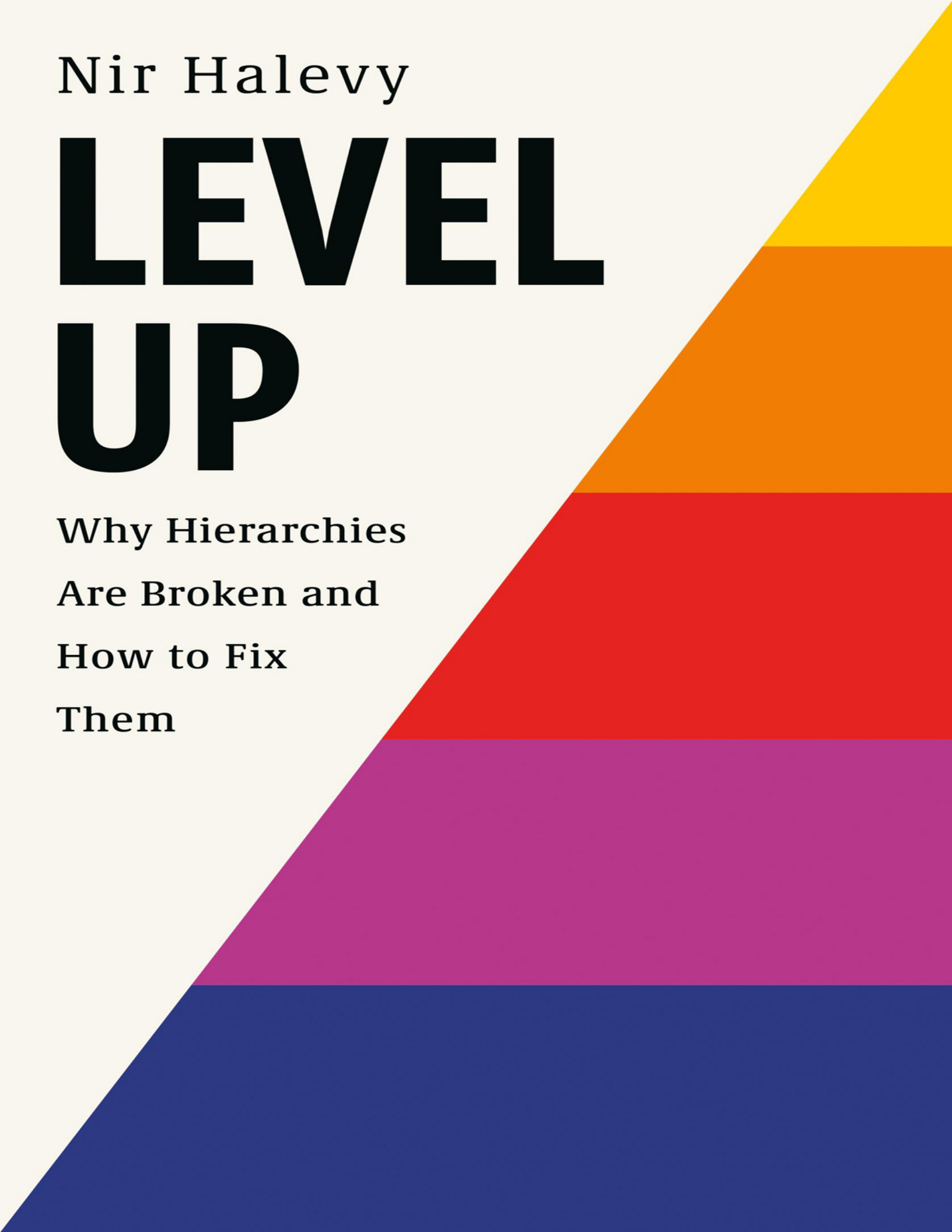
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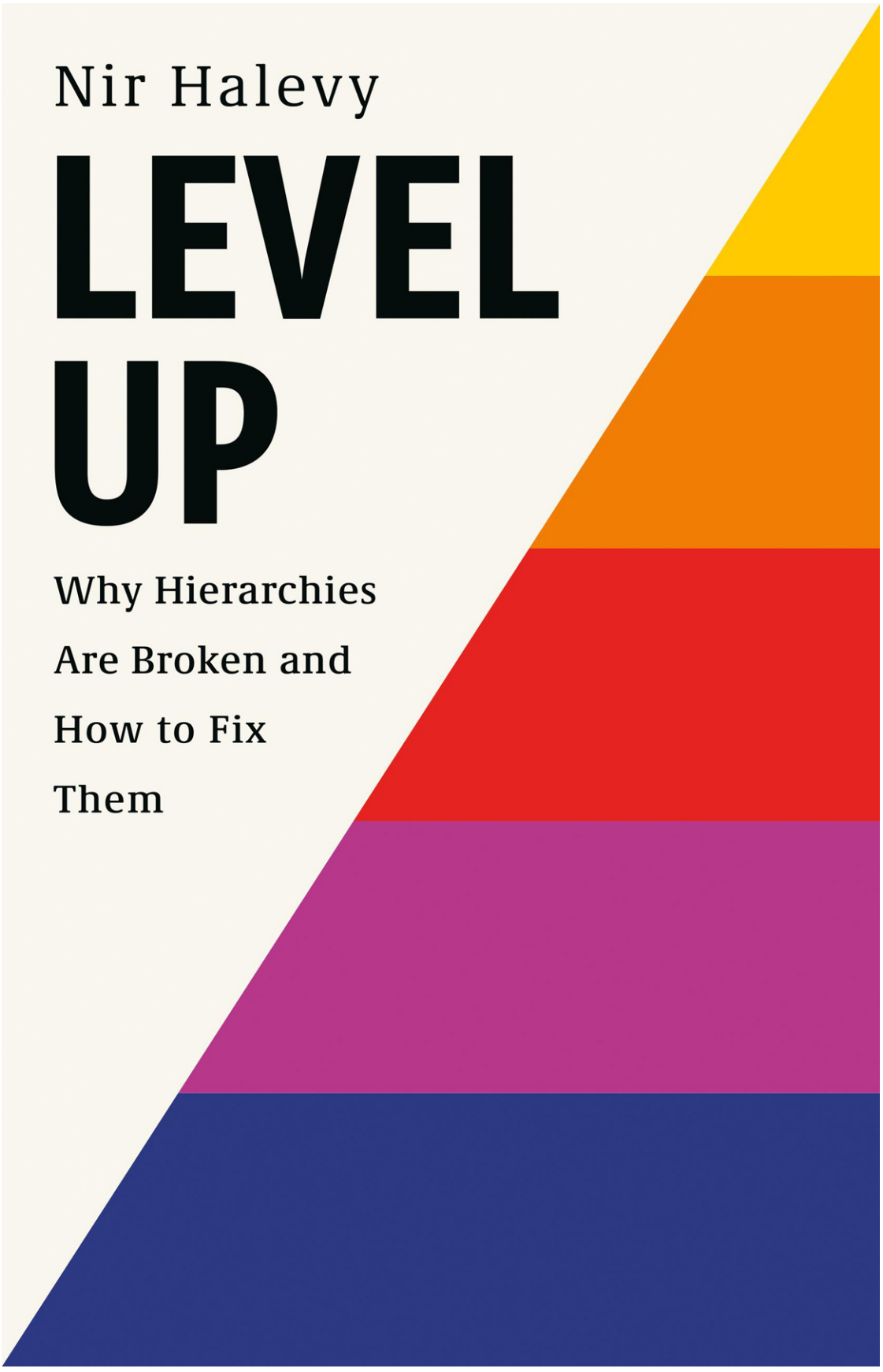
Why Hierarchies Are Broken and How to Fix Them



Nir Halevy

LEVEL UP

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LEVEL UP

Why Hierarchies Are Broken and How to Fix Them

Nir Halevy



New York

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To my family

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INTRODUCTION

Hierarchy is the protagonist of the human story. Its palpable presence has shaped our collective story from the days of ancestral *Pan*, the shared antecedent of chimpanzees, bonobos, and humans. For thousands of years, members of all three species competed for resources, engaged in dominant behavior to attain power, used power to mandate peace among quarreling members, and formed political coalitions among subordinates.[1] This is why Plato and Aristotle, Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, and many others, have explored hierarchy in their writings.[2] Some thinkers, like Bertrand Russell, claimed that the desires for power and status are the primary motivational forces animating human behavior.[3] Hierarchy shapes our lives every day in myriad ways, through its functions, dysfunctions, and numerous manifestations.

Like many great protagonists, hierarchy is flawed, complex, and riddled with contradictions. We assume it exists for a greater cause, though it often falters and fails. Hierarchy perplexes us and stirs our emotions, bringing at once dismay and a desire for redemption. Hierarchy has been around for millennia and is likely here to stay. This protagonist's journey to realize its potential continues, and you can help shape it.

Some people believe that hierarchy is an absolute necessity and seek to bolster it, whereas others hate it fervently and seek to dismantle it altogether. Some see hierarchy as the root of many organizational problems, while others see it as the solution their organizations sorely need. What does hierarchy mean to you? Look at the following fifteen concepts. Which of them come to mind when you hear the word *hierarchy*?

Achievement	Boss	Control
Expertise	Leadership	Dominance
Mentorship	Influence	Inequality

Respect	Popularity	Oppression
Stability	Rank	Privilege

Some of these concepts, such as achievement, respect, and mentorship, have positive connotations. They make us think about constructive interactions and relationships characterized by displays of competence and care. In contrast, other concepts, like dominance, oppression, and inequality, have negative connotations. They underscore the abuse, mistreatment, and exploitation that characterize some hierarchies. Hierarchy takes many forms and influences our daily lives in countless ways—at school, at work, and in society. Accordingly, hierarchy means many different things to different people.

Why is hierarchy so polarizing? How can it be both good and bad at the same time? Can we maintain a hierarchy's benefits while eliminating its harms? This book seeks to make progress toward solving these puzzles. Our journey to address these questions will unfold in two parts. First, we will distinguish broken hierarchies from well-functioning ones. We will examine the characteristics of each and learn how to diagnose them. Then, we will review a framework for fixing a broken hierarchy. This book will teach you how to transform it from a harmful system that undermines people's well-being and collective success into a beneficial system that reaffirms people's values, provides them with multiple pathways to contribute, thrive, achieve, and lead, and brings them closer together rather than pulls them apart. Throughout this book, I will encourage you to think about hierarchy from two complementary perspectives. The first perspective focuses on what hierarchy does to people. The second focuses on what people can do with, and to, hierarchy. By *people*, I mean all of us, including you.

HIERARCHY IS EVERYWHERE

Driving my younger son home from school on a Wednesday afternoon, I asked him what he thought about *Why Hierarchies Fail* as a potential book title. "I want your honest opinion," I said.

"Meh," he uttered. Then he asked, "What is hierarchy?"

I gave him a short definition that I thought would work well for a smart

fifth grader: “It’s a social structure where some people are at the top, some are in the middle, and some are at the bottom.”

He looked thoughtful.

“Do you see hierarchies around you?” I asked.

“Pretty much everywhere,” he responded immediately. As we continued our ride home, he gave me a few examples from his world, such as the hierarchy at his school between the principal, the full-time teachers, the temporary teachers, and the classroom aides.

Listening to my son in the car revealed that much of the slang children use shapes or reinforces social hierarchies. For example, I learned that a witty comment from a child might boost their standing by showing “rizz” (short for charisma), while an uncool comment at lunch might cost them “minus ten thousand aura points.” From the prom king and queen to the social outcasts, from the valedictorian and salutatorian to the captains of the football and cheer teams, and from the nerd squad to the school bullies, our children come face to face with a multitude of hierarchies from an early age. If this reminds you of your days at school, it’s because little has changed. Technology may change some manifestations of hierarchy, but its fundamentals have been largely stable for millennia.

