



BIG
BROTHER III
GAMES ON CAMPUS

By Richard L. McDermott

was watching a TV episode of *Big Brother* last summer, observing how a dozen or so “cast” members lived and worked with each other over the course of three months in the confines of the Big Brother House and on our TV screens. Somehow it all seemed too familiar. I kicked it around for a while, and then it dawned on me—I had played a kind of *Big Brother* game several times in my university career. How? By being part of an informal organization that was in a contest with a rival informal organization, each person making and breaking alliances to further their own agendas. And one thing I was sure of, I was probably not the only one who felt a sense of familiarity.

I checked the Internet and found a wealth of information on the routine aspects of informal organizations. Most of it sounded like this:

Informal organizations benefit the organization in many ways. They help in the development of an effective organizational system and reduce the workload of managers. Informal organizations also provide employees with an outlet to express their anxieties and problems, improve job satisfaction, and reduce employee turnover.

Everyone knows that this is true. But did you know that when informal organizations go bad, they can turn into an episode of *Big Brother*?

Although this information is available in a corporate setting, there is not much known about

it in the nonprofit world. This is surprising given that it is on the large, nonprofit university campus that the games can be of a higher order than almost anywhere else. So it is important to discuss the issue, especially when there are career implications based upon how you choose to play.

First let's define some terms.

INFORMAL ORGANIZATION (IO)

A network of personal and social relationships (alliances, cliques, friendships) that arise as people associate with one another in a work environment. The communication channel is the grapevine.

HIGH CONTEXT

A high-context setting is one in which key people on campus know you and your values. They know you well enough to reject

a lie about you. That's very important, because in the game of *Big Brother*, lying is the common currency for gaining advantage.

LOW CONTEXT

A low-context setting is one in which key people on campus do not know you or your values. They do not have enough personal experience with you to immediately know something is a lie. And, they will believe false information until it is replaced with facts.

BROAD SET OF RESOURCES

Beyond the funds in your annual budget and the people in your department, this includes everything tangible and intangible given to you by your institution, including your administrative influence and decision-making authority.

BALANCE POINT

An ideal position in which resources are balanced between institutional and personal priorities.

FACILITY MISMANAGER

A facility mismanager uses institutional resources to support their personal career ambitions before considering institutional priorities.

There are several types of informal organizations. Let's draw a distinction between Beneficial Informal Organizations (BIOs) and Destructive Informal Organizations (DIOs). Informal organizations become DIOs when a facility mismanager joins up with other “birds of a feather.” A DIO typically serves a leader who has taken the position that “All my dreams and ambitions need to happen here. I'm not going to seek out another institution where I can naturally achieve my personal ambitions.” Figure 1 displays a few common informal organizational types—most are beneficial, but at least one type...not so much.

Figure 1: Common Informal Organizational Types

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>BIO Focused on professional support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive • Colleagues help you with getting along in the system, with how to continually grow and get better at what you do, and how to be ready for the next career step. | <p>BIO Focused on the highest university priorities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive • My highest priority is on how well we can accomplish, promote, and develop the interests of the university. When we leave, the university will be a better place than it was when we arrived. |
| <p>BIO Focused on solving common problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive • The formal organization is not set up to facilitate processes and get things done. So, informal networks fill in to make things work (e.g., when you need X, just call Joe over in the “Y” office). | <p>DIO Focused primarily on personal priorities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative • What is in the interest of the university is secondary. My title, pay, prestige, and most of all power, are paramount. I will break the rules to get what I want. |

FIRST STEP TOWARD ENDING UP IN A DIO

The first step in becoming a DIO member is to be unbalanced in your allocation of resources. Everyone benefits when we are close to a balance point (diagram below). Institutional priorities are in the foreground. Personal development is supported by the institution, but in a background position. If a facility manager is too far on the plus side, there are no resources for personal growth and development. This will hurt both the individual and the institution. If a facility manager is too far on the minus side, they are a mismanager. A -5 manager is a prime candidate to form a DIO.



The late Peter Drucker is an ideal reference for avoiding mismanagement in the nonprofit sector. He hit the heart of the matter with statements such as, “It is not only important to do things right, it is important to do the right things,” and, “There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.” In the 1980s I had the pleasure of talking with Drucker about facilities management on a university campus. At the time, I was taking a new position at a large, naturally low-context campus, and I was tracking down Drucker’s latest recorded session on management in the nonprofit sector.

I talked with his Claremont office about placing an order, and they said the session was not complete and ready for sale. However, they told me that Drucker was on vacation in the Rocky Mountain National Park, so why not call him and ask him about

it. I’m thinking—you’re kidding—just call up a luminary like Peter Drucker, interrupt his vacation, and say, “Hey Pete, I have a question for you.” But, they did give me his number, so I dialed it up. Drucker picked up the phone, and he was friendly and gracious. His natural mode of college professor talking to a student was evident. We talked for a half hour. I asked his advice. He gave it. I pass it along here. Drucker told me that success would center on communication. He advised me to set up a one-on-one meeting with key customers on campus on a regular basis. I should first ask them, “What do you need from me?” After that, I should tell them, “Okay, this is what I can do for you.” In this exchange, it’s helpful to remember another Druckerism: “The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn’t being said.”

These exchanges create realistic expectations. And, more importantly, they form high-context relationships between you and key members on campus. High-context relationships are invaluable when the *Big Brother* games begin. As an example, I once received a phone call from a professor who said, “Rich, I’m calling to tell you what I heard someone say the other day, and I know it is not true.” That’s the fruit of a high-context relationship.

