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Exclusive

How to avoid toxic work culture: Clique culture

In an exclusive interaction with ETHRWorld, HR leaders share thoughts on the identification of 'clique culture' and how to counter it.

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If left unaddressed, clique culture can cause many well-performing employees to leave the company, says Varun Arora, Co-Founder and CEO, Ekostay.

By Swati, Aarushi Bhargava

- 'Be open and welcoming'
- Creating scopes to interact and bond naturally, helps to

inclusivity.

Every company wishes for its staff to get along. After all, collaboration is critical for any company's success. Often in a social setup, people form small groups of the same interests, and don't want others to join it, developing a 'clique'. It appears harmless in wider circles, but at the organisational level, where the demography isn't ever changing, it becomes critical as cliques start hampering social bonding.

Employees on the outside feel less important or worthy than those within the cliques. As a result of this, employee morale suffers and it can lead to workplace bullying, which ultimately impacts the culture and performance.

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Organisational culture

Ruhie Pande, CHRO, Godrej Housing Finance, says, "An organisation is a sum total of its people and their cumulative energies & professional work ethic. While it is only human to associate with a certain group of people with similar interests and backgrounds, the impact of this can have both positive and negative impact on the culture of an organisation."

It all boils down to the need of belonging, social support and the feeling of being 'left alone', that negativity starts surrounding the people, and they get deeply impacted, from outside.

Sandeep Budhiraja, Co-Founder and Executive Director - HR Practices, BYLD Group, says, "The culture of a company is vital in forming the positive tone and environment for its employees. In case it is left to take its own course, it might lead to creating office cliques which can cause disruption amongst the employees."

Effects of Clique Culture

The clique culture at the workplace can have drastic effects. While it is only human to bond, a negative attitude towards someone with dissimilar interests can be very harmful. If someone feels like an outsider and cannot relate and associate with the people, it lowers their morale, affecting them mentally, which can take on a physical form later.

Varun Arora, Co-Founder and CEO of Ekostay, a homestay venture, says, "**If left unaddressed, it can cause many well-**
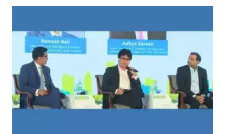

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surely, grouping can eat away at the foundation of a company's culture and undo years of work and effort."

'Old Boys Network'

Pande of Godrej Housing Finance argues that the clique culture can prevent collaboration and inclusion of diverse perspectives. She says, "If several cliques are formed, it could lead to an 'us vs them' mentality that could prove detrimental to the overall workplace morale. Sometimes these cliques can create what we refer to in DEI as the "Old boys network" and even lead to creating non-inclusive cultures."

Arora of Ekostay says, "The natural affinity and kinship which people share with each other is not a crime. It is only when a particular group becomes so closed off to welcoming new people, ostracising them, or making them feel left out, that it becomes an issue."

How to deal with it?

Acknowledging the harm, HR leaders lay emphasis on the culture of the company and how the organisation can play a role in creating acceptance and inclusion. Budhiraja of BYLD Group says, "This can be solved when the organisation helps the employee understand that it values the creativity and authenticity, the fresh and new ideas that they bring in to help the company grow."

"What accelerates the clique culture is when the behaviour of the participants of a clique group goes unnoticed and unaddressed. To address this, it is important to **assign work to individuals and add them to different groups to maintain a balance and avoid bullying and ostracization**," adds Budhiraja.
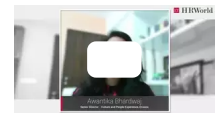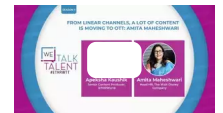
monitor every individual's behaviour. Moreover, you have to maintain the privacy of your employees and forcing them to mingle with colleagues they do not see eye to eye with is also questionable. The solution here is to not aggressively dissolve the cliques and groups in your organisation and force them to hang out with each other. It is to subtly and **actively create collaborative workspaces and an environment where every employee can bond naturally**."

Pande says, "Culture flows from the top and the leadership behaviours get observed and emulated – and hence as a leader ensuring you **interact with a diverse set of people especially who do not get an opportunity to regularly engage with you** is imperative."

Hardeep Singh, President, Right Management India, a part of ManpowerGroup India, seconds this. He says, "To address the clique culture, an environment of trust and safety within the organisation would play a huge part. Having said that, any change must begin from the top, and the middle and bottom levels will follow suit. The top management must make a genuine effort to engage with and understand the employees' issues."

Arora adds, "At the end of the day, the solution to counter clique culture is to be as open and welcoming as possible."

Identifying the fine line between clique and harmful clique is a challenge in itself. While the social needs stand valid, with human associations being common, some interventions from the top can help foster inclusivity and reduce the feeling of 'not belonging'. It has also been found that people try to 'fit in' certain groups to feel 'belonging'. It also puts a question on authenticity and what the organisation is promoting in their culture. **Little efforts like the team having lunch together, and bonding over activities, while rotating the participation across can help**