**Unmasking Manly Men**

by Robin J. Ely and Debra Meyerson

What can managers in white-collar firms learn from roughnecks and roustabouts on an offshore oil rig? That extinguishing macho behavior is vital to achieving top performance. That’s a key finding from our study of life on two oil platforms, during which we spent several weeks over the course of 19 months living, eating, and working alongside crews offshore.

Oil rigs are dirty, dangerous, and demanding workplaces that have traditionally encouraged displays of masculine strength, daring, and technical prowess. But over the past 15 years or so the platforms we studied have deliberately jettisoned their hard-driving, macho cultures in favor of an environment in which workers come to appreciate one another publicly; and were good listeners, and willing to learn.

Over the 15-year period these changes in work practices, norms, perceptions, and behaviors were implemented company-wide. The company’s accident rate declined by 84%, while productivity (number of barrels produced), efficiency (cost per barrel), and reliability (production “up” time) increased beyond the industry’s previous benchmark.

But the changes had an unintended effect as well. The men’s willingness to risk a blow to their image — by, for example, exposing their incompetence or weakness when necessary in order to do their jobs well — profoundly influenced their sense of who they were and could be as men. No longer focused on affirming their masculinity, they felt able to behave in ways that conventional masculine norms would have precluded.

If men in the hypermasculine environment of oil rigs can let go of the macho ideal and improve their performance, then men in corporate America might be able to do likewise. Numerous studies have examined the costs of macho displays in contexts ranging from aeronautics to manufacturing to high tech to the law. They show that men’s attempts to prove their masculinity interfere with the training of recruits, compromise decision quality, marginalize women workers, lead to civil- and human-rights violations, and alienate men from their health, feelings, and relationships with others. The price of men’s striving to demonstrate their masculinity is high, and both individuals and organizations pay it.

The problem lies not in traditionally masculine attributes per se — many tasks require aggressiveness, strength, or emotional detachment — but in men’s efforts to prove themselves on these dimensions, whether in the hazardous setting of an offshore oil platform or in the posh, protected surroundings of the executive suite. By creating conditions that focus people on the real requirements of the job, rather than on stereotypical images believed to equate with competence, organizations can free employees to do their best work.

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**Making Diverse Teams Click**

by Jeffrey T. Polzer

Diverse teams are prone to dysfunction because the very differences that feed creativity and high performance can also create communication barriers. Conventional team-building activities are unreliable for such groups, because their one-size-fits-all approach to building cohesion fails to recognize team members’ idiosyncratic strengths and weaknesses and how they can be combined to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Getting 360-degree feedback can help.
My research with Bill Swann, of the University of Texas, and Laurie Milton, of the University of Calgary, examines the fit among team members and how to optimize it. We define “fit” as interpersonal congruence—the degree to which members’ appraisals of one another are similar to their self-assessments on dimensions relevant to team functioning. For example, if a team member sees himself as a creative leader, do others see him the same way? Our research has shown that high congruence improves the performance of diverse teams.

Unfortunately, team members often cloak their weaknesses, disclose their true self-assessments reluctantly or not at all, feel threatened when others challenge their expertise, and act defensively in the face of such challenges. At the same time, they may be quick to form biased impressions of others, often based on stereotypes that obscure unique talents.

Sharing honest self-assessments and appraisals of one another through 360-degree feedback can help members achieve interpersonal congruence. When thoughtfully gathered and exchanged, such information can open the lines of communication on topics that are usually off-limits precisely because they are uncomfortable to discuss. Members can correct colleagues’ inaccurate perceptions, learn where their own judgments of others may be skewed, and adjust their behaviors and self-assessments.

Consider the experiences of a management team I studied in Bangalore. Ashok Kumar, who in 2003 was the director of National Semiconductor’s India Design Center, knew that the members of his cross-functional management team needed to collaborate better. With Kumar’s encouragement, Sonali De Sarker, the HR manager in Bangalore, and Joe Neipp, an HR trainer in Santa Clara, California, gathered 360-degree feedback about Kumar and each team member from the members themselves, their subordinates, and other colleagues.

When Neipp flew to Bangalore to facilitate individual feedback sessions, he and Kumar took the additional step of discussing the feedback in a full team meeting. After Kumar began by disclosing some of the key things he had learned from receiving feedback about himself, other members of the group slowly opened up and began discussing what they could do differently to help the team function more effectively. For example, Sanjay Sood, the finance manager, learned that because others viewed him as inflexible, they worked around him to solve their budgeting problems. In contrast, he viewed himself as highly flexible within the constraints of his responsibilities. To close the gap in perceptions, he invited people to come to him directly with their budget problems. As a result, others began to see him as more flexible, and together they started to collaborate more effectively when allocating funds to the team’s various projects. Discussing feedback as a team increased members’ trust in one another, allowing them to raise potentially awkward issues relating to perceptions and performance.

As a result of the 360, the team’s communication and problem-solving markedly improved. Members began talking directly with one another, rather than through their boss, and took greater ownership of the team’s solutions, which led to smoother implementation.

Before managers try this approach, they should assess whether their teams are ready for such an intervention and have the right tools. Receiving and sharing 360-degree feedback can be a powerful, productive experience; but if it’s done poorly, it can open new wounds and amplify the very problems it is intended to solve. Teams are more likely to benefit from feedback when the team leader is open to receiving it and models appropriate responses to it; when team members have at least a modicum of respect for and trust in one another and are motivated to improve in order to achieve a shared goal; when the data are gathered by established methods and are used for development rather than evaluation; and when a qualified and trusted facilitator guides the team discussion and helps design follow-on steps for improvement.

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