My son was right: Hierarchies are everywhere. You can find them in governments and corporations, in armed forces and nonprofits, and in sports teams, rock bands, and classrooms. A hierarchy is a social or organizational system characterized by unequal distribution of experiences and outcomes. It’s a system that differentiates between those who have more and those who have less on one or more dimensions, such as power, status, ability, virtue, wealth, responsibility, connections, authority, or number of followers on social media. It inherently involves inequality and asymmetric influence. People who control more resources or command greater respect and deference are in a better position to influence those who have less of these qualities.[4]

A hierarchy can involve formal differentiation in ranks, such as a chain of command in the military or government, but it can also involve informal differentiation between those who have more of something and those who have less, such as differences in one’s perceived popularity within a group of friends. A hierarchy can be steep, with large differences in power and

status between those at the top and those at the bottom, or relatively flat, with smaller differences in power or status across ranks. Hierarchy is a fundamental form of social organization that is as ubiquitous as families, networks, and markets.[5] Just as families, networks, and markets come in different shapes and sizes, hierarchy, too, takes different forms and can encompass small groups or entire societies.

My collaborators and I have been studying power, status, influence, and leadership for many years. This research has led me to conclude that we are surrounded by hierarchies from all directions. I believe that this book will guide you to a similar conclusion. By continuing to read this book, you accept the risk of seeing hierarchy everywhere. As we will see, some hierarchies are innocuous, whereas others come with life-and-death consequences. To appreciate the ubiquity and diversity of hierarchy, consider the following examples from studies of hierarchy that social scientists have conducted over the past fifteen years.

Dating

Have you ever dated someone "out of your league"? Research on online dating shows that there exists a real hierarchy of desirability among both men and women. The researchers assessed people's desirability using a measure inspired by PageRank, the algorithm Sergey Brin and Larry Page, the cofounders of Google, developed to evaluate the appeal, importance, and quality of web pages.[6] According to this measure, people who receive more incoming messages (because of their physical attractiveness, interesting description, signals of wealth, demographic characteristics, or other factors) from others who also attract a lot of attention online are rated as more desirable than those who receive fewer incoming messages.

The researchers studied messages exchanged between heterosexual people in New York, Boston, Chicago, and Seattle. They found that people have a clear sense of where they stand in the desirability hierarchy. This is evidenced from the fact that they often contact others "in their league," that is, others with roughly the same desirability ranking as themselves. However, people also actively pursue dates who are "out of their league," those who are more desirable than they are. The researchers noted: "Messaging potential partners who are more desirable than oneself is not

just an occasional act of wishful thinking; it's the norm.… [T]he vast majority of the online dating population we study tend to reach up the hierarchy toward more desirable partners."[7] People also invest more effort when trying to "date up" in the desirability hierarchy, for example, by writing longer messages. However, reply rates drop as the gap on the desirability ladder increases between aspirational message writers and coveted message recipients. These findings and other results related to so-called marriage markets highlight how hierarchy permeates the domain of close relationships.[8]

The National Basketball Association (NBA)

As an avid basketball fan, one of my first research projects on hierarchy focused on its effects in the NBA. As it turns out, hierarchy enhances team success in professional basketball.[9] My colleagues and I found that NBA teams that allocated valued resources like salary, starting lineup positions, and playing time more unevenly among players won more games in a season. The positive effect of hierarchy emerged in part because teams that were more hierarchical had better internal coordination among the players. Their superior coordination manifested itself in various on-court behaviors, including more assists and fewer turnovers during games. Other colleagues subsequently discovered that this relationship is a two-way street. Hierarchy enhances team success in the NBA, and team success, in turn, further solidifies hierarchy when top performers get the lion's share of credit for the collective achievements of the team.[10]

Anecdotal evidence suggests that hierarchy in basketball teams may be beneficial at the collegiate level as well. As a faculty member at Stanford University, I got to interview Tara VanDerveer, who retired as the winningest coach in the history of college basketball. With 1,216 career wins—having won more than 80 percent of the games she coached—and with an Olympic gold medal as the head coach of the US women's national team in the 1996 games in Atlanta, VanDerveer is a foremost authority in building and leading successful teams. I asked her about her experiences with hierarchy in the teams she had coached.

VanDerveer's lived experience underscores the value of hierarchy in

basketball. “On a basketball team, it’s actually very good to have hierarchy. … Players on a team like to know their place. They don’t always like their place, but they want to know where they fit in. I have found that teams seem to function better when things are set.… You have a starting five, and then you have a sixth player, seventh player, eighth player. And then every once in a while, you can mix it up a little bit, but [players] know where they stand.” The effects of hierarchy in the NBA, and VanDerveer’s experiences during her illustrious coaching career, point to the potential benefits of hierarchy.

The US Military Health System

The common power imbalance between physicians and their patients emanates from physicians’ professional expertise and ability to order tests, prescribe medications, and offer treatments. In the US Military Health System, there is an additional layer of hierarchy associated with physicians’ and patients’ respective ranks. When an active-duty military member arrives at the emergency department for diagnosis and treatment, they are assigned to a doctor according to their position in the queue. This means that, irrespective of their own rank, they may encounter a physician whose rank is lower than, higher than, or the same as theirs, merely by chance.

Researchers analyzed the cases of more than 1.5 million military personnel who visited the emergency departments in the US Military Health System. They found that patients received different treatment from physicians depending on whether they outranked the doctors. Physicians invested significantly more time, effort, and other resources when their patients outranked them than when their patients occupied a lower rank than the physicians’. Further, when the physician was attending to both a higher-ranking patient and a lower-ranking patient at the same time, allocating more resources to treating the former came at the expense of the latter.[11] Thus, in emergency departments in the military’s health system, hierarchy shapes the quality of medical care that patients receive.

Mountain Climbing Teams

Hierarchy can sometimes be a matter of life and death even outside of healthcare contexts. Consider, for example, research on mountain climbing

expeditions. Some countries have more hierarchical national cultures than others. In highly hierarchical cultures, where people value authority, employees avoid expressing disagreements with their bosses. In less hierarchical cultures, where people value egalitarianism, employees express their views more freely regardless of their rank. Data on more than thirty thousand Himalayan mountain climbers who took part in more than five thousand expeditions reveals a startling picture. Expeditions that came from more hierarchical countries were more likely to make it to the top. They had a clear chain of command with well-defined roles and responsibilities, which facilitated coordination and reduced conflict. That sounds great, right? But there's more. While they were more likely to summit, expeditions from more hierarchical countries also had more climbers die along the way.[12] So success came with tragic costs. Hierarchy can stifle psychological safety and silence critical voices, preventing low-ranking team members from speaking up when they have concerns about life-threatening circumstances. Mountain climbing teams from hierarchical countries performed better, but their superior performance cost some team members their lives. How does that trade-off make you feel?

As these examples illustrate, hierarchy often comes with costs as well as benefits. Can we disentangle a hierarchy's functions from its dysfunctions? Can we benefit from hierarchy without bearing its costs? In this book, I propose that we can achieve these goals by striving to fix broken hierarchies. Although hierarchies are all around us, this book focuses specifically on hierarchies in work organizations. Focusing on current-day organizations will enable us to make meaningful progress toward our two main goals: diagnosing and fixing broken organizational hierarchies.

BROKEN AND WELL-FUNCTIONING HIERARCHIES

Many people endorse the principle of equality. One of the core tenets of the Enlightenment, equality is immortalized as the central element in the French motto *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Democracy is similarly premised on the notion of one person, one vote, and many parents raise their children to share and share alike. This might be why many people instinctively

bristle at the idea of hierarchy. Although all hierarchies entail inequality, not all hierarchies are created equal. Broken hierarchies harm individual well-being as well as collective performance. In contrast, well-functioning hierarchies support employee welfare and promote the collective performance of teams and organizations. The extent to which a hierarchy is broken, or well-functioning, is a continuum. Take the short quiz "Is This Hierarchy Broken?" on the next page to determine the extent to which a particular hierarchy that comes to your mind is partly or wholly broken.

POP QUIZ

IS THIS HIERARCHY BROKEN?

Think about a hierarchical organization to which you belong, or used to belong, and that you know well. It can be any kind of organization: a business, a governmental or volunteer organization, a professional society, a religious congregation, a sports team, a theater ensemble, or a rock band. To figure out the extent to which this organization's hierarchy is broken versus well functioning, respond to the following twelve yes-or-no questions.

THIS HIERARCHY…

1. Helps us achieve our common goals **(Yes / No)**
2. Encourages us to collaborate **(Yes / No)**
3. Brings us closer together **(Yes / No)**
4. Is characterized by respect and dignity for all **(Yes / No)**
5. Promotes care and concern all around **(Yes / No)**
6. Penalizes rude and offensive behavior **(Yes / No)**
7. Is commonly seen as legitimate **(Yes / No)**
8. Promotes fairness **(Yes / No)**
9. Aligns with our notions of justice **(Yes / No)**

10. Makes us feel safe and secure **(Yes / No)**
11. Makes life predictable **(Yes / No)**
12. Feels calm and peaceful **(Yes / No)**

Totals: Yes _____ No _____

How many *no* responses did you get? If you answered no to even just some of these questions, then this hierarchy is due for some fixing. The more noes you had, the more broken the system. In my experience, relatively few people would respond with an unequivocal yes to all twelve questions. Unfortunately, this means that many of the hierarchies around us are broken, partly or wholly. To fix something, we must first understand how it's broken. Broken hierarchies have three primary characteristics. Specifically, they tend to be:

- ***Ultracompetitive***: Employees compete fiercely with each other over resources and recognition.
- ***Unjust***: Employees come by experiences and outcomes they don't deserve, caused by illegitimate processes and the abuse of power.
- ***Unstable***: Employees experience constant strife and unpredictable changes.

When a hierarchy is broken in the ways captured by these three *U*'s, there is little justification for its existence. Broken hierarchies are dysfunctional systems that harm people's well-being and undermine collective performance, and people experience them as illegitimate and oppressive systems of inequality. These experiences produce negative feelings, including fear, anger, jealousy, discontent, and distress.

All people have essential and undeniable needs. These include safety and security, a sense of worth and meaning, and autonomy and freedom of choice. We also need to belong and be a part of a community, be treated with fairness and justice, and feel capable, competent, and effective in pursuing the goals and challenges we undertake. People have intense

negative feelings toward dysfunctional hierarchies because they frustrate these needs.

Our own feelings and other people's feelings are useful information and can serve as our detection and alarm systems. Fear signals that the need for safety and security is under attack. Anger signals that the need for self-worth or justice may be under threat. Guilt and shame signal that our ability to fulfill the needs to belong and connect is potentially at risk. We know that broken hierarchies are a major problem not only because we see the troubles they cause all around but also because they feel wrong. These hierarchies evoke intense negative emotions because they threaten our ability to fulfill most, if not all, of our fundamental needs.

In contrast, well-functioning hierarchies enable learning, development, and growth. You can help create a well-functioning hierarchy by upholding three standards that I will summarize as CPR (common value, pluralism, and relatedness):

- ***Common value***: Hierarchy should reflect commonly held values and promote collective welfare.
- ***Pluralism***: Hierarchy should enable multiple pathways to contribute, thrive, advance, and lead.
- ***Relatedness***: Hierarchy should strengthen connections between people.

Teams and organizations whose members adhere to these broad principles and harness concrete tools derived from them are on track to achieve a well-functioning hierarchy. In these hierarchies, experts mentor apprentices, old-timers welcome and guide newcomers, and leaders care about their employees, feel responsible for them, and strive to support them. Hence, well-functioning hierarchies enable us to fulfill our fundamental needs. They instill a sense of safety and predictability, facilitate coordination and cooperation, and function as incentive systems that motivate us to achieve and succeed, individually as well as collectively.[13] Consequently, well-functioning hierarchies inspire positive feelings such as calmness and pride. Calmness signals that our environment is safe, and pride signals that our environment enables us to achieve our goals.

FIXING BROKEN HIERARCHIES

We have the power to fix broken hierarchies—to transform them into well-functioning ones. This is a tall order, and success is not guaranteed by any means. However, some pathways can help us make progress toward this important end.

