

Slowly, we turn into each other at the office

Either we conform or we are molded

By Amy Yelin | October 15, 2006

The other morning, while hard at work in my cube, I caught myself rubbing my hands together, the way a person might to keep her hands warm. Just days earlier, I had approached my supervisor, whose office is situated directly behind my cube and asked him, "Do you realize that you constantly rub your hands together . . . very loudly?"

My comment did not appear to come as a surprise.

"Yes, I do it when I get excited about something," he said while rubbing his palms together in an enthusiastic demonstration. I stared apprehensively at my own, previously well-behaved hands before returning to my cube.

This incident may have been dismissed as nothing but a coincidence had I not recently caught myself also using two of my boss's favorite phrases outside of work. When my husband had asked if I could please put my shoes away in the closet, I replied: "Sure, I'll put that on my *radar screen*."

And then, when I left my husband home alone with our 6-month-old for several hours, I called to check in. "Any *bottlenecks*?" I asked.

"Huh?" he replied.

To top it all off, yesterday I made the same corny joke as my boss -- *at the same exact time*.

Things were getting out of control.

In my quest to understand the forces at play in my office, I have been pondering what it is that makes people who work together begin to behave, speak, and, in the most severe circumstances, look like each other. I've come to the conclusion that two dynamics are at play, the first being conformity.

Most of the time we conform consciously, laughing at a colleague's bad joke, pretending to enjoy certain tasks or people, or nodding our heads in feigned agreement as a manager expresses her opinions about "American Idol" or Tom Cruise. We want to fit in, to belong, to avoiding rocking the office boat.

We're like our chimp ancestors in this way. Studies have shown that even when taught a better way to perform a task, a chimp will still choose to behave like the group, because such behavior ensures the animal's longevity in that group.

Unlike our monkey friends, however, conforming in humans is a trickier art. Do it well, and you'll most likely get ahead on the job. Try too hard (think Michael Scott on "The Office" when he attempts to address the warehouse workers as though he is one of them), and it can be seen as ridiculing or "aping" the other person. Decide not to conform at all, and you could eventually find yourself out of a job, which I suspect may be the ultimate goal of the nonconformist anyway. [Continued...](#)

I had a friend who did this when we worked at a local start-up. When the president of the company said, "Anyone who can't give 110 percent shouldn't be

here," this friend quit, saying he could give only 100 percent to his job and was unable to conform any further.

I too have found it difficult to conform at jobs that really weren't right for me. About 15 years ago I worked for an unusual company whose sole mission was to support people working in the footwear industry. Not having any particular passion for footwear industry personnel, it was difficult to muster enthusiasm for this company, or for the people I worked with, whom I assumed all shared an interest in matters related to pumps and penny loafers.

It certainly didn't help that the job wasn't very exciting. I spent most of my days filing and shredding papers. Lunch was the only part of the day I looked forward to, a one-hour escape when I could read a book or shop for anything but shoes. About two months into the job, I was approached by a supervisor.

"I'm wondering why you never eat lunch with the rest of us," she said.

I shrugged.

"We'd really like you to join us. . . . It feels as though you're not part of the group."

I promised her that I'd join them for lunch at some point, but I never did. Shortly after this conversation, I was out of a job. I can't remember if I was laid off or quit. All I remember was the great sense of relief.

Despite my conclusion that conformity to some degree is necessary at the office, it still did not thoroughly explain why I would be absorbing the habits of my current boss. Was I choosing to rub my hands together, and choosing to use the word "bottleneck" in my personal life just so I would be liked and get ahead at my job?

It didn't make sense. Something more subliminal was occurring, an unconscious type of social influence that seems to happen when you spend a lot of time with anyone: your spouse, your siblings, your colleagues, your pet. Sooner or later, you're bound to see similarities .

Case in point: While employed at his last company, my husband, who had always preferred World War II documentaries on the History Channel to "South Park," suddenly began talking like Cartman and spending a significant amount of time watching Comedy Central. It was only at his office holiday party, when I met an entire breed of Cartman-talking professionals, that I finally understood where this behavior was coming from.

Another example: Last week, four women showed up in my office wearing the same outfit of black pants and a bright yellow top.

"Hey, how come I didn't get the memo on what to wear today?" I joked.

Of course, there was no memo, just the old unconscious social influence in action, this time playing tricks on our wardrobe-selection psyches.

Yet the more I've thought about the subject, the more I've begun to question: Is it really so bad, all this conforming and social influencing occurring at the office?

The answer, I believe, depends on the situation. If you're bending over backwards trying to fit in on the job and you're miserable, you may want to think about moving on. But if you're satisfied and the worst that is happening is you're broadening your wardrobe, or expanding your sense of humor, or nodding your

head in feigned agreement occasionally with something not too important, what's the harm?

Take me for example. If I look at the situation this way, not only do I now have a more extensive vocabulary, but I also have a new means of nonverbally expressing my enthusiasm.

That alone deserves a good hand-rubbing, don't you think?■

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