

Executive **EDGE**

HOT GROUPS: HANDLE WITH CARE

A hot group is an enthusiastic, high-achieving, committed group whose members are inspired by stimulating and demanding tasks—just the spark an organization may need to rescue it from an impossible problem. Unfortunately, hot groups are not consciously planned, so they will not be standing by waiting for a crisis. But when such groups do develop, they can be a boon to an organization.

Hot groups are rare, requiring the right internal conditions. Hot groups are more likely to arise in organizations that:

- Promote openness and flexibility, allowing employees to interact informally with one

another across hierarchical levels and departmental boundaries.

- Encourage an environment of independence, granting hot groups the time and autonomy necessary to arrive at a solution.

- Generate an aura of putting people first. This establishes an atmosphere in which employees create tasks, rather than one in which subordinates rely on managers to tell them what to do.

- Are committed to seeking the truth.

In addition to these internal conditions, two influences external to an organiza-

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tion—crises and competition—may also provide the spark to ignite a hot group. However, do not count on a hot group forming just because the organization is facing a crisis or intense competition. For ex-

ample, some organizations turn to total authoritarianism during crises. Competition may turn up the heat for short periods of time but cannot be counted on as a long-term motivator of hot groups.

Although hot groups can be organizations' deliverance, such groups may precipitate complications.

Hot group members feel an intense, emotional link to one another as a result of trying to complete the task at hand. The group's members are not available to assist the rest of the organization.

This may isolate hot group members from other employees. And hot groups appear to be immune to organizational controls, provoking outsiders to resent the group and resist its initiatives.

From Harold J. Leavitt and Jean Lipman-Blumen, "Hot Groups," Harvard Business Review, July-August, 1995, pp. 109-116.

RETURN OF THE SECRETARY

Who will do the administrative chores that were performed by middle managers before downsizing? Smart executives will hire or train secretaries to perform them now.

Fortunately, there are many computer-literate, often college-educated young women in today's tight job market. (Women still fill 99 percent of secretarial jobs.) No exec need put up with a languid assistant. Plenty of energetic, intelligent women would like to step onto the corporate ladder's first rung.

Robert Dilenschneider, the owner of a public relations firm, advises execs to slowly enlarge their secretaries' duties. "Give her more and more responsibilities, a dram at a time," he says.

Dilenschneider's secretary organizes everything for him, including business dinners. Carole Lassak, secretary to the president of a human resources consulting firm, feeds her boss's cats when the boss is out of town. The relationship is not exploitive. Lassak and her boss, Elizabeth Fried, live in the

same neighborhood. "Of course, I would feed her dog if she were out of town," says Fried.

Muriel Siebert, who owns a discount brokerage house, says a good secretary will possess strengths that complement her boss's weaknesses. Siebert has trouble recalling names, for instance. But Eleanor Davis, her secretary, "is great at remembering somebody's name when I need it," Siebert says.

Siebert so values Davis's work that, when her secretary's daughter was attending college, Siebert gave Davis an annual Christmas bonus large enough to cover tuition, room, and board. Other execs reward their assistants with significant salary increases or corporate perquisites. If nothing else, the smart boss of the 1990s gives a secretary lots of appreciation and respect.

From Marshall Loeb, "How to Get a Great Secretary," Fortune, October 30, 1995, p. 228.