

# Case Incident 1

## The Nice Trap?

In these pages we've already noted that one downside of agreeableness is that agreeable people tend to have lower levels of career success. Though agreeableness doesn't appear to be related to job performance, agreeable people do earn less money. Though we're not sure why this is so, it may be that agreeable individuals are less aggressive in negotiating starting salaries and pay raises for themselves.

Yet there is clear evidence that agreeableness is something employers value. Several recent books argue in favor of the "power of nice" (Thaler & Koval, 2006) and "the kindness revolution" (Horrell, 2006). Other articles in the business press have argued that the sensitive, agreeable CEO—as manifested in CEOs such as GE's Jeffrey Immelt and Boeing's James McNerney—signals a shift in business culture (Brady, 2007). In many circles, individuals desiring success in their careers are exhorted to be "complimentary," "kind," and "good" (for example, Schillinger, 2007).

Take the example of 500-employee Lindblad Expeditions. It emphasizes agreeableness in its hiring decisions. The VP of HR commented, "You can teach people any technical skill, but you can't teach them how to be a kindhearted, generous-minded person with an open spirit."

So, while employers want agreeable employees, agreeable employees are not better job performers, and they are less successful in their careers. One might explain this apparent contradiction by noting that employers value agreeable employees for other reasons: They are more pleasant to be around, and they may help others in ways that aren't reflected in their job performance. While the former point seems fair enough—agreeable people are better liked—it's not clear that agreeable individuals actually help people more. A review of the "organizational citizenship" literature revealed a pretty weak correlation between an employee's agreeableness and how much he or she helped others.

Moreover, a 2008 study of CEO and CEO candidates revealed that this contradiction applies to organizational leaders as well. Using ratings made of candidates from an executive search firm, these researchers studied the personalities and abilities of 316 CEO candidates for companies involved in buyout and venture capital transactions. They found that what gets a CEO candidate hired is not what makes him or her effective. Specifically, CEO candidates who were rated high on "nice" traits such as respecting others, developing others, and teamwork were more likely to be hired. However, these same characteristics—especially teamwork and respecting others for venture capital CEOs—made the organizations that the CEOs led less successful.

### Questions

1. Do you think there is a contradiction between what employers want in employees (agreeable employees) and what employees actually do best (disagreeable employees)? Why or why not?

**Answer:** Students will likely agree a contradiction exists. It exists because each factor has a different set of perceptions about how to achieve organizational success. Although they agree on what they want to achieve, the steps needed to achieve the goals is the place of dissention.

2. Often, the effects of personality depend on the situation. Can you think of some job situations in which agreeableness is an important virtue? And in which it is harmful?

**Answer:** This is an opinion question. The answer depends on the student's experience. For jobs that agreeableness is appropriate might be customer service, marketing, sales, or human resources. Jobs where agreeableness is a potential detriment would be jobs such as product engineering, plant manufacturing, finance, or accounting.

3. In some research we've conducted, we've found that the negative effects of agreeableness on earnings is stronger for men than for women (that is, being agreeable hurt men's earnings more than women's). Why do you think this might be the case?

**Answer:** This answer might depend on the expectations of men versus women in the workforce. Women might be expected to be more agreeable and, therefore, their behaviors at work are more fulfilling to their responsibilities. Men expected to be less agreeable in work requirements, that is more questioning and analytical, may affect job performance judgments when they are seen as agreeable and, therefore, passive in their performance.

*Source:* T. A. Judge, B. A. Livingston, and C. Hurst, "Do Nice Guys—and Gals—Really Finish Last? The Joint Effects of Sex and Agreeableness on Earnings," working paper, University of Florida, 2009; S. N. Kaplan, M. M. Klebanov, and M. Sorensen, "Which CEO Characteristics and Abilities Matter?" working paper, University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, 2008, [faculty.chicagobooth.edu/steven.kaplan/research/kks.pdf](http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/steven.kaplan/research/kks.pdf); L. K. Thaler and R. Koval, *The Power of Nice: How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness*. New York: Doubleday/Currency, 2006; E. Horrell, *The Kindness Revolution*, New York: AMACOM, 2006; D. Brady, "Being Mean Is So Last Millennium," *Business Week* (January 15, 2007), p. 61; L. Schillinger, "Nice and Ambitious: Either, Neither, or Both?" *New York Times* (January 14, 2007), p. 1; "Congeniality Factor: Employers Become Pickier About Personality," *Gainesville (Florida) Sun* (November 6, 2007), p. 6B.

## Case Incident 2

### Reaching Out, Literally

“Why are people at work always touching me?” asked Elizabeth Bernstein. It’s a problem not everyone has, but it makes you wonder why people like Bernstein are touched a lot at work. It also makes you wonder who does the touching.