This book will guide you through a two-step process, inspired by an approach used in medicine. Physicians rely on scientifically valid diagnostic tests, in combination with interviews with their patients, to form an accurate clinical picture of their patients' needs. Similarly, this book uses scientific evidence and interviews to diagnose the main ailments of the systems that surround us—the three *U*'s I introduced earlier as the characteristics of broken hierarchies: ultracompetitive, unjust, and unstable. The first step is diagnosis—learning how to identify a broken hierarchy and understanding where exactly it's broken. This will be our focus throughout Part 1 of the book, in Chapters 2–4, each of which focuses on one of the three *U*'s.

The second step in the process is treatment. It involves proposing various remedies derived from the CPR framework, thereby promoting common value, pluralism, and relatedness within an organization. This will be our focus in Part 2, where Chapters 5–7 present concrete tools based on the three CPR principles. Part 2 will give you a fresh perspective on how you can help fix a broken workplace hierarchy. You will see how you can change the systems that surround you, starting now.

This book benefited tremendously from the insights of more than a hundred people I interviewed, with the help of brilliant and dedicated research assistants. These individuals come from many settings, including healthcare, government, finance, the armed forces, sports, and the performing arts. They generously shared their lived experiences that, alongside published research, inspired and informed the short stories and examples you will read in this book. Some interviewees have agreed to be acknowledged by name, whereas others chose to remain anonymous. To protect these individuals' privacy, I have changed people's names, characteristics, and identifying details; based composite characters and scenarios on information from multiple sources; and altered certain events.

The fictional short stories and examples you will read maintain the essence and spirit of people's experiences with hierarchy.

The motto of my workplace—Stanford Graduate School of Business—is "Change lives. Change organizations. Change the world." I believe that fixing dysfunctional hierarchies is a great mission to undertake for those who wish to initiate change and make a positive difference. Given hierarchies' ubiquity and impact, fixing broken ones has the potential to change people's lives, organizations, and society more broadly. My workplace is situated at the heart of Silicon Valley, a place where innovation and change are synonymous with disruption. I would like to offer here an alternative vision of change, taken from the American poet E. E. Cummings. In "Spring is like a perhaps hand," Cummings describes spring as "changing everything carefully." The awakening, growth, and rejuvenation that the season brings instill awe, excitement, and hope. Spring's transformative effects are restorative rather than disruptive. Fixing broken hierarchies would ideally bring a change as profound, positive, and powerful as springtime. The mission is about building something new and better together. A community that is committed at once to individual well-being and collective success, a system that helps you achieve your goals while you help others achieve theirs. You can help bring spring.

1 /
WHY CAN'T WE GET RID OF HIERARCHY?

Hierarchy is all around us. Many of us intuitively associate hierarchy with the notion of formal ranks in the armed forces or with the organizational charts of large corporations. However, small start-ups, religious groups, and online volunteer communities also have hierarchies. Small start-ups often distinguish between employees, executives, and the founders. The Roman Catholic Church distinguishes between deacons and priests, bishops and archbishops, cardinals and patriarchs. Wikipedia's internal governance system for its community of contributors includes numerous hierarchically structured roles that vary in their access and privileges, such as file movers, reviewers, bureaucrats, and stewards. Most families are not perfectly egalitarian. Young children seldom get equal say about important family decisions, such as whether to relocate for work. Some family members don't get equal access to all information (e.g., medical or financial) because of paternalistic ideas or a desire to protect certain family members, such as those who are particularly elderly, ill, or vulnerable. Hierarchy also pervades the animal kingdom. Many species, including dwarf mongooses, African wild dogs, ring-tailed lemurs, rhesus monkeys, and white-throated sparrows, feature dominance hierarchies. In these animal dominance hierarchies, lower-ranking members submit and defer to high-ranking members.[1] Hierarchy truly seems to be everywhere—a fundamental regularity of social life.[2]

Think about your current workplace. Is your team or organization hierarchical? Take the pop quiz "Is My Workplace Hierarchical?" to determine how much your organization embraces hierarchy.

Count the number of *no* responses you got. A larger number indicates that your organization is more hierarchical. Hierarchy is continuous—some readers might respond no to just two or three of these questions, whereas others might respond no to six or seven questions. Few people, if any, would respond yes to all ten questions. That's because perfectly egalitarian organizations are extremely rare. Informal hierarchies emerge spontaneously and powerfully, even when formal markers of power and status—like ranks and roles—are absent. In a group of friends, some people will take up more space in conversation and be louder and more prominent, thereby dominating interactions. Other friends may garner more respect and admiration through their achievements or expertise, thus exerting more influence than others over group decisions.[3]

Hierarchies have been around for thousands of years, and as much as some of us love to hate them, it's unrealistic to assume that we'll be rid of them anytime soon. Human nature hasn't changed much since the days of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Why would we expect the fundamentals of social structure to change? Changing technology may usher in new forms of hierarchy and new ways to maintain or challenge it (e.g., AI-based digital surveillance, battles for control over social media platforms), but hierarchies are likely here to stay.

POP QUIZ

IS MY WORKPLACE HIERARCHICAL?

EVERYONE IN MY ORGANIZATION…

1. Receives exactly the same pay **(Yes / No)**
2. Has equal access to all information **(Yes / No)**
3. Shares all responsibilities equally **(Yes / No)**
4. Has the same privileges **(Yes / No)**
5. Has identical influence over decisions **(Yes / No)**
6. Receives the same respect and deference from others **(Yes / No)**

7. Makes equally valuable contributions to collective success **(Yes / No)**
8. Participates equally in all discussions **(Yes / No)**
9. Controls precisely the same resources **(Yes / No)**
10. Influences others' experiences and outcomes in the same way **(Yes / No)**

Totals: Yes _____ No _____

Some people reject the idea that hierarchies are going to stay with us for the foreseeable future. They are fed up with hierarchy and mistakenly believe that we can eradicate social and organizational hierarchies altogether. Consequently, they focus their efforts on dismantling hierarchy. Those who hope to demolish hierarchies completely tend to overlook the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which hierarchy keeps raising its head even in seemingly egalitarian groups and organizations. They often focus on the future, overlooking evidence that hierarchy has been fundamental to human existence throughout our collective past. It's extremely difficult to eliminate hierarchy in large groups and organizations sustainably. People who believe that we can get rid of hierarchy entirely might thwart the other path—the one that involves fixing broken hierarchies rather than trying to get rid of these systems.

To understand why hierarchy persists despite numerous attempts to eradicate it, we should consider the forces that make hierarchy so pervasive and persistent. Learning about these forces also helps us see why fixing these broken systems may be both a more desirable and a more feasible solution than trying to eradicate hierarchy altogether.

THE FORCES THAT SUSTAIN AND BOLSTER HIERARCHY

Why is hierarchy so pervasive? What makes hierarchy so sticky? Hierarchies persist because people at the top enjoy the advantages and privileges that come with power and status and take actions to maintain and

reinforce them.[4] These structures also persist because many people, including those in the middle and at the bottom of organizational hierarchies, often acquiesce to the systems in which they are embedded, thereby bolstering the status quo.[5] For example, new recruits who feel a high sense of personal obligation to the organization (i.e., a strong sense of duty to work extra hours, follow policies and rules, and adhere to the organization's values) tend to see greater value in the organization's formal training program.[6] But there's more to it. Multiple processes work together to bolster the hierarchies around us. As a result, there are several factors explaining why hierarchy is so pervasive.

These forces that sustain hierarchy emerge from anecdotal evidence and decades of scientific research, which identified six complementary processes that contribute to the pervasiveness and persistence of hierarchy. Three of these forces are positive: Well-functioning hierarchies reproduce because they satisfy the fundamental human needs for safety and predictability, serve as incentive systems that motivate achievement, and promote collective success. People in such a system are often motivated to maintain the hierarchy around them because they see the benefits that they personally, and their group as a whole, receive from it. Thus, the personal and collective benefits that these forces fuel sustain hierarchy.

Unfortunately, hierarchies are often sticky not only when they are well functioning but also when they are broken. Three negative forces that often sustain broken hierarchies include exploitative pro-hierarchy ideologies, abuse of power by bad actors, and the inertia that exists within hierarchical systems. People in broken hierarchies may submit to these forces unwillingly because challenging or overpowering them is risky and difficult. Well-known expressions such as "snitches get stitches and end up in ditches" capture the view that speaking up against power holders or blowing the whistle on an unjust system may result in severe punishment. Strong conformity pressures and formal and informal sanctions for challenging existing hierarchies make it difficult to change these systems. Let's consider each of these six forces in turn.

Positive Force 1: Safety and Predictability

Well-functioning hierarchies can provide a sense of safety and predictability. The existence of a stable structure reduces uncertainty and helps people know what to expect from others and what others expect of them. Several leaders we interviewed for this book spoke to that effect. One of these leaders, Colonel Everett Spain, is a decorated officer who served in Iraq, Germany, and Kosovo and earned the Bronze Star, Purple Heart, and Combat Action Badge, among many other honors and accolades. He received his doctorate from Harvard Business School and served as the head of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the US Military Academy at West Point at the time of our interview. He described the sense of security and predictability that the military hierarchy can offer: "The military can be a very comfortable place.… We know our place. We know when we're going to be considered for promotion next. We know the expectations.… There's just a system that we're used to, and those who have chosen to stay in [it] know what's coming.… We know when the military moves us somewhere new; we go to the housing office first and see what housing is available for our grade and rank.… The thicker the hierarchy, the more comfortable one can get with it. I think it's also very safe. Those of us who have been in the army a few years… we just don't feel a danger of losing our jobs quickly, right?… Generally our jobs are pretty safe, and we're happy with that." This positive force contributes to the pervasiveness and persistence of hierarchy by garnering voluntary support from the people who seek to fulfill the fundamental needs for safety and predictability in their personal and professional lives.

Positive Force 2: Incentives

Well-functioning hierarchies fulfill more than just the needs for structure, security, and predictability. They also serve as incentive systems, providing employees with material and social incentives, such as pay, bonuses, recognition, social status, and a sense of self-worth. People have fundamental needs to achieve, feel competent, and gain status—they want to earn the respect, admiration, and deference of those around them.[7] Some people are further motivated to accumulate wealth, power, and influence.[8] Flat organizational structures don't allow people to achieve and advance according to their capabilities and accomplishments. In contrast, well-

functioning hierarchies reward capable people, those who show virtue, and those who contribute to collective success.[9]

The notion that well-functioning hierarchies enable organizations to bestow power and confer status on their most capable members came up in an interview with Tal Lee Anderman, who was the chief talent officer at Alpine Investors at the time of our conversation. Alpine is a successful private equity firm in San Francisco—the first-ever private equity company to win the Most Innovative Company Award from *Fast Company*. At Alpine, Anderman helped create a culture that empowers young and talented people by placing them in positions of considerable authority and responsibility. In her role, she directed and oversaw a CEO-in-training program that developed young graduates and placed them as leaders at the top of Alpine's portfolio companies. This approach contrasts with the typical path, where "it takes most MBA graduates 15 to 30 years to obtain a CEO role."[10] Anderman contrasted this approach with the stagnation she observed in some nonprofit organizations. She noted that many highly capable employees in nonprofit organizations are not utilized to their full potential because these organizations discourage competition and don't reward excellence. Such an environment stifles ambition and high performance, thereby suppressing collective success. At Alpine, hierarchy is viewed not as a rigid structure but as a system that recognizes and rewards talent and hard work, thereby enabling individual achievement and fueling collective success. This positive force consolidates hierarchy by increasing employees' voluntary endorsement of hierarchy as a pathway to fulfilling their achievement needs and obtaining highly valued rewards, both material and symbolic.

Positive Force 3: Better Collective Performance

Well-functioning hierarchies facilitate performance through division of labor and by coordinating expectations. Leaders inspire, share their expertise, set goals, provide constructive feedback, solicit input, and make decisions. Followers learn by observing, listening, asking questions, seeking feedback, providing input, and executing action plans. Consider the following insights shared by one of our interviewees, a recruited collegiate athlete. When we interviewed her during her first year with the team, she

noted, “There are some very, very good [players] on my team. A lot of them are a couple of years older than me, so I’m kind of lacking the physical strength and the smarts that they have, so that’s something that I’ve been working a lot on while I’ve been here. I really enjoy being able to play with them, though, just because I feel like I personally thrive in an environment where other people are better than me, because then I’m pushing myself and learning from them to be as good as them, so I would rather have it where I’m behind those people. Obviously, I want to play… but I really value being with better people.” This observation reflects the value that some people at the bottom of a team’s hierarchy see in learning from better performers on their team.

