BIG BROTHER GAMES ON CAMPUS

By Richard L. McDermott
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.
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.

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.

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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.

The personal priorities are in the foreground. 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.

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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
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

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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.”

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Hatfield Clan in 1897.