SECOND STEP TOWARD ENDING UP IN A DIO

Everyone has a few beefs about their workplace. So it’s easy to feel a degree of gravitational pull toward the camaraderie of other disgruntled employees. That’s normal. But when the malcontents evolve into a nascent DIO, they have crossed over into the danger zone.

It is mystifying how DIOs, after forming up so they are fully recognizable, can survive for an extended time on campus. Drucker has the answer. He has pointed out that nonprofits have a weakness that can breed mismanagement. Nonprofits do not have the discipline of going broke. A mismanager in the private sector will likely go broke. A mismanager in a nonprofit setting will likely be given a new budget at the beginning of the next fiscal year, and off they go into a new year of misadventure. Since nonprofits are without the self-controlling mechanisms of free enterprise, we owe them an extra measure of fidelity in managing resources under our direction. Drucker’s advice is to scrub through your organization on a regular basis to check for alignment to the institution’s primary mission.

A facilities management department can usually segregate its responsibilities and activities into primary and secondary levels. Look hard at the secondary level. That is where a separation



“The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn’t being said.”
—Peter Drucker

from the institutional mission usually begins. Having clarity on the secondary level is also helpful in tough times, because that is where to cut the budget if necessary. This process prevents resources slipping over into misbegotten priorities. Being able to mismanage and not be punished for it is the fertile ground that DIOs grow upon.

FINAL STEP TOWARD ENDING UP IN A RIVAL DIO

Eventually, a leader arrives to gather up fellow mismanagers in the cause of taking something away from the BIOs, the Beneficial Informal Organizations. A rival DIO is formed, and the *Big Brother* games begin. The spoils a DIO leader seeks are the usual ones—title, power, or salary. Thus, once operating, they can be spotted a mile away and avoided like the plague. Some telltale phrases that let you know you are talking with a DIO member are:

- **“I don’t understand.”**—response to a common sense proposal.
 - *Translation:* Oh, I understand—but you have not yet said what I want to hear, so keep talking till you do.
- **“We are going a different direction.”**—response that is contrary to logic and good sense.
 - *Translation:* A hidden agenda is afoot.
- **“You’re just pulling a power play.”**—response to being caught in a misadventure.
 - *Translation:* I can’t win the matter on the facts—so let’s move onto to another field of play, namely my nefarious motivations.
- **“This is the first time I’ve heard of this.”**—response to being presented with the facts of a misadventure.

- *Translation:* Well, really I am fully aware—but I’m in a pickle here, so let’s hit the restart button on the discussion with me playing the role of the “babe in the woods.”
- The competition phase of the DIO versus BIO is similar to the *Big Brother* game on TV, and the outcomes can be similar. Harm to working relationships is predictable; most people are not done in by their bosses—rather by their colleagues. The worst of all outcomes is when a DIO persists long enough to


Ugly Tile?

Leaking Shower Pans?


Dated Bathrooms?

DON'T REPLACE, REFINISH!

Our proprietary surface refinishing process **eliminates** costly replacement of leaking showers, damaged tile, vanities, and countertops.




BEFORE



AFTER!

See you in Chicago – Booth 309 – APPA National Conference – August 4 - 6

See case studies at:
MiracleMethod.com/collegehousing




Miracle Method®

SURFACE REFINISHING

Each franchise is independently owned and operated.

All Work Guaranteed

Call 800 444-8827 for an estimate or referral



Repaired & Refinished!

- Cal Poly
 - 12 community bathrooms
- U.S. Coast Guard Academy
 - 13 showers
- University of Alabama
 - 4 community showers
- Georgia Tech
 - 104 fiberglass showers
- Western Michigan Univ
 - 121 tile floors
- New Mexico State Univ
 - 450 shower stalls
 - 390 vanities
- Wharton County J.C.
 - 9 comm. bathroom
 - 2 comm. showers
 - 2 locker rooms



Hatfield Clan in 1897.

create a “Hatfields versus McCoys” condition. The original issue may not even be remembered—but long live the DIO, and down with the rival BIOs. Institutional priorities and even individual career growth are sacrificed to serve the Destructive Informal Organization.

SAFEGUARDS AGAINST DIOS AND THE BIG BROTHER GAMES THEY SPAWN

1. Manage your Broad Set of Resources to remain at a Balance Point.
2. Meet regularly with key customers to align expectations and priorities.
3. Never let your relationship with key people on campus become low context.
4. Attend to the extra measure of fidelity we owe while managing in the nonprofit sector by regularly scrubbing through alignment of resources to the institutional mission.
5. Avoid being drawn into someone else’s DIO *Big Brother* game, remembering the advice of Abraham Lincoln: “Quarrel not at all. No person resolved to make the most of themselves can spare time for personal contention.” ☹

Rich McDermott is vice president for facilities at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. He is the 2014 recipient of APPA’s Rex Dillow Award for Outstanding Article in *Facilities Manager*, and he can be reached at richard.l.mcdermott@uth.tmc.edu.

sustainability

Harness the power of the sun



ZON Powersol™ solar charging station

- Three (3) Universal USB charging ports for smart phones, tablets and a wide range of devices
- Innovative Solar Charged Battery hub with a powerful rechargeable Lithium-Ion battery
- Conveniently charges as fast as a wall outlet day or night
- High quality, Marine Grade canopy fabric for durability
- Works with existing Patio Tables- no special installation required

☺☺ ZON is The Most Affordable Solar Solution for Charging Mobile Devices. ☺☺

Charge up!™

ZON™ www.zon-technology.com