The value of having varying levels of skill and expertise in a team also emerged in the context of healthcare. Professor Jacob Ballon, cochief of the Division of General Adult Psychiatry and Psychology and codirector of the INSPIRE Clinic at Stanford, described this value in an interview: “I think there are definitely places where hierarchy is really helpful and really necessary.… There are times for hierarchy when it comes to training.… [Consider] me and the residents.… They’re coming to learn.… It’s important to recognize that my decision at the end of the day is going to be the one that has to be carried out. I’m willing to listen… if it’s not dangerous, you know.… [But if] this is really a bad way to go, then I’m going to overrule that in a hierarchical kind of way.” Like the collegiate athlete, Ballon’s insights acknowledge the value of hierarchy for learning and development, in this case, from the top of the team’s hierarchy. Teams in which everyone tries to lead or everyone follows will struggle to perform.[11] When people work on ambiguous tasks and lack clarity about their responsibilities within the team, hierarchy is particularly beneficial. It structures the teammates’ contributions and activities, which promotes division of labor, coordination, and predictability.[12]

The collective performance benefits of hierarchy emerged in interviews with performers who recalled their experiences in highly successful teams. One interviewee, a collegiate athlete on a championship team, elaborated on how one of the captains of her team helped produce these benefits: “She was just the one you can go to off the field if you’re struggling with anything or had questions about stuff on the field, and she was just a perfect

mix of intense but nice and there for you [and] on the field just super inspiring." A principal dancer in an elite ballet company shared in our interview how they personally help promote coordination and predictability in the context of their company hierarchy: "The newer dancers who are coming into the company,… I go up to them, I say, 'Welcome to the company. This is a great company. Some beautiful dancers, great rep. [repertoire]. If there is any problem, please talk with me. I know this company so well. If you have any questions of how to behave or what to do in a situation, come and ask me. I will be more than happy to help you out.'"

Finally, Steve Kerr, who won multiple NBA championships as a player with the Chicago Bulls and San Antonio Spurs and as a coach with the Golden State Warriors, shared how up-and-coming team members can learn by observing top performers on their team. In a public conversation at Stanford University, Kerr reflected on the experience of learning by observing Michael Jordan, the undisputed leader of the Chicago Bulls during the 1990s: "I was very self-conscious when I started playing in the NBA, and I didn't really feel clutch. You know, I felt like I was thinking too much. And so, I learned a lot, especially from Michael Jordan, who took game-winning shots almost every week and missed plenty of them, and [it] didn't seem to bother him that much, you know? And there was a great lesson in there that you got to go for it, and you got to be able to live with the failure."

The athletes, artists, and physicians we interviewed acknowledged the ways in which well-functioning hierarchies promote collective performance, which include learning and mentoring, decreased ambiguity, and better coordination. These benefits were recognized by leaders and followers alike. This positive force contributes to the pervasiveness and persistence of hierarchy by rallying support from organizational members who experience firsthand the upsides of operating within a well-functioning hierarchy.

Negative Force 1: Exploitative Pro-Hierarchy Ideologies

Hierarchies are pervasive and sticky not only because they provide safety and predictability, motivate people, and deliver performance benefits to

teams but also because people have cultivated ideological worldviews that sustain them. These worldviews have dual roles in sustaining hierarchy and making it a polarizing social and organizational system. Ideologies vary in their content and in the extent to which people rigidly adhere to them. For example, some ideologies elevate the religious, cultural, or national in-group above all out-groups, whereas other ideologies put less emphasis on in-group superiority.[13]

Ideology is not a negative force per se; indeed, it can propel people to do a lot of good. Unlike the positive forces noted earlier, which reinforce well-functioning hierarchies through voluntary support from organizational members, a pro-hierarchy ideology may bolster well-functioning and broken hierarchies alike. Exploitative pro-hierarchy ideologies often justify the maintenance of broken, harmful hierarchies. Decades of psychological research show that disadvantages typically loom larger than advantages.[14] Accordingly, I include pro-hierarchy ideologies, and exploitative pro-hierarchy ideologies in particular, among the negative forces that sustain hierarchy.

Many people judge obedience to leaders, respect for established hierarchies, and adherence to the law as moral and identify actions that oppose or undermine established authority or the existing social order as immoral.[15] From this perspective, the legitimacy of bosses and leaders, legal proceedings, police departments, and the rule of law in general comes from the view that yielding to authorities is moral. Psychological research highlights individual differences and group-based differences in endorsement of this worldview: "Traits such as obedience and deference are virtues in some subcultures—such as among social conservatives in the United States—but can be seen as neutral or even as vices in others—such as among social liberals."[16]

Many people also base moral judgments on the extent to which actions and objects feel pure or impure. Specifically, people judge pure and clean objects and actions as moral and those that they associate with pathogens and contamination or that make them feel disgusted as immoral. Like deference to authority, relying on perceived purity tends to shape conservatives' moral judgments more than liberals' moral judgments.

Purity-related arguments often bolster hierarchy. For example, research suggests that some members of high castes in rural India resist the provision of tap water and toilets to all households because they see "sharing the same water source as a threat to their superiority and purity."[17]

Let's consider two additional pro-hierarchy worldviews that psychologists have studied for decades. Some people strongly endorse these worldviews, whereas others strongly reject them. The first worldview claims that some groups are inferior to others and should stay that way. Research shows that people who support this worldview are often competitive, tough-minded, narcissistic, nationalist, militaristic, and racist. They also tend to support torture, immigrant prosecution, and the death penalty.[18] The second worldview sees income inequality as fair and legitimate. Some studies show that wealthier people, men, conservatives, authoritarians, and anti-egalitarians are likely to support this worldview, whereas those who support social movements like the feminist movement, Occupy Wall Street, LGBTQ+ rights, and Black Lives Matter tend to reject it.[19] In light of these findings, conservatism often seems to be about the maintenance of hierarchy. This link exists both because hierarchy aligns well with conservatives' moral beliefs about institutions and social life and because hierarchy fulfills certain important and salient needs and motivations for conservatives.[20]

Ideological worldviews such as these bolster hierarchy and make it sticky by presenting it as principled, moral, and normative in the eyes of many people. Consequently, these worldviews exert powerful conformity pressures on people to comply with existing hierarchies, even when these arrangements produce undesirable outcomes. Those who wish to resist or alter the hierarchy expect forceful opposition and moral outrage.[21] Such expectations may discourage people from speaking up against the hierarchy or participating in protests. These pressures, rooted in ideologies and moral worldviews that justify various hierarchies, promote the pervasiveness and persistence of both broken and well-functioning hierarchies.

Negative Force 2: Bad Actors

The idea of a broken hierarchy naturally brings to many readers' minds the notion of bad actors, perpetrators who abuse power and mistreat others. These bad actors also often play an important role in maintaining hierarchy. The concept of rankism captures harmful actions that reinforce and accentuate hierarchies. These actions can take many forms. In some cases, rankism involves top-down comments that demean others or bosses who control and criticize every action of their direct reports. In other cases, it involves intrusive employee surveillance that undermines privacy rights or full-blown harassment and abuse. Other displays of abuse of power include hazing rituals, nepotism, and corruption.

Though corrupt politicians and CEOs quickly come to mind when we think of bad actors, abuse of power and mistreatment can be found at different levels of an organizational hierarchy and in less conspicuous settings. Researchers who surveyed medical students in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia, during their pediatrics rotation encountered multiple experiences of "teaching by humiliation."[22] For example, a student who noted it was their first week in pediatrics received the following comments from a physician: "I don't care. I'm still going to punish you," and "wow, can't believe you don't know that." Worse yet, these offensive comments were made in front of patients and parents. Other experiences reported to the researchers included being "grilled"—that is, tested publicly with questions asked in an intimidating way—and being exposed to yelling, swearing, and other rude behavior from senior staff. Reports of top-down intimidation, harassment, and discrimination emanating from abuse of power also come from family medicine residents in Canada.[23] Of course, the problem is not unique to medical schools. News stories abound about law enforcement officers, coaches, politicians, chefs, and priests who abused their power.[24] In one case, a bank executive slapped an employee who refused the boss's demand to order an alcoholic beverage during a company dinner.[25] These behaviors produce multiple measurable harms. For example, research finds that abusive supervision in organizations is associated with employee depression, emotional exhaustion, and counterproductive work behavior.[26]

The actions of bad actors reinforce broken hierarchies through

intimidation and coercion. Bad actors in positions of power allocate the resources they control, including budgets, opportunities, and information, in ways designed to secure their positions of power and to deter challengers from trying to change the system.[27] These actions enhance the stickiness of hierarchy.

Negative Force 3: Inertia

Hierarchies also persist because of the self-reinforcing nature of power and status. The behaviors of those who have power and status, and the complementary behaviors of those who lack these qualities, operate together to perpetuate and accentuate inequality. High-ranking employees typically show agency, advocacy, and confidence; they claim resources, assert their desires, and spring to action. In contrast, low-ranking employees typically show deference, compliance, vigilance, and hesitation; they are less likely to claim resources, assert their desires, and act. For example, a study of more than 150,000 small business owners in Mexico found that people in higher socioeconomic contexts tend to be more overconfident than people in lower socioeconomic contexts. People often infer competence from displays of overconfidence. Therefore, expressions of overconfidence lead to status conferral and tend to reinforce social hierarchies.[28]

We often expect high-status people to succeed. Consequently, we provide them with opportunities, support their efforts, and give them the benefit of the doubt when they fail. These privileges are rarely given to those occupying disadvantageous positions in social and organizational hierarchies. As a result of these complementary behaviors, high-ranking employees accumulate more power, receive more credit for collective success, garner more respect and influence, and become more prominent in the eyes of others.[29] The tendency to give more credit and recognition to those who are already famous is known as the Matthew effect, whereby "eminent scientists get disproportionately greater credit for their contributions to science while relatively unknown scientists tend to get disproportionately little credit for comparable contributions."[30]

Some of our interviewees mentioned how these complementary

processes from the top and the bottom of the hierarchy reinforce their daily experiences. A dancer in an elite ballet company noted that when younger dancers work very hard but feel that they are being overlooked for roles, they are typically apprehensive about the prospects of expressing discontent to the staff: “I’ve been working really hard and trying to do everything I can, and I didn’t get that part that I thought that I would have been really good at, and I don’t know what to do to change this cycle. How do I say something, because I don’t want to, you know, offend or make it worse or, you know, have them take more away from me.”

These feelings of trepidation and angst stand in sharp contrast to the feelings of entitlement, demanding behavior, and interpersonal forcefulness enacted by dancers at the top of the company hierarchy. One of our interviewees shared this observation: “We used to have a principal dancer who was phenomenal, and she had been with the company for a long time. But she was also a nightmare of a partner to work with, only because she would be very demanding… in a very aggressive way. And she would have partners, you know, leave the studio or go speak to our director and things like that. And you know, if the director likes her dancing, he will still put her onstage no matter what. And that was sort of the case where she, you know, would be first cast for everything… do all of the roles that she would like to do… regardless of these really tumultuous situations that she would cause.”

Differential treatment of those at the top versus those at the bottom emerged in other contexts as well. For example, one collegiate athlete on a championship team described the “star treatment” that the coaches gave a teammate who had recently joined the team. The interviewee noted that because the teammate had national team experience and was considered the best player in the nation in their age group, the coaches were more lenient with this player when they made mistakes than they were with other players. Getting more opportunities, receiving more of the credit, and being given the benefit of the doubt when things don’t go well reinforce the advantages of those at the top of the hierarchy. Inertia contributes to the pervasiveness and persistence of hierarchy by sustaining the differentiation between those who have more and those with less. By elevating those in advantaged positions and continuously suppressing those in disadvantaged positions, inertia suppresses efforts to change or challenge hierarchy.