Though there is no literature on this, the part of the “toucher” is perhaps easier to analyze. We know that extraverts are more expressive, demonstrative, and physically affectionate than are introverts. So one might well conjecture that extraverted people are doing more of the touching at work.

As for the “touchee,” that’s harder to figure. Some evidence suggests that women are more likely recipients of touches than are men. One study of Japanese women suggested that agreeable women are more likely to be touched than less agreeable women.

Elizabeth Bernstein is not sure what causes her to be the target of so many touches. “I get bear hugs from men and unsolicited kisses on the cheek from women,” Bernstein wrote. “Co-workers of both sexes grip my elbows, tap my knees, and pat my back. . . . One friend hugs me every time she sees me in the elevator.”

There also may be personality differences in the degree to which someone likes to be touched.

Greg Farrall, a 39-year-old financial advisor, has the worst of both worlds: he receives touches all the time and hates getting them. He has repeatedly asked people not to touch him, to no avail. “If you’re looking over me at my computer screen, you don’t need to put your hand on my shoulder. You can easily put it somewhere else.”

Farrall is not alone in his dislike of workplace touching. One employee commented, “Few things are more annoying than employees who put their creepy-crawlies on co-workers.”

As for when touching is inappropriate, obviously, touching someone in an inappropriate place, or continuing to touch someone when the recipient lets you know it’s unwelcome, constitutes sexual harassment. But many touches fall into neither of these categories. “There aren’t standards about what touching is nonsexual other than handshakes,” said Larry Stybel, a Boston-area management consultant.

Of course, some people like being touched at work. Todd Adler, a Florida equities trader, recently started working from home. He says, “I work with myself and can only touch myself... which has its pluses and minuses.”

#### Questions

1. What causes others to want to touch others at work?

**Answer:** Students should perceive the reason for different ideas about touching at work is a function of the individual’s “social distance” categorization of the other person. Go to [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What\\_is\\_the\\_Bogardus\\_Social\\_Distance\\_Scale](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_Bogardus_Social_Distance_Scale) and look at one categorization for social distance.

2. How would you feel if a teacher in one of your classes put his or her arm on your shoulder? Can you imagine a situation in which that would be acceptable? Do you think your answers say something about your personality?

**Answer:** In which category might a teacher perceive appropriate social distance as compared to a student? As the semester progresses and the teacher and student begin to know each other better, is the social distance likely to change? If so, in what direction?

3. Some experts advise that employees should avoid all physical contact with coworkers at all times. Do you think that's a wise policy? Why or why not?

**Answer:** The student's answer to this question is likely based on his or her understanding of the differences in social distance and the ramifications of misinterpretation between coworkers. In most instances to act on the side of caution should be the practice. Since a person has no control over another's interpretation of appropriate social distance, it is better not to test it.

4. Do you think the social mores against are distinctly American? If so, why?

**Answer:** In reading the chapter, students should realize that social distance is different in other cultures. For example, in Europe giving cheek kisses to greet others, even ones you don't know well, is the norm. For a North American, experiencing such a norm unexpectedly can be the cause of considerable misinterpretation.

# Instructor's Choice

## Individual Differences in Teams

Begin by pointing out some behaviors that effective teams practice: establish a common mission, assess strengths and weaknesses, develop individual goals, secure agreement on a way to achieve goals, develop accountability for individual and group actions, build trust, maintain a mix of skills and personalities, provide training, and create opportunities for successes. Ask students to review the “Big Five” model before beginning the exercise. If you choose not to list the items presented by the teams on the board, appoint a scribe.



## EXPLORING OB TOPICS ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Search Engines are our navigational tool to explore the WWW. Some commonly used search engines are:

[www.excite.com](http://www.excite.com)  
[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

[www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)  
[www.lycos.com](http://www.lycos.com)

[www.hotbot.com](http://www.hotbot.com)  
[www.bing.com](http://www.bing.com)

1. Learn more about yourself! Go to [www.2h.com/personality-tests.html](http://www.2h.com/personality-tests.html). There you will find a variety of personality tests such as “Are you a Type A?” the “Stress O Meter,” and other IQ and personality tests. Most are free and often fun to take. Take two or three of your choice. Print the results you get on yourself and bring them to class where we will discuss the validity of your findings.
2. How are personality tests and employment linked? Why would an employer or employee be interested in the results of a personality test? Go to the following sites to learn more:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/marketplace/jobs/myjobsearch/ccsdt/advance/personal/personal2.shtml>

<http://www.careerjournal.com/jobhunting/interviewing/20010622-webb.html>

<http://www.hr-guide.com/data/G312.htm>

Bring five new facts you learned from at least two of the above sites to class for a group discussion.