

# THE WATERFRONT COMPLEX

How current employees can make things more difficult for new hires and negatively impact the entire organization.

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A new employee faces many obstacles while trying to get accustomed to a job. Meeting coworkers, getting used to a new work environment, learning office policies, figuring out the specifics of the new position—the list can seem imposing. Many times, the other employees at the organization unknowingly contribute to the difficulties, making it harder for the new person to feel welcome and get comfortable in the job. Companies must be aware of this possibility and strive to avoid it.

**GREG:** It was my first day at a new job for a public accounting firm. Sitting in the main conference room, the view outside was beautiful. I could see the city's downtown waterfront area and ships sailing along the ocean. In the room with me was another new employee starting her job that day. She had previously interned at the firm and asked if I had (knowing the answer was "no"). The next four hours of employee orientation left me feeling more like a strange outsider to the organization rather than helping me feel like a new member of the team. As I stared out the window of the conference room, I determined my coworker's actions were an unintentional, subconscious attempt to mark her territory in the organization. Thus, I termed this behavior the Waterfront Complex.

We all fall victim to the Waterfront Complex at some time or another during our everyday lives, and not only at our jobs. Walking into a coffee shop, we ask about an employee to prove to others we're regulars. We're on a first-name basis with members of the waitstaff at our favorite restaurants. We view new people at our local health clubs with both intrigue and inquisitiveness while at the same time demonstrating our familiarity with the place—which machines work best, the best classes to take, etc.—demonstrating that we are long-time members. All of these behaviors are normal, but they can cause problems when brought into the workplace—for us and for our companies.

## THE SYMPTOMS

It's important for management to be aware of the symptoms of the Waterfront Complex and to always look for ways to prevent and address it should it find its way into the organization. The Waterfront Complex manifests itself in many different ways, but there are several key symptoms that can be found in most organizations: emphasizing years of service ("This is my 21st year at the company"), resistance to change ("That's the way we've always done it"), and avoiding extra work ("That's not my job"). Table 1 lists the common symptoms of the Waterfront Complex as well as several methods that can help avoid it. Let's take a look at the symptoms.

### **"This is my 21st year at the company."**

Regardless of whether we're happy at our jobs, most of us place great emphasis on how long we've been at our company. Communicating our seniority is done in a variety of ways. We can be direct and tell people how long we've worked there. We can be indirect and talk about how

things "used to be" at the organization. And even companies get into the game, taking time at annual functions to recognize years of service.

**JEANNE:** I once worked at a client where the majority of the employees had been with the company for more than 15 years. Both the employees and management were proud of this fact, yet I couldn't help but wonder if this were a positive or negative characteristic. While having the same staff over a long period of time can contribute

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to efficiency, it can also lead to fraud and stunt the organization's growth in the long run.

As employees get more comfortable with each other, trust among them naturally increases. As trust increases, the effect of segregation of duties decreases. For example, consider two employees who have worked together for 20 years. Employee A prepares the monthly bank reconciliation, and Employee B reviews the bank reconciliation and signs off. After a 20-year relationship, will Employee B give the same attention to the bank reconciliation as if it had been prepared by a newer employee? The answer is most likely "no."

When a company has employed most of its employees for a long time, it needs to use caution when bringing in new hires. The goal of bringing in new blood may be part of the company's planning for the future, but new employees can be easily intimidated in these environments and need to be handled delicately. An active awareness of the problems that can arise is imperative to the success of building for the future. If the organization is simply hiring for the short term, however, there isn't as much need for this effort.

### **"That's the way we've always done it."**

We all have routines. For some, it's buying the same

breakfast combo at our favorite stop each workday. For others, it's turning on our computers first thing in the morning and then heading to the break room for coffee. We're biased in the way we take our coffee, the way our steaks are cooked, and even the weekly television shows we watch.

Questioning leadership is our duty whether as constituents or as employees. But the more we become comfortable in our daily activities, the less likely we are to change them. In a business, the employees who have been there the longest are comfortable with their routines as well as the policies and procedures of the company. Therefore, they also are less likely to question any long-standing policies and procedures. "That's the way we've always done it" is no doubt a phrase we've heard often.

