues to arise via a mechanics’ union grievance was
the question as to which locker room Stu/Sue should use, and when. It
was a Catch-22 among the workforce. Neither the men nor the women
were too keen on getting naked and showering next to him/her, particu-
larly during the in-between stages of the process. And when does he
officially become a she? A decision had to be made. What’s yours?
Analysis

Believe it or not, this is actually a fairly easy one. The employer can defer this decision to the medical profession; specifically his/her own personal physician/psychologist team, as to when an employee uses which locker room while undergoing gender-reassignment. In other words, once Stu/Sue provides a letter of approval or recommendation from his/her doctor(s) that the procedure is advanced to the point where s/he can be considered a woman, then that is when the transfer should occur.

That’s all well and good, but let’s be practical here. It is still going to be a hard sell to Sue’s co-workers. So, in order to ease the transition for everyone, it would also be advisable to inform co-workers as to the basis for the decision (i.e., legal and medical, not arbitrary) and some “sensitivity/diversity” training would be in order, as well. This is not easy for anyone: not for the employee undergoing the transformation, and not for his/her co-workers. There is no denying it; no pretending it will go away; no reason or advantage to side-step reality. It is what it is, and it needs to be out of the closet, just like Stu…or is it Sue?

And before you start crying the blues for Sue, understand that this was her decision, that she got the support of the company medical plan, and that part of her transition counseling includes dealing with all of the personal and emotional issues surrounding such a decision. It’s your employees who are being blind-sided and for whom we must also show empathy and provide education.

This is the time to remind all workers of what constitutes sexual harassment and hostile environment and the consequences of it, as well as all the potential legal ramifications of working in today’s “new normal” world of work. It doesn’t have to revolve exclusively around the issue of Stu/Sue, nor should it, although most people will probably figure it out. Ideally, this type of training and awareness should have been taking place as standard procedure before a case like Stu’s ever devel-
oped. If it hasn’t, this is the time. But even if it has, this is a good time for a refresher course.

As a final aside, this might also be a good time to look at your locker room configurations, and if there is one large, common shower and dressing area, it might be worth considering partitions and more private accommodations. Regardless of the Stu/Sue scenario, most employees would rather dress, undress, and shower in private anyway, male or female. Wouldn’t you?

A Boy Named Sue (Part 2)

OK, so now we’ve dealt with the locker room and sensitivity issues. But the saga continues. It’s a year later, the gender-reassignment process is complete, and Sue is wearing dresses and make-up and using the ladies’ locker room. Things have settled down somewhat, but now there is a job posting, and Sue bid on it. It’s a promotion to a higher-grade position; one which s/he feels qualified to perform.

The job went to another bidder, a man (who has always been a man). Sue felt that she had been a victim of sex discrimination based on her new sex, and she filed suit against her employer. Is this possible? To be sued (no pun intended) by a female employee on the basis of being discriminated against as a woman, that the company subsidized to become a woman?

Analysis

Of course! You can sue for anything in this country! But can you believe that such a complicated case can actually be so easy to resolve? Yes, once again, the decision is an easy one. This case was tested beyond the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) level all the way to the courts, and the ruling has stood that, for purposes of enforcement of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, employees
are considered to be their sex at birth, regardless of gender-reassignment or any other effort at changing their real or perceived sex.

In other words, in the eyes of the EEOC, Stu is still Stu, and therefore cannot be protected by law as a woman. He can still sue for sex discrimination, but it would have to be as a man. Born a man, you can only be protected as a man. Because another man got the job, there was no basis (prima facie) for a discrimination case on the basis of sex.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that employers are increasingly adopting nondiscrimination policies pertaining to what are now being called GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender) workers, who generally have had no legal protection from being fired if they express a nontraditional gender identity on the job. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a Washington, DC-based advocacy group, now publishes a Corporate Equality Index that rates companies on their policies regarding workers with nontraditional gender identities.

The Devil Made Me Do It!

Ben the Baptist was also a cop. Not a problem, until he was assigned to provide law-enforcement services at a casino. As a Baptist, Ben’s belief was not only that he must not gamble, but also that he should do nothing that would help others to do so. Providing law enforcement services, in his mind, would be facilitating others’ gambling, and thus he asked for a different assignment. The police department refused his request, so Ben felt he had no choice but to refuse to report for duty, and just stayed home. Does Ben have a religious right to refuse to work in a casino?

Analysis

No. Ben can be disciplined or even terminated. He is not being terminated or disciplined because of his beliefs. He is being terminated or
disciplined for insubordination, for failure to report for duty. Allowing Ben or any law enforcement officer to pick and choose his or her assignments is an unreasonable expectation for the employer. It could even have an adverse impact on public safety, to which he and his fellow officers have a sworn duty.

**Freedom from Religion?**

Here’s a new slant on freedom of religion….How about freedom “from” religion? Agnes was hired to be an executive housekeeper for a brand new hotel. One of her duties was to put a copy of the Gideon Bible in every room. During a meeting with her manager and the Gideons, they began to pray and read from the Bible. Agnes, who had no particular religious affiliation, was uncomfortable with the situation, and walked out of the meeting.

When her supervisor called her into his office to discuss this indiscretion, Agnes became quite belligerent and said that she is not required to participate in or be witness to a religious activity, particularly since she is not even a religious person. The conversation went downhill from there, which ultimately led her supervisor to fire her for insubordination. Is Agnes on terra firma or is she going straight to hell?

**Analysis**

Agnes’ downfall is not her religion, but her lack of religion. She cannot claim the hotel discriminated against her because of her beliefs, because she doesn’t have any! How can she force the hotel to accommodate her religious beliefs, particularly since the hotel cannot be expected to accommodate every contention that some aspect of a job violates some undefined religious belief?

Case dismissed! Now go straight to purgatory!