In sum, hierarchy is pervasive and sticky because multiple forces operate simultaneously to maintain and bolster it. First, well-functioning hierarchies can fulfill multiple fundamental needs. Second, they operate as incentive systems that motivate people to achieve and contribute to collective success. Third, they facilitate team performance by clarifying expectations when team members work on ambiguous tasks. These forces fuel voluntary support for well-functioning hierarchies. Other forces sustain and accentuate broken hierarchies. These include exploitative pro-hierarchy ideologies, the abuse of power by bad actors, and the tendencies of high-ranking and low-ranking members to engage in complementary actions and receive differential treatment. These forces bolster broken systems by leading people to expect strong conformity pressures and formal and informal sanctions if they were to challenge the existing hierarchy. Taken together, the positive and negative forces we discussed in this section reinforce, and often accentuate, employees' advantages and disadvantages within organizations.

EFFORTS TO FLATTEN SOCIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL HIERARCHIES

You might reason, surely there are settings in which equality is maintained —where communities and organizations enact egalitarian values and manage to grow and flourish while maintaining perfectly flat structures. History shows that communities and organizations that have attempted to establish perfect equality among their members have achieved mixed results at best. Many of them have failed to create flat structures or sustain them over time. As you will see in the following examples, the various forces that sustain and bolster hierarchy tend to undermine such efforts toward egalitarianism.

The Kibbutz

Kibbutzim (the plural form of *kibbutz*) are equal-sharing communities founded in Israel in the first half of the twentieth century by young and idealistic immigrants, primarily from Eastern Europe. Embracing socialist and communist ideas and rejecting fascist and capitalist ideas, these founders sought to establish communities committed to equality, social

justice, freedom, respect, participative decision-making, and self-governance. Many kibbutzim still exist, though their nature and internal structure have changed substantially over the past few decades.

During the first few decades of their existence, kibbutzim enforced a noncash economy, with no private property and with communal production, consumption, and child-rearing. The members were assigned tasks by the kibbutz (e.g., milking cows, picking oranges, carpentry, manufacturing, cooking). They received no income, dined together in communal halls, and had their children raised collectively outside of parents' homes. They received public goods from the kibbutz, including free education, cultural events, and recreational facilities such as a shared swimming pool.

The kibbutzim had to confront the limits of equality very early in their existence. Even during their early days, kibbutzim used nonfinancial rewards that created a hierarchy within the community. High performers held prestigious leadership positions, such as treasurer, secretary, and farm manager—positions that gave them considerable influence. The elections that placed high performers in these prestigious positions were popularity contests, effectively creating competition for power and influence. Using the power and responsibilities vested in these leadership positions, the people who held these roles could assign members to more desirable or less desirable jobs. Working in a more desirable or a less desirable job was another manifestation of hierarchy within the kibbutz.[31]

Additionally, despite the kibbutzim's ideological objection to using hired labor, research shows that within a fifteen-year period (between 1951 and 1965), these communities transitioned from having virtually no hired labor to having a third of their work completed by hired labor. Further, despite their ideological distaste for capitalism and their reluctance to rely on capitalist systems and organizations, kibbutzim heavily depended on banks to finance various expenditures.[32] Thus, the vision of full equality failed to materialize almost from the very beginnings of the kibbutzim.

Kibbutzim faced numerous pressures against their equal-sharing arrangements.[33] First, their most capable and productive members had an incentive to leave the kibbutz, earn higher wages elsewhere, and accumulate their wealth independently.[34] Although this so-called brain

drain problem existed from the early days of kibbutzim, the rise of the high-tech industry in Israel exacerbated this problem when the country became the "start-up nation" in the early 2000s.[35] New and lucrative opportunities tempted capable, entrepreneurial kibbutz members to leave the community and profit individually from their talents and hard work. Second, the equal-sharing arrangements, which offered a form of social insurance against life's uncertainties, attracted newcomers with limited education, lower earnings, and greater need or desire for the social insurance that the kibbutz offered. Third, kibbutzim did not use wages to reward effort and could not fire shirking workers as a sanction, as doing so meant expelling whole families from the kibbutz. Hence, there were no financial incentives to maintain a strong work ethic and high-quality work. The absence of incentives created conditions for the proliferation of undesirable behaviors such as slacking at work.

So how did the kibbutzim try to maintain their ideologically driven, egalitarian way of life? First, they made departure from the kibbutz costly and difficult. People who chose to leave had little property or money of their own with which to start their new lives. Most members had education or skills that offered limited value in the free market. That's because the kibbutzim intentionally prevented their members from attaining higher education in profitable fields with broad applicability. For example, attending law school was forbidden. Second, the kibbutzim used intense screening to prevent low-ability people from joining the kibbutz from outside. Thus, equality was desirable only as long as the kibbutzim could achieve homogeneity by keeping out those deemed less capable of contributing. Finally, kibbutzim were kept intentionally small to allow ceaseless monitoring and social sanctioning by other members. Privacy was severely limited, and ideological indoctrination was enforced through the communal education system and constant peer pressure. These social practices are easier to maintain in small groups and become more challenging once groups and organizations scale in size.[36] One economic historian noted that "such measures must typically be used in extreme ways if a community is to be based on full equal sharing, which helps to explain why such communities are so rare and why they tend to be short-lived."[37]

Indeed, most kibbutzim have shifted away from a model of full equal

sharing over the past few decades. Some of them transformed "into capitalist neighborhoods," a dramatic change that mirrored broader "disillusionment with socialism around the world in the late 1980s."[38] Similar to the end of statewide communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, full equality was impossible to sustain in the kibbutzim.

Flat Business Organizations

Widespread discontent with the dysfunctions of hierarchy in corporate America has led multiple organizations to invest considerable resources in flattening their structures. You may be familiar with Valve, a successful software and hardware company responsible for video games such as *Half-Life*, *Defense of the Ancients*, and *Counterstrike*. If you visit Valve's "People" page on its website, the first thing you will see is the slogan "Boss-free since 1996."[39] Its website reads, "We aren't a typical company—which is why you're here, right? As a flat company without hierarchy and job titles, we don't usually hire for specific roles."[40]

Efforts to flatten hierarchies by creating boss-free environments are not unique to Valve. They often emerge in relatively small companies that consist of a few hundred people, similar to the kibbutzim. Companies like global design firm IDEO and online shoe retailer Zappos pride themselves on having few or no managers, few job titles, and no hierarchy. Employees in these organizational environments possess more autonomy, greater decision-making authority, and more flexibility in setting goals, choosing their tasks, and advancing the firm's mission. But are Valve, IDEO, and Zappos truly flat organizations?

These firms may lack the formal hierarchies captured by standard organizational charts. However, studies of these organizations reveal that they have maintained many of the core features of hierarchies. For example, researchers noted how employees in these companies often compete for respect, status, and influence in brainstorming sessions and meetings and how recent accomplishments are rewarded with recognition and opportunities to contribute to additional projects.[41] Put differently, informal status hierarchies quickly emerge even when formal ranks are removed.

Valve may be boss-free, yet it employs a forced-ranking system based on employee feedback and uses this ranking system to compensate different employees differently. Pay dispersion is a very common and highly consequential form of hierarchy in organizations.[42] Finally, the initial structure and culture of Zappos changed meaningfully after Amazon acquired the retailer in 2009, consistent with Amazon's hierarchical structure.

Seemingly flat organizations like Valve, IDEO, and Zappos may have an advantage in attracting and keeping talented people who value equality and freedom in their workplace. While these firms lack some markers of hierarchy, they tend to share at least some characteristics of more traditionally hierarchical companies. For example, only some people have the power to hire and fire employees, some employees are paid more than others, some employees receive more respect and deference than others, and some employees receive more opportunities than others to influence organizational processes and outcomes. These characteristics make such organizations de facto hierarchies.

Occasionally, large corporations also launch reorganization plans aimed at flattening their structures. For example, take Bayer, a large pharmaceutical company known for making Aleve, Claritin, and aspirin, alongside vitamins, soybean seeds, and more. In 2023, Bill Anderson, Bayer's CEO, launched a plan aimed at empowering employees by removing layers of middle management and transferring work to self-managing teams. Flattening the organizational structure through a new operating model called dynamic shared ownership required employees to choose which ideas, proposed by their peers, they would like to work on by "voting with their feet."[43] Think about the new practice of voting with your feet as an employee at Bayer. Voting is a power contest: It entails assessing the degree of popular support for different ideas or candidates. The outcomes of voting typically elevate people whose ideas received popular support and demote those whose ideas received little or no support. Power involves asymmetric control over valuable resources such as budgets, personnel, information, and more. The new system at Bayer means that employees whose ideas are endorsed by more coworkers gain more power.

Replacing top-down bureaucratic control with popularity contests does

not flatten hierarchies. It simply substitutes one form of hierarchy for another that may be more amenable to employees. Increasing employee voice and input by changing the bases of hierarchy within an organization can influence how employees feel, think, and act in the workplace. However, it does not eliminate hierarchy. The long-term consequences of this initiative at Bayer remain to be seen.

Attempts to flatten hierarchies often prove difficult. Managers and employees of Avinsa, a food processing company in Colombia, learned this firsthand. The forces that sustain hierarchy, which we encountered earlier in this chapter, kept hindering change efforts in Avinsa, where "the ghosts of past hierarchies can linger, haunting the change effort."[44] Further, some employees gained greater autonomy during the change process, but frontline workers were kept working in a hierarchical regime. This unequal implementation of the change accentuated differences between advantaged and disadvantaged roles within the company. Efforts to flatten Avinsa also meant that managers and employees had to develop new and shared understandings of their respective roles and responsibilities. They had to learn to navigate the disorienting jargon jungle that emerged when management introduced new terms such as "circles," "sub-circles," "coordinators," and "facilitators." In this case, efforts to flatten the hierarchy seemed to substitute clarity with ambiguity and predictability with uncertainty. Although the final chapter in this transformation story is yet to be written, Avinsa's journey underscores the challenges associated with efforts to flatten organizational hierarchies.

The story of CashCo provides another vivid illustration of employees' experiences in an organization that seeks to flatten its hierarchy. CashCo is the fictional name of a real US company that produces hardware products for managing physical and digital currency.[45] As is often the case when organizations scale, CashCo's fast growth was accompanied by the addition of hierarchical layers. Although the ultimate legal responsibility and decision authority remained with the owner, concerns about diminished employee empowerment and organizational agility led CashCo to pursue reorganization. Specifically, it sought to replace a traditional command-and-control hierarchy based on ranks with a holacracy—a dynamic, team-based, self-governance system that maintains roles but eliminates ranks.[46] While

roles were seen as helpful for coordinating activities and contributions by different employees, the use of ranks to assign authority and responsibility within the firm was seen as alienating and demotivating.

The efforts to decentralize proved extremely challenging at CashCo. Initiatives to flatten hierarchies might appeal to employees when they envision work environments without red tape, bottlenecks, and disapproving gatekeepers. However, building consensus in large groups through endless deliberation might not be the best path toward agility. When was the last time you felt invigorated by endless meetings and debilitating disagreements with colleagues? The frustrating experience of having to do exactly that was not lost on some of the employees of CashCo. One employee noted, "In some ways, the traditional style is compelling. God, we could just get that stuff done… just make some decisions and do things." Another employee observed, "Before, in a traditional hierarchy… I had to go to one or two people [to get approval].… In this environment, I have got forty people that I need to get on board." The efforts to flatten hierarchy at CashCo empowered peer-to-peer problem-solving and facilitated conversations based on people's roles. However, the efforts also created operational difficulties, interpersonal conflict, and uncertainty.[47]

For example, consider the role descriptions of employees appointed as "lead links." These employees were responsible for tasks and needs that were not explicitly included in someone else's role description. Put differently, they oversaw any tasks and processes that were not formally part of someone else's job. This responsibility made lead links de facto managers and the focal points when employees faced problems.

As another example, the new decentralized system at CashCo raised concerns among the most senior leaders that the company in its new form lacked strategic direction and a sense of coherence. These concerns led them to meet off-site, formulate an overall strategy, and invent a new group role called the Strategy Council. Expectedly, this solution reaffirmed their disproportionate influence over the company.

