

Agreed to death

Too many 'yes' men can doom a company to failure, experts warn

By George Frey
Staff Writer

Did you ever think, "A change would do me good?" Well, some experts agree it might actually save your business. Executives beware: if your associates are agreeing with you all the time, it could be dangerous to your career and the future of your company.

Try reading Machiavelli's *The Prince* again. You could become aware that someone is plotting against you or the management team at your company is composed of tyrants, and as a result, nothing constructive will ever happen at your company.

The broad understanding of the concept of the "yes" man was explored in the 1950s novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* by Sloan Wilson, which was a story about the struggle of young Americans against the pressures of conformity in life, and was based in part on Mr. Wilson's own life as a returning World War II vet who worked in a publishing company. The main character in the book, Tom Rath (played by Gregory Peck in the film version) sees his demise in the constant pursuit of material wealth and the pursuit of the suburban dream.

"Without talking much about it, (Tom and his wife Betsy) both began to think of the house as a trap, and they no more enjoyed refurbishing it than a prisoner would delight in shining up the bars of his cell." Mr. Wilson wrote about his best-selling novel. As the novel unfolds, Tom is hounded by his own and his wife's need for material possessions and, as a result, takes a position at a company that he dislikes and whose philosophy he disagrees with, to advance his own self interest and satisfy his greed.

The scenario invented by Mr. Wilson is the classic breeding ground for the archetypal "yes" man. You know the kind of person I'm talking about. He or she is quick to agree without giving any thought to what's being said, as long as the boss is the one who is saying it. "Go along to get along" is another phrase that comes to mind in the high-stakes game of corporate onepmanship.

The character Tom became a "yes" man and lost his identity. In today's competitive business world, a company with too many "yes" men runs the risk of total oblivion.

"I think I see it a lot in the business community," said Barbara Swan of the Swan Group, a technical recruiting firm in Somerville. "They don't challenge the people above them. They don't think for themselves. That is a real threat to the company."

According to Ms. Swan, the "yes" man attitude has to come from the top down. The management team at every company has to make an effort to discourage that kind of behavior. "The feeling should be that it is all right to think for yourself," she explained. "Executives should not feel challenged by the people who think for themselves and disagree with others. I see it all around me. 'Yes' men are a threat to a whole company because they stifle everyone else."

Indeed, Ms. Swan said, companies are really missing out because they don't encourage people to disagree. Although she does agree that everyone has to agree to some extent, and that she isn't suggesting being argumentative or nasty as a way to get ahead in business, but, at the same time, it isn't good to take the path of the least resistance in every kind of situation. Often the employee can become dissatisfied or even jaded at a company if he or she thinks they always have to agree with a situation that they know is wrong.

Ms. Swan said that she had just heard of an instance where a person at a company had been given a project by managers two levels above her which she said she disagreed with. This employee stated her disagreements to those managers, who she said continued to insist that she complete the project. Finally the employee was granted the opportunity to state her case for one hour after one week's preparation.

The one-hour meeting was attended by two levels of managers and business unit people. When the dissenting employee arrived at the meeting, she said the looks on people's faces indicated to her that her presentation was futile. But, by the end of her presentation, she said those in attendance had a lot of questions to ask and wound up reversing their previous decision entirely.

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John McCrea
Executive Coach and Certified Management Consultant,
Renaissance Group, New Brunswick



The moral of the story is that, despite a sometimes hard fight, it is better to speak your mind, Ms. Swan said. In this case, the employee and the management team wound up getting the best possible outcome because she forced a discussion of the situation, she said.

John McCrea, an executive coach and certified management consultant with Renaissance Resource Group in New Brunswick, echoed Ms. Swan's remarks.

"This is something that drives a company out of business," Mr. McCrea said. "We really say if we attend a meeting within a department or a company and everyone agrees with the boss and then that business doesn't get any new ideas."

Mr. McCrea recounted an anecdote about a situation he came across as a consultant to illustrate the "yes" man phenomenon. "I remember going to a client where for 20 years the manager had brought in all the employees and ran the place like a little Napoleon and he wouldn't ever let anyone disagree," he said. "He left to start his own company and, as soon as that happened, you could see a change in the place. New ideas came to the table, and people wanted to try new things."

If bosses don't accept disagreement, they don't have to defend their positions, continued Mr. McCrea, and employees will be seen as troublemakers if they disagree. Very often people at the top are to blame for the lack of acceptance of new ideas and that's where it's most deadly, he said. "The president or the CEO sets the tone for the rest of the company. It's not what the leader says, it's what employees see them do. Shouting and cutting them off will only encourage people to hire people that will comply with them even if you yourself aren't a 'yes' man."

As a way to avoid situations like this, Mr. McCrea recommended that executives should never surround themselves with the same kind of people, but promote people that are different from themselves to attack whatever it is that you are working on. Mr. McCrea used an example from his career to illustrate his point.

"I promoted an individual who totally disagreed with me and I gave him the title of assistant to the general man-

ager because I knew that it was important to be forced to think differently," Mr. McCrea said. "He always categorically disagreed with me and that brought out the worst in him. I knew that he disliked me, and invariably, he would disagree with me and the staff at all meetings, and we didn't like that about him. But the good thing about having someone like that who always disagrees with you is that you always have to defend your position. We needed that person to shore up our good points. You couldn't come into the staff meeting with a weak premise. Divergent thinking is always key. You should always ask why people are thinking the way they think."

The "yes" men aren't as prevalent in today's business culture, our experts agreed, but companies have to continue to struggle every day to not be complacent and to constantly question why those companies do what they do. Challenging the status quo should be a top priority at every company or the resulting stagnation will kill even the most successful enterprises.

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