**GREG:** I once worked at a retail store selling men's tailored clothing. I became increasingly frustrated with the fact that some sizes weren't available for customers. We only received limited quantities of sizes on each end of the bell curve. I discussed this with other employees, and they simply said that management controls the ordering of inventory. I decided to ask a manager why the ordering of inventory isn't modified since carrying these sizes could lead to lifelong customers. The manager replied, "We've always ordered inventory this way." The manager had been at this retail store for eight years and obviously was comfortable with the procedure.

Hiring new employees can bring a fresh set of eyes to an organization. Newer employees are more likely to ask *why* rather than *what*. Questioning existing practices leads not only to change, but to improvement. New employees can bring an impartial and apolitical insight into an organization's current operations and identify areas for improvement. This directly contradicts the standard "That's the way we've always done it" philosophy.

**"That's not my job."**

Let's face it. At one time or another in the course of our professional careers, we've all seen work to do and avoided it by rationalizing, "That's not my job." Not only is this a symptom of the Waterfront Complex, but it may be a foolproof way to get fired!

Think about the first few weeks on a new job. We're always eager to do whatever is asked of us. For us, we know that we would have cleaned the kitchen floor if our

**Table 1: THE WATERFRONT COMPLEX**

SYMPTOMS	PREVENTIONS
"This is my 21st year at the company."	Introduce yourself to new employees
"That's the way we've always done it."	Develop mentor programs
"That's not my job."	Focus on present rather than the past
	Consider experience levels in teams
	Office technology orientation

bosses had asked us. But the longer we were at an organization, and the higher we climbed the ranks, the more we found ourselves thinking, "That's not my job."

**GREG:** Companies in the technology industry commonly fall victim to this symptom of the Waterfront Complex. For instance, I was visiting one large technology firm that had a complex organizational structure and offices located throughout the world. Many of the employees I saw were afflicted with the "That's not my job" symptom. The Computer Operations department, for example, provides an excellent illustration that management accountants should be able to apply to their own companies.

I was at the company one day while it was undergoing an audit. The auditor requested an end-of-day checklist from the Computer Operations department. The internal control process required a computer operator to complete the form, the lead computer operator to review the form and deliver it to the operations manager, the operations manager to review and sign the form, and the general manager to sign off as the final reviewer. The checklist couldn't be located, so the auditor went to the general manager, who said, "It is the operations manager's job to review the forms and get them to me." When confronted, the operations manager said, "It is the lead computer operator's job to get the forms to me for review." The lead computer operator said, "It is the computer operator's job to get this form to me." Finally, when confronted, the computer operator said, "I was never told there was a problem. It is just my job to fill out the forms and leave them for the lead operator. It isn't my job to follow up and see if the lead operator received the form."

Not only is this perceived as a weakness in internal controls, but it demonstrates the problem with the "It's not my job" symptom. After seeing this happen, I began to ask myself: How is this beneficial to the overall health of the organization? How much time is wasted by this

type of hierarchy? How would a new employee perceive this hierarchy? And does this hierarchy extend to other areas of the organization?

Creating a solid line of communication, taking responsibility instead of assigning blame, and being aware of the fact that hierarchies have potentially negative effects helps a management accountant prevent this symptom of the Waterfront Complex. For example, the computer operations manager was once the lead operator and had also been a computer operator. It's fairly easy for employees to forget the demands of particular positions as they move up the corporate ladder. Keeping this in mind may reduce the "That's not my job" problem.

## PREVENTING THE WATERFRONT COMPLEX

There are several different methods that can be used to help prevent the appearance of the Waterfront Complex. Many of them are easy enough to carry out. They simply require making sure employees are aware of the potential symptoms and how to avoid them as well as keeping employees up to date on new hires and changes in policies. Let's a look at some of the most effective remedies to the Waterfront Complex.

### Personal Introductions

One of the simplest solutions is to communicate the necessity for current employees to introduce themselves to new members of the team. It's quite easy for employees to be so involved with their current tasks that they forget other workers are coming and going. How often do we see a new face at our job and ask a coworker who the new person is rather than taking the time to introduce ourselves? Sometimes avoiding these introductions is our way of indicating that we are long-standing members of the organization and are reluctant to allow new members into our circles.