Although meaningfully different from CashCo's prior hierarchy, the decentralized structure proved extremely formal, bureaucratic, and complex. Employees had to convene in periodic governance meetings to create new roles publicly and explicitly, clarify the responsibilities imbued

in their roles, or propose additional responsibilities for their roles. For example, an employee in the role of a trade show manager added to her role responsibilities the power to decide which products would be displayed in a given show to prevent senior leaders from intervening in decisions related to trade shows.

The psychological, social, and organizational forces that sustain and bolster hierarchy, discussed earlier in this chapter, countered the efforts to decentralize CashCo. Roles were fundamentally unequal—just like the ranks in the old system. Some roles involved more responsibilities and accountabilities than others. Some employees held many roles, which made authority further unequal. Roles constantly evolved, employees kept creating new roles, and the need to describe new roles formally and publicly created additional work that prevented employees from attending to urgent work matters. Navigating this ever-changing system of roles was complex, effortful, time-consuming, and emotionally exhausting for employees.

Changing organizations can be extremely difficult, especially when such efforts challenge powerful forces that operate to establish, sustain, and bolster hierarchy.[48] So, what should we do?

NAVIGATING VERSUS FIXING BROKEN ORGANIZATIONAL HIERARCHIES

Organizational hierarchies are here to stay. What should we do about the existence of so many dysfunctional systems that are ultracompetitive, unjust, and unstable? Some readers may answer this question by arguing that broken hierarchies are a necessary evil, noting that we must simply learn how to play the game. According to this view, we should learn to navigate organizational hierarchies, whether they are dysfunctional or well functioning. Other readers may provide a different answer to this question. Specifically, they may see an acute need to fix broken systems. According to this view, all of us would be better off if we addressed the ultracompetitive, unjust, and unstable character of broken organizational hierarchies. Let's consider each view in turn.

You might be familiar with the aphorism "You have to learn the rules of the game, and then you have to play better than anyone else" (another

dimension of hierarchy for you!). Newcomers to organizations often endorse this view. They need and want to learn the rules of the game, and those who are particularly ambitious also seek to excel and outperform others who play the game. When newcomers join an organization, they typically seek advice about others' expectations from other low-ranking employees, correctly assuming that those in lower positions pay more attention to conventions and social norms.[49] Indeed, the rules of the game for navigating hierarchy look different, depending on your position in it.

Some people are better than others when it comes to playing this navigating-the-hierarchy game. They form accurate perceptions of where everyone stands in a given hierarchy. Their astuteness in perceiving hierarchy enables them to identify competent mentors and high-status contacts from whom they can learn valuable knowledge, skills, and practices. The ability to quickly learn the culture of a new social group or work organization increases these employees' success.[50] Such *status acuity* is also linked with fewer debilitating status conflicts at work. Groups with fewer status conflicts, in turn, perform their tasks better. Thus, groups whose members have status acuity perform better because they can focus on the collective task rather than on dysfunctional competitions over establishing relative standing in the group.[51]

Research shows that people in lower socioeconomic contexts often see organizational systems as broken: They believe that individuals must be manipulative and cunning and play politics to accumulate power and get ahead in work organizations. These perceptions reduce some people's willingness to seek positions of power at work. For example, MBA students from lower socioeconomic contexts were less likely than those from higher socioeconomic contexts to choose an elective course teaching how to use politics in organizations to gain power.[52] However, portraying power as providing opportunities and means to help others increases the motivation of people from lower socioeconomic contexts to pursue power. Thus, the motivation to navigate hierarchy and ascend to leadership positions may depend on the actions you must take to gain power and status and what power and status enable you to do once you reach a leadership position.

Acknowledging that hierarchies are here to stay may inspire some

readers to do more than merely learn how to personally navigate these systems more effectively. Specifically, some readers may conclude that we have a moral obligation to fix broken hierarchies—to make sure that hierarchies protect, benefit, and care for all of us. To repair broken systems, we must familiarize ourselves with their symptoms. The interconnected symptoms of ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability add up to a dysfunctional syndrome. Learning to distinguish broken hierarchies from well-functioning systems is the next step in our journey to fix the broken ones.

PART 1

DIAGNOSIS

How to Identify a Broken Hierarchy

Going through life entails encountering much that is broken: broken chairs and pipes, broken promises and hearts, broken bicycles and cars. A broken chair does not mean we should stop using furniture, and a broken car does not mean we should stop using vehicles. Rather, we rely on carpenters, therapists, and mechanics to help us fix whatever is broken. Some of my friends and colleagues who study power, status, and influence note that many hierarchies produce harms rather than benefits. They are correct. Logically, we should not expect to see hierarchies' potential benefits when they are fundamentally broken. That's exactly why we should fix them.

Employees and managers may intuitively feel that the hierarchy around them is poorly functioning, yet they lack the tools to identify, measure, and articulate precisely how it is broken. Part 1 (Chapters 2–4) focuses on diagnosis, an essential first step for those who wish to fix a broken hierarchy. It will give you tools to identify the three symptoms of these hierarchies: ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability. These symptoms are interwoven and reinforce each other, giving rise to the overall dysfunctional syndrome of the broken hierarchy. Once you have mastered these symptoms of the problem, Part 2 will provide you with a framework and concrete tools for fixing it.

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ULTRACOMPETITIVE

It's 6 a.m. It's cold. A peaceful lake reflects the gray morning clouds that float above. A white van pulls up next to a large brownish building. A group of young women in jackets disembarks from the van and heads into the boathouse. Some have yet to shake off the night's slumber. Everyone knows the routine. The assistant coach provides brief instructions. Soon after, the rowers are in their boats, on the water, with oars in their hands. The cox steers them, the rower in the stroke position sets the rhythm, and the remaining seven rowers follow. The coaches are in the launch, watching the practicing boats from a short distance, occasionally providing instructions using a megaphone.

In some ways, this is just another day in the life of a rowing team. Except that it's not just another day. The seat races today will determine who gets a seat in the top boat. In these races, two boats will compete head-to-head for a set distance. Two rowers, one from each boat, will then switch seats, and the two boats will race the same distance again. Coaches will use the outcomes of these races to see how each rower influences the boat's speed. The best rowers will get to compete for a national championship in the varsity eight-person boat. A few other rowers will be relegated to the less prestigious four-person boat, while the rest will stay behind and watch the regatta online. The stakes could not be higher in their world.

Julie and Laura have been best friends since middle school. Both have been sacrificing their social lives, sleep, and schoolwork for years to invest everything they have in the sport they love. Both have fought their way back from injuries, rowed for the national team as teenagers, and put in blood, sweat, and tears—literally—to get to this point. One final unassigned seat is left in the top eight-person boat. The upcoming seat race will pit

them against each other. A head-on competition for a coveted spot in the top boat.

The seat race begins. Two four-person boats, side by side, racing for fifteen hundred meters. Julie's boat beats Laura's by a small margin. The rowers switch places, and the two boats repeat the same piece. This time Laura's boat wins by a small margin. It could be the currents, the winds, or human inconsistency. The margin of victory is so small. The team repeats the process, but the identity of the winner keeps changing. At some point, the coach decides to do a full race. Two eight-person boats, with coxswains calling as they would normally during a formal race. The tension is unbearably high, and everyone on the team feels it.

The decision is posted right after practice, shared publicly with the entire team. Julie won the final seat in the boat. Laura lost. Julie and Laura are in the same van together on the way back to campus. The ride feels longer than usual. Julie is ecstatic but cannot celebrate or show her emotions in any way. She feels like jumping up and down and screaming at the top of her lungs. She wants to call her family and friends and tell them. She wants to hug the rest of the rowers who will join her in the effort to win a national championship together, but she can't.

Meanwhile, Laura is heartbroken, upset, and mad. At the coach, at herself, at the entire world. She feels as if her worst enemy is sitting in the van with her. She thinks about all the hours she "wasted" and the opportunities she missed while trying to become the best rower that she can. She wants to yell, she wants to cry, but she can't. Not here, not now. She puts in her earbuds and pulls her dark blue hoodie over her eyes, shutting the world out. The other rowers in the van are in complete silence, trying to honor the opposite emotions that Julie and Laura barely manage to keep inside.

The van finally arrives back on campus and stops. The sliding door opens, and Julie and Laura climb out. Both are teary-eyed. They stand there for a moment. Then they step toward each other and hug. Crying. A long minute passes. The other rowers stand there for a moment, uncertain, ambivalent, and hesitant. They then leave quietly to give Julie and Laura their much-needed space.

This short story illustrates some of the costs of internal competitions within elite performance teams. You do not have to be a professional athlete

or have a longtime workplace frenemy to appreciate the emotional toll of a direct competition with a teammate. Internal competitions that divide colleagues into winners and losers have consequences that go beyond the allocation of rewards and opportunities in sports teams, educational institutions, and work organizations. While seat races are unique to rowing, internal competition is rife across organizations of different kinds.

Competition is interwoven in human experience. It can elevate and motivate, but it can also devastate and deflate. In broken hierarchies, competitions run amok, become all-consuming for employees and teams, and produce dysfunctional and unethical behavior, such as efforts to undermine others' endeavors and success. Ultracompetitiveness in broken hierarchies manifests itself in debilitating conflict, harmful self-promotion, and sabotage of others' work. In such environments, the open wounds and divides created by cutthroat competitions are left to fester. In contrast, well-functioning hierarchies discourage ultracompetitiveness, confine competition to specific times and places where it's necessary and useful, and use incentives to motivate teammates to collaborate and support each other. Coaches, captains, and other leaders have the power to determine whether to rely on competitions to motivate, evaluate, and allocate scarce resources such as opportunities and rewards (e.g., promotions and bonuses). They can design an environment that will keep competitiveness in check or allow it to get out of hand.

This chapter identifies the social, organizational, and psychological forces that fuel harmful ultracompetitiveness in work organizations. This knowledge will help you understand when and why ultracompetitiveness emerges and support your ability to diagnose it in your organization.

THE UBIQUITY OF SOCIAL COMPARISONS

The starting point for the problem of ultracompetitiveness in broken hierarchies is surprisingly innocuous. We all want to know where we stand. As social creatures, we wish to know whether we are similar to others or different from them. We seek to evaluate our competencies and abilities, and we want to feel that the people around us appreciate and respect us. These aspects are at the core of our self-esteem, which, in turn, functions as

an internal thermometer telling us whether others value or devalue us.[1] Cues of devaluation are important—they serve as warning signals that we are at risk of being socially excluded and that we should therefore consider changing our behavior.

We sometimes use objective standards to evaluate ourselves. For example, runners know they have improved if, after training, they lowered their personal record from a seven-minute mile to a six-minute mile. When my older son was in high school, runners in his cross-country and track and field teams often focused on improving their personal best, outperforming their past selves. However, we often base our judgments on how well we do relative to others. Improving your personal record as a runner is very rewarding, but a young runner's self-esteem is often also shaped by knowing whether they came in first, fifth, or last on their high school team. Lowering your mile time to six minutes feels good, but that feeling might be tinged by displeasure and envy on learning that your friend just ran a five-minute mile.

Engaging in social comparisons is extremely common, and it can shape how we feel about ourselves as well as how we evaluate others.[2] You may be familiar with the idiom "comparison is the thief of joy." You may have experienced it yourself. Envy, pride, confidence, disappointment, and determination are just some of the emotions you might feel as you compare yourself to others.

Consider Joe, an employee who recently received a meaningful raise. Joe can tell that his new salary is noticeably higher than it used to be. However, the context of getting a raise also lends itself to social comparisons. Joe might feel bad about his raise if he learns that it's considerably smaller than all the raises other employees received. He might also feel bad if he discovers that he is still the lowest-paid employee despite the recent increase in his salary. Falling behind others is an aversive experience that people will go to great lengths to avoid.

We often engage in social comparisons even when thinking about aspects of our lives that are seemingly noncomparative. For example, even judgments of gender seem to be relative. Study participants judged the same human face as more feminine when shown next to a masculine face and as more masculine when shown next to a feminine face.[3] The same effect

emerged in evaluations of many other targets. A circle seemed more masculine when shown next to a heart but more feminine when shown next to a square. It seems that our minds often propel us to make comparisons.

The tendency to engage in social comparisons rather than compare ourselves to objective standards, our set goals, or our past selves is even more pronounced when it comes to aspects like ability, achievement, success, power, status, and popularity. A study that summarized more than sixty years of psychological research on social comparisons concluded that people are more likely to compare themselves to others who are doing better than to those doing worse (though given the choice, a substantial portion of people also chose to compare themselves to similar others). The choice to compare upward—to people who are more competent, more successful, or better off than we are—decreases our judgments of our own ability. It makes us feel as though we are falling short relative to others. Unsurprisingly, upward comparisons also diminish our satisfaction with our outcomes. The drive to achieve and improve makes people look up to determine how close they are to others who are capable and successful; unfortunately, the same process can lead to self-deflation.[4] You likely feel that your friends have more friends than you do.[5] Feeling less popular than others often evokes a sense of threat, which leads people to engage in compensatory behaviors, such as inflating the size of their own network in surveys.[6]

The harmful effects of social comparisons on interactions and relationships have been observed not only in humans but also in other species. Consider the so-called nasty-neighbor effect. The tendency to worry about your relative standing in the group and access to scarce resources makes you act more competitively toward close others than more distant others. Researchers have found that people who feel a threat to their status are more likely to engage in costly contests with fellow in-group members than with out-group members in an economic game simulating attack and defense. Cross-cultural evidence shows that this tendency is stronger in societies with hierarchical values and weaker in more egalitarian societies. The nasty-neighbor effect is not unique to humans. Rather, group-

living birds, banded mongooses, social insects, and other species display it too.[7]

Occasionally, organizations try to harness the power of social comparisons to motivate employees to perform. As the following study illustrates, such efforts can backfire. UCLA Health, the public healthcare system of the University of California, Los Angeles, experimented with using social comparisons to boost physician performance. Decision-makers at the organization reasoned that competition can be motivating: Most people, understandably, want to compare favorably to their peers. So, the researchers gave physicians information about where they stood relative to others in terms of their patients' compliance with recommended health maintenance activities such as scheduling and showing up to routine screenings.[8]

The investigators set up three groups. In all three, the physicians received emails with information about their preventive care performance: the proportion of preventive care procedures that their patients completed after the doctors' recommendations. In one group, no additional information was provided. In the second group, the email also included both a list of the month's "Top 25 Primary Care Physicians" according to patient compliance and information about the recipients' rank relative to their peers. The third group was identical to the second, except that clinic leaders also received training on how to support their physicians' performance.

What did the researchers find? First, the not-so-great news: Giving physicians information about where they stood relative to their peers did not increase their performance. Second, some bad news: The peer comparison intervention decreased job satisfaction and increased burnout. By learning where they fell relative to others, physicians on average felt worse about their jobs. Physicians' jobs are stressful enough without having peer comparison information to deal with. Finally, some good news: The leadership training helped. Clinic leaders who learned how to support physicians helped lessen the negative impact of peer comparisons on physicians' well-being. The takeaway: Learning about peers' accomplishments can produce negative feelings, but social support can help mitigate the harms of social comparison. The experiment at UCLA Health also illustrates the power and responsibility of managers and leaders at the

top, who can remove practices that harm employee well-being. The idea of undoing unhelpful programs is important, because decision-makers tend to think primarily about adding new policies, rather than removing existing ones, when they try to change, improve, or fix systems.[9] We need to remind managers and leaders that eliminating harmful procedures and practices can be a useful path to positive change.

How does our fundamental human tendency to engage in social comparisons give rise to harmful ultracompetitiveness in teams and organizations? Forced-ranking systems play an important role in this process.

THE WIDESPREAD USE OF FORCED-RANKING SYSTEMS

The pervasive use of forced-ranking systems in organizational structures and management practices transforms naturally occurring social comparisons into a motivational force that spurs ultracompetitiveness. This level of intense competition consequently destabilizes hierarchies, undermines relationships, and breaks teams apart.

We are all surrounded by ranking systems. We are inundated with lists of top athletes (e.g., tennis player rankings), singers (e.g., the most Grammy wins), organizations (e.g., best companies to work for), cities (e.g., best cities to live in), and even countries (e.g., the number of medals won in the Olympic Games). The cultural obsession with ranking systems is evident from their ceaseless production and widespread consumption. The Fortune 500 list ranks the largest US companies by revenue. *Time* magazine's Most Influential People of the year. *U.S. News & World Report*'s ranking of the best universities and colleges. Netflix's weekly Top 10 most popular movies and shows. The list goes on. Many people consume these ranking lists as a pastime and tune in to follow competitions and rivalries between CEOs, sports teams, and firms, even when the contests are not directly related to their personal or professional lives.

NASCAR fans might be familiar with the saying "Second place is just the first-place loser" attributed to Dale Earnhardt Sr. Nike captured the same sentiment and cultural obsession with rank-based competition in some

of its campaigns surrounding the Olympic Games. Before the Olympic Games in 1996, Nike put up billboards in Atlanta that read: “You don’t win silver. You lose gold.” This slogan, which stirred controversy by arguably devaluing a remarkable achievement, captures the psychological pain of narrowly missing the opportunity to be crowned the best in the world. Nike launched a campaign that is similar in spirit during the Olympic Games in 2024.

Marketing campaigns like Nike’s build on valid psychological insights. Rank-ordered hierarchies in sports accentuate social comparisons. For example, research on Olympic medalists’ emotions shows that silver medalists tend to look less happy and more disappointed on the Olympic podium than bronze medalists. That’s because silver medalists compare themselves to the gold medalist, whereas bronze medalists compare themselves to the fourth-place athlete who missed out in an attempt to win a medal.[10] The greater discontent of silver medalists was apparent when both human and automated coders judged medalists’ emotions from their facial expressions on the podium.[11]

Forced-ranking systems also permeate educational institutions and work organizations. Though much less celebrated than the Olympic podium, these ranking systems shape the daily lives, self-esteem, and social relations of millions of people every day. In many educational institutions, students compete for class rank—they strive to graduate magna cum laude or summa cum laude or to become valedictorian or salutatorian. They compete for these honors because they expect that making it to the top of the list of the most accomplished students may confer both prestige and financial rewards in the form of scholarships.

At some point in their existence, many work organizations have used forced-ranking systems that could fuel dysfunctional conflict related to relative standing between peers. Some of the top management consulting firms have used an up-or-out promotion system, in which employees who have not moved up the ranks within a given period had to leave the firm.[12] Numerous other firms have used forced distribution systems. Many of these so-called rank-and-yank systems require managers to rank all their employees and dismiss those at the bottom. It’s easy to see why such a system would push employees to try to outperform each other.

Unfortunately, research on forced evaluation distributions shows that they can lead people to sabotage others' work.[13]

Forced-ranking systems in organizations can hurt many aspects of work. Structuring teams as strictly rank-ordered hierarchies harms relationships by increasing social comparisons and decreasing trust among teammates. By upsetting relationships in teams, strict rank ordering of employees diminishes team performance.[14] Forced ranking can also corrupt employee recommendations and peer feedback. Specifically, people who perform well on a given dimension are less likely to recommend hiring talented candidates who already surpass them or who can potentially surpass them in the future on that dimension.[15] In this way, forced-ranking systems can discourage the recruitment of highly capable and talented people.

These systems can also undermine the retention of highly capable and talented employees. Research on a multinational pharmaceutical company highlights the costs associated with a strict recognition cutoff.[16] Managers in this large organization nominate their best employees as "outstanding" or "exceptional," with the remaining employees classified as "solid." The organization has a strict quota to keep the top two categories scarce and thus valuable in the eyes of employees. Managers tend to nominate more employees than the strict quota allows as outstanding or exceptional, as they seek to recognize excellent employees with identical or near-identical performance. This practice creates the need for top executives to downgrade some of the excellent performers whom the managers nominated as outstanding or excellent to solid. The downgrading is done intentionally by the top executives to signal to employees that the final rating does not reflect what their direct managers think of them.

Downgraded employees choose to leave this organization voluntarily at significantly higher rates than employees who are recognized without being subsequently downgraded. Their experiences of unfairness, envy, and threat to their self-image are evident from interviews that reveal how upset they are by being downgraded to the solid category. Their managers, who have discretion over performance bonuses, often try to compensate the downgraded employees for this perceived slight with some of the largest financial bonuses. The company also works to reassure excellent employees

that their prospects of a future promotion are linked to how their managers rated them, not whether top executives subsequently downgraded them. However, these retention efforts fall short of curbing the voluntary exit of highly talented employees from the organization. Thus, the strict enforcement of a recognition quota not only creates an intense competition for relative standing in this recognition hierarchy but also has the undesirable and unintentional consequence of pushing out excellent performers.

THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED THREAT

Perceived threat plays a critical role in shaping our reactions to the success of others. Observing highly accomplished people who have rightfully achieved success can inspire us, motivate us, and lead us to hope that we can attain similar success through hard work and perseverance. Self-promotion by role models whose superior performance places them close to the top of the hierarchy is not threatening. However, when our peers engage in self-promotion, we experience threat and negative emotions rather than excitement and inspiration.[17]

For example, consider research on the dynamics of competition on online crowdsourcing platforms. Competition for relative standing on such platforms can give rise to feelings of threat and can corrupt peer evaluations. In one study, the researchers analyzed more than 38 million evaluations of over 150,000 submissions of shirt designs on Threadless, a crowdsourcing and e-commerce platform where people create T-shirt designs and evaluate their own and others' designs in weekly contests. Votes by community members determine the weekly winners of these contests. Winners receive symbolic awards and cash prizes, and their designs are printed and sold on the platform.

This research found evidence of strategic self-promotion and sabotage during the weekly contests on Threadless.[18] Most creators rate their own submissions, and almost all of them give themselves the highest possible rating of 5 stars, substantially higher than the average rating creators get from others, which sits at 1.8 stars (in part due to strategic sabotage). Self-promotion on Threadless is more likely among low performers, who

typically get relatively lower evaluations from others. High performers, whose designs usually receive high ratings from community members, are less likely to engage in self-promotion. In contrast, high performers are more likely than low performers to sabotage other designers by giving them the lowest possible evaluation. Strategic sabotage behavior is more likely when raters submit a design of their own to a particular contest. What's more, it became more frequent after Threadless doubled the cash prize for winners of the weekly contest. These results show that strategic sabotage is more likely when it threatens high performers' chances of winning. The effects of sabotage are far-reaching, especially in close contests where sabotage can change the selection of the winner 25 percent of the time. Although community members sometimes show generosity by giving others' designs inflated ratings, such behavior is directed toward designers who don't pose a threat to the rater's chances of winning. Thus, competition for relative standing among community members can corrupt evaluations of the quality of product design.

Perceived threat shapes interactions not only between people but also between organizations. Consider trades of players among teams in Major League Baseball (MLB). Highly ranked MLB teams are less likely to trade their star players to other highly ranked teams, fearing the trade will allow rivals to surpass them in the league's ranking. However, they don't show the same reluctance when the trade involves non-star players, because these trades are seen as less threatening to their relative standing.[19] The threat of falling behind in a rank-ordered hierarchy is a powerful motivator.

Competition is fiercer when competitors are closer to the top of the corporate ladder, the top of the league, or the top of the class.[20] Nonetheless, we should not overlook competitive behavior by lower-ranking employees. People who occupy lower ranks often worry about negative repercussions of behaving competitively. The lack of power makes lower-ranking employees vulnerable to potential retaliation from powerful colleagues. Accordingly, employees in lower ranks tend to engage in covert competition. These covert actions include secretly sabotaging a coworker's work (e.g., by failing to correct their mistakes), working extra hours to outpace or outperform coworkers, procrastinating to impede a coworker's progress, spreading negative gossip behind a coworker's back, and

refraining from helping a coworker or from defending their reputation.[21] People with less power are more likely to lie about their professional achievements than those with more power. Such lies enhance the self-esteem that lower-ranking employees feel in the context of their organization. Indeed, researchers found that a self-affirmation intervention that led less powerful employees to feel better about themselves diminished the effect of their lack of power on deceitful self-promotion.[22] Thus, concerns about relative standing among lower-ranking organizational members can produce covert competition and dishonesty as a means to ascend within a broken hierarchy.