By taking a moment to introduce ourselves to new employees, we reduce the feelings of unease almost everyone experiences as a result of being new. Many of us may feel uncomfortable as new hires approaching current employees at an organization. For this reason, current employees should take the initiative for the initial introduction. This can be something as simple as stopping by the person's desk or inviting him or her out for a cup of coffee.

### Mentor Programs

There's no way to avoid the politics within an organization,

but you won't find a discussion of the current state of office politics included in the employee manual. A properly orchestrated mentor program will make incoming employees feel as if they are welcomed new members of the team while also helping them learn the intricacies of the organization more quickly. A mentor can teach a new employee about the politics, personalities, and hierarchies that exist within the organization.

In order to be effective, a mentor shouldn't be restricted in what he or she is allowed to communicate to a mentee. Open communication should be stressed. The mentee shouldn't feel that any questions or other content of conversations with the mentor will be divulged. If there are limits on what can be discussed, the mentor program will end up contributing to the Waterfront Complex rather than helping the company avoid it.

**GREG:** I was assigned a mentor when I began working at a public accounting firm. My mentor had been at the organization for approximately two years. He was forthcoming about what was expected of employees, how to succeed, which management members possessed the most power, and which employees to avoid. This open communication facilitated my growth by giving me details I otherwise could learn only from experience, and it let me focus immediately on learning the technical aspects of my job rather than navigating the political ones.

It's important to distinguish here between a young employee and a new employee. While many may think mentor programs only apply to young employees, mentors are essential for employees of all ages. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average person born in the late stages of the Baby Boom generation held 10.5 jobs between the ages of 18 and 40. Clearly, people aren't staying at organizations for a long period of time, which means that a new employee can be someone who has been working for the past 10 years just as easily as it is someone beginning their first job just out of college. Either way, they are both new to the organization and would benefit from having a mentor. Table 2 summarizes aspects for a successful mentor program.

### Avoid Talking about Past Employees

Perhaps the most difficult thing for people to do is to avoid talking about former members of the company, but employees must remain cognizant of the negative impacts that arise from



**Table 2: Characteristics of a Successful Mentor Program**

- ◆ Introduce the mentor to the new employee on the employee's first day.
- ◆ Make it clear to both the mentor and the new employee that communication between the two is completely confidential.
- ◆ Schedule lunch meetings between the mentor and the new employee on a monthly basis.
- ◆ If possible, have the mentor participate in some of the new employee's training.
- ◆ After a year, have the new employee evaluate the mentor, providing strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. This allows the organization to continuously evaluate its mentor program and provides suggestions for improvement.

bringing up former employees in conversation. First and foremost, these conversations only aid in making newer employees feel like lesser members of the team. It reminds them of their lack of seniority and can lead to a decrease in self-esteem. Second, the discussion about a past employee inevitably leads to the reasons that person is no longer with the company—whether the topic is brought up by one of the long-time employees holding the conversation or explained in response to a question from a newer employee.

For very new employees (i.e., those at an organization for less than six months), hearing about the reasons ex-employees left can be the most damaging to morale. There are three general reasons an employee leaves a job: better opportunities elsewhere, the employee is disgruntled with the organization, or involuntary termination.

Opportunities for advancement at outside organizations are a natural part of the professional world, and it's an unrealistic goal for employers to prevent employees from leaving for better opportunities. Thus, the impact of these conversations on new employees is minimal. The other two reasons, however, have a larger impact.

People leaving because of discontent may cause new employees to question their decision to join the company. It will draw the focus of their attention to potentially negative aspects of the company, causing them to dwell

more on the parts of the job or company that bother them than on the parts they enjoy or the opportunity it provides.

**JEANNE:** When I started working at one organization, I was chatting with coworkers when three former employees were brought up in the conversation. The first employee left for advancement at an outside organization. As we mentioned, this is a constant factor in an organization, and I didn't think much of it. The second employee had left because he hated the organization. People were listing many of the reasons for his dissatisfaction: He hated the current leadership, hated the evaluation policy, and felt he should have been promoted three years ago. When I heard these stories, I began to wonder if I made the right choice in working for this company. Several questions went through my mind: Is the leadership at this organization really that awful? Is the evaluation policy unfair? Will I not be promoted when I deserve to? While it didn't take long for me to realize that these concerns were unfounded, I had consumed valuable time worrying about them. The third employee brought up in conversation was involuntarily terminated. Everyone had a different explanation for why the employee was terminated, but the overall consensus was that the person was incompetent. My coworkers made it seem as if the organization expected instant success from its new employees. This proved to be inaccurate as well, but it did cause me some initial anxiety. The Waterfront Complex was at work.

#### **Avoid Placing New Employees in Seasoned Workgroups**

It can be difficult to introduce a new employee into a team that has been working together for quite some time. Both the new person and the regular team members will need time to get used to the addition. This is especially true in small and mid-sized public accounting firms, where it is quite common for a senior accountant to bring a new staff person to a client that the senior member is familiar with but the staff person isn't.

There are two main catalysts of the Waterfront Complex that this situation has the potential to release. First, as already discussed, long-term members of an organization have a natural tendency to bring up past events, which can occur in conversations between coworkers or with a client.

Second, this is a prime opportunity for reminiscing about the way things "used to be" at the organization. Reminiscing contributes to making the new employee feel more like an outsider who isn't as involved—or doesn't

have as much at stake—in what goes on at the company, and it's another way employees choose to communicate their seniority, longevity, and status in an organization. In public accounting, for example, the recent shift from paper to paperless engagements has fed the Waterfront Complex. Employees who remember working on paper engagements often bring it up and tell newer employees what it used to be like before the organization went paperless. Looking at the past through the tinted glass of nostalgia, things always seem better back then—again drawing a new employee's focus to the potentially negative current aspects of the organization and lowering his or her morale.

### Office Technology Orientation

Finally, the copier, fax machine, and coffee maker can be the easiest way to spread the Waterfront Complex as well as prove to be its greatest vaccine. Of all the obstacles facing new employees, you'd expect that operating these three devices would be at the bottom of the list. Yet these mundane tasks often lead to embarrassment and humiliation.

**GREG:** One of the first assignments I was given as an intern was to make copies of tax returns for a senior accountant to review. I remember thinking, "This is a job I can certainly handle." I eagerly walked over to the copy machine and made my copies. There was only one slight problem—I couldn't find where the copies came out of the machine. A gentleman walked by, and I asked him where the copies came out. He shook his head, laughed, pulled out the copies, and threw them on top of the machine. This employee had an opportunity to avoid the Waterfront Complex and chose not to.

The fax machine and coffee maker left me with the same fumbling questions. Does the paper go face up or face down when sending a fax? Where do they keep the filters for brewing the coffee? Many employees watched without offering assistance as I struggled. I'm sure several took personal comfort in knowing they knew how to operate these machines. In other words, they were drowning in the Waterfront Complex.

The best way to keep new employees from suffering through this embarrassing situation is to assign the responsibility of showing them how to operate these devices to Human Resources, a mentor, or a combination of the two. But failing that, the rest of us don't have to wait for someone else to step in. Offering assistance to new employees relieves stress in the office and serves as a

great ice breaker, providing a perfect opportunity for current employees to introduce themselves to new employees and make them feel more comfortable. Next time you see an employee struggling to use the copier, fax, or coffee machine, reach out and offer assistance. Otherwise, it isn't just a struggling employee you're watching, it's the Waterfront Complex finding its way into your organization.

### BE AWARE OF THE SYMPTOMS

Phrases such as "This is my 21st year at the company," "That's the way we've always done it," and "That's not my job" are surefire signs of the Waterfront Complex that can be found in any organization, but they aren't the only symptoms. As professionals, we must not only recognize the symptoms—we must do our part to avoid their spread. If management is open-minded, for example,

new employees can prevent the rigid resistance to change that sometimes becomes established. Mentor programs can help new employees get acclimated quicker. And teaching employees that everything is part of their job makes all employees, old and new, feel part of the organization.

It's important to point out that this article may appear to be cynical about older employees at times; this is in no way the intention. Older, more experienced employees present great value to an organization. The goal here is to point out areas where people often display behavior they are unaware of that can deter the progress of an organization. Employees with longevity are vital members of the team who offer insights; provide valuable, informed perspectives; and can be excellent leaders and mentors.

Whether you find yourself working at a public accounting or consulting firm, service organization, retail establishment, hospital, or in academia, be aware of the symptoms of the Waterfront Complex. Vaccinating both yourself and your organization can lead to healthier employees and improve the long-term success of your organization. ■

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