SEEING LIFE AS A TOURNAMENT

The perfect storm for the emergence of ultracompetitiveness in organizational hierarchies occurs when our fundamental human tendency to engage in social comparisons meets the promiscuous use of forced-ranking systems, and together they produce feelings of threat on dimensions that are personally meaningful to us. When these conditions coalesce, employees may come to think about their work—or even their entire career—as a tournament. If you work in a team or an organization where many or most other employees view their work life as a fierce and endless tournament, your organizational culture likely shows symptoms of ultracompetitiveness.

Edward Lazear, who served as a chief economic adviser to President George W. Bush and was an esteemed colleague at Stanford, is credited with founding the field of personnel economics. One of his notable contributions is known as *tournament theory*.[23] This perspective focuses on rewarding employees according to their performance *relative to* others. Tournaments have two critical elements. First, the prize for the winner is much larger than the prize for the runner-up. For example, in 2025, the winner of Wimbledon won £3 million, whereas the runner-up received roughly half that amount: £1.52 million.[24] And second, the margin of victory can be minuscule, but it's still enough to produce extremely unequal outcomes. Consider two results from the 2024 Paris Olympics. In the finals of the men's 100-meter race, Noah Lyles of the United States came ahead of Kishane Thompson of Jamaica by a mere 0.005 seconds, a determination

that required a nail-biting review of the photo finish. The second example involves the US women's basketball team, which won gold by beating France in the finals by a single point (67–66). These two characteristics—a disproportionately larger prize for the winner and the reliance on even the smallest of differences to determine the identity of the winner—extend far beyond the domain of sports and cash prizes.

Lazear used a tennis tournament analogy to illustrate organizational tournaments: "Within a firm, receiving a promotion is akin to winning a tennis tournament. The contestants in this case are typically managers at a lower level in the firm's hierarchy. Promotion decisions almost always require relative rankings. The raise associated with a promotion motivates young associates at consulting firms to exert high levels of effort in order to win a promotion to partner."[25] To make the point that incentives in organizational tournaments need to be optimal and efficient, he used the example of gladiators battling for their lives: "It might be possible to set the prize so high that players would be willing to risk death or try to kill the other player to win, as was the case in gladiatorial tournaments, but that would not be efficient because the added output would not cover the cost." As a psychologist, I see many problems in thinking about coworkers as gladiators, beyond the inefficiencies captured in this quote.

Let's focus on tennis tournaments for a moment and see what scientific evidence tells us about the psychology of ranking systems in that context. Tennis players know whether their opponents on the court are ascending or descending in the rankings of the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP). In a competitive rank-based hierarchy, your competitor's success, and specifically the trajectory of their status momentum (i.e., whether they are rising or falling in the rankings), has consequences for you. A study of more than fifty-nine thousand ATP tennis matches found that when players faced an opponent on the rise, their chances of winning dropped from 52 to 38 percent.[26]

Importantly, this effect was not caused by the opponent's current rank but by their upward momentum, which posed a threat to the player facing them. How do we know that players experienced their opponent's positive status momentum as a threat? The researchers showed that players facing an ascending opponent committed more double faults—unforced errors for

which the serving player is solely responsible. The opponent cannot influence these unforced mistakes except through the mental threat they pose to the player serving the ball.

The researchers provided additional evidence for the threat experience that emerges when people compete within a hierarchical ranking system. In one of their studies, they analyzed more than 2.75 million chess games. In this context too, facing a competitor who was rising in the ranks decreased a player's chances of winning the game significantly. Just like in tennis, this experience of threat was not caused by the competitor's rank at the time of the game; rather, it was caused by the competitor's upward trend. The opponent's positive status momentum created the expectation that they would continue to beat others and rise in the ranks. Specifically, a chess player's probability of winning decreased from 65 to 30 percent when their opponent's upward momentum increased.

Tournament theory can help us make sense of the inner workings of organizations as varied as governmental bureaucracies in Asia and publicly traded organizations in North America.[27] For example, researchers used the tournament perspective to explain why large public companies offer highly disproportionate compensation packages to their CEOs. The ratio of CEO-to-typical-worker pay increased over the past few decades from 1:21 in 1965 to 1:344 in 2022.[28] Researchers have also used the tournament perspective to explain why promotions that happen at lower levels in the hierarchy involve much smaller raises than promotions at higher levels.[29] Both phenomena reflect the view that the lure of much larger future promotions must be maintained to keep employees motivated to get ahead and make it all the way to the very top.

Studies of internal competition within the top management teams of high-tech firms showed that the pay dispersion created by the tournament approach harms teams. It diminishes cooperation and increases social comparisons, resentment, jealousy, and the tendency to focus effort on individual tasks over joint tasks.[30] Intense tournaments can also increase attrition. When the top executives are paid disproportionately more than other employees in the firm, the resulting pay differences increase the likelihood of turnover.[31] Think back to the experiences of threat that tennis

and chess players experienced when they had to face others who were rising in the ranks. What would you do if that was how you felt at work *every day*?

In organizations, the winner and the loser of a head-to-head competition for a coveted promotion often need to continue working together. This is similar to the experience of Julie and Laura, who, as described earlier in this chapter, stayed with the same rowing team after their seat race. Alternatively, if the loser decides to leave the team or the organization after their loss, the organization loses a talented individual who is sometimes almost as good as the person who beat them. Now multiply that loss by thousands of competitions between coworkers over time and across numerous corporations that use the tournament approach to incentivize their employees. It's easy to see how much harm such an approach can do to workplace relationships and retention efforts.

DIAGNOSING ULTRACOMPETITIVENESS

Having read this chapter, you can now evaluate the extent to which your workplace—or any other organization that you know well—is showing symptoms of ultracompetitiveness. Take the quiz "Is My Workplace Ultracompetitive?" to diagnose ultracompetitiveness in any organization.

POP QUIZ

IS MY WORKPLACE ULTRACOMPETITIVE?

Think about the hierarchy in your team or organization. To figure out the extent to which it is characterized by ultracompetitiveness, respond to the following sixteen yes-or-no questions.

IN MY ORGANIZATION…

1. Forced-ranking systems are used regularly to evaluate employees **(Yes / No)**
2. Competitions spill over to other, unrelated interactions **(Yes /**

No)

3. People undermine others or sabotage their performance **(Yes / No)**
4. People avoid helping others who might surpass them **(Yes / No)**
5. Competitions have lasting negative effects on relationships **(Yes / No)**
6. People constantly worry about how they perform relative to others **(Yes / No)**
7. There is an up-or-out promotion system **(Yes / No)**
8. People build coalitions to gather support for their views **(Yes / No)**
9. People think about their careers as a tournament **(Yes / No)**
10. People tend to see many activities as competitions **(Yes / No)**
11. People typically seek to outperform or outshine others **(Yes / No)**
12. People might act unethically to win a competition **(Yes / No)**
13. People compete fiercely for social influence **(Yes / No)**
14. People belittle or demean others' contributions **(Yes / No)**
15. People exaggerate or inflate their own contributions and achievements **(Yes / No)**
16. People feel threatened by others' accomplishments **(Yes / No)**

Totals: Yes _____ No _____

How many times did you choose yes as your response? The more yes responses, the more your workplace is characterized by ultracompetitiveness.

CONCLUSION

People's tendency to engage in social comparisons, organizations' use of forced-ranking evaluation systems, the psychological threat caused by ascending rivals, and the tendency to view organizational life as a fierce and endless tournament produce manifold measurable harms. Thus, the ultracompetitiveness that characterizes broken hierarchies includes multiple elements. The structural (the systems we use to allocate recognition and resources), social (distrust, fractured relationships), cognitive (social comparisons, tournament view), emotional (feelings of threat, envy, discontent), and behavioral elements (inflated contributions, strategic sabotage) reinforce each other in creating and sustaining the symptom of ultracompetitiveness.

Ultracompetitiveness is one of three interrelated symptoms that jointly produce the syndrome of the broken hierarchy. Some manifestations of ultracompetitiveness, such as feelings of threat, fractured relationships, and harmful behaviors, connect directly with the symptom of injustice, which is the focus of the next chapter. However, there are also notable differences between ultracompetitiveness and injustice. For example, ultracompetitiveness is often most salient in interactions with peers, whereas injustice often surfaces most prominently in interactions with managers and supervisors. The next chapter will provide you with the tools to diagnose injustice in broken organizational hierarchies.

3 / UNJUST

Broken hierarchies are unjust. To illustrate the many faces of injustice in these kinds of hierarchies, consider three short stories, about Denise, Alex, and Louisa.

Denise has been working as a nurse at Carefree Hospital for two years.[1] A few weeks after she started, a new morning ritual was born out of necessity—as a coping mechanism of sorts. Every day, she would park her car in the underground garage, turn off the ignition, close her eyes, and take three deep breaths. Surrounded by gray concrete walls, hundreds of empty cars, and the occasional coworker making their way to the nearby elevator, she would sigh heavily. She would then get out of the car, take her brown bag and heavy coat from the back seat, and slowly climb five floors to start another demanding shift. Mondays were particularly difficult for Denise. It seemed like every weekend was an opportunity for Kathy, her supervisor, to load up on negative energy that she would then unleash at her subordinates as the new week began.

Soon after the morning shift started at the Department of Internal Medicine at Carefree, Denise walked from one of the patient rooms toward the nurse station. She heard Kathy's voice skyrocket: "She did *what?*" Denise slowed down, hesitant to walk into a scene of public humiliation. "I'm done with her!" the supervisor shouted. "Where is she now?" The yelling continued from the direction of the nurse station. Kathy stormed out of the station in pursuit of Shanna, the new nurse who had refused to follow her instructions to move a dying patient from his room. As Kathy barreled down the hallway, she shouted at Denise, who passed next to her, "What are you looking at?" Denise quickly cleared a path for Kathy, who now

instructed another nurse to move the patient. A few minutes later, the patient passed away—in the elevator.

Denise was not sure what would happen to Shanna. In light of her experience, everything was on the table. Kathy's punishments could range from public scolding and verbal threats, to assigning Shanna the most undesirable shifts and grueling tasks, to outright termination. Kathy was not the only bully at Carefree. John, one of the physicians, was notorious for intimidating residents and medical students who asked what he deemed "unnecessary, dumbass questions." At six feet three, he would lean over a student, standing uncomfortably close, sneer, and ask in a poisonous tone in front of everyone, "Why would you ask me such a stupid question?"

John's toxic behavior extended beyond students. He was just as rude and demeaning when Denise called him one evening during his on-call shift to get orders for one of his patients. Over time, Denise, Shanna, and other nurses were forced to endure insults, with him calling them worthless, incompetent, or a dime a dozen. They also knew Kathy deliberately withheld information about patients from the nurses, setting them up to fail. These behaviors jeopardized patient care, instigated conflicts with patients' families, and made the nurses feel stressed, anxious, and depressed. When the daily doses of fear, anger, and confusion were too much to take, some nurses became ill and stayed home. One nurse, seven months pregnant, resigned after Kathy called her unprofessional and lazy and worsened her work conditions. Absenteeism and turnover became constant problems at Carefree, yet the hospital's human resources (HR) department seemed unable or unwilling to curb the bullying.

Injustice plagues a wide range of organizations, including ones that differ markedly from Carefree Hospital. Consider the setting of an elite ballet company, where recently, a guest choreographer named Patrick tapped Alex, a young dancer, to perform the lead role in his new ballet. According to Patrick, Alex's appearance and acting skills made him the perfect cast for the role of the ship's captain. As a low-ranking corps de ballet dancer, Alex was elated to receive this opportunity not only to dance the lead role but also to cocreate a role in his image—a role that future dancers would follow. Unfortunately, his excitement was short-lived.

The first signs of Patrick's tyrannical style in the studio were his comments to Alice, a seventeen-year-old dancer who had recently gained

some weight. Patrick announced unexpectedly, and in front of everyone, that he was giving Alice's part to someone else because she had gotten too fat. Then came the incident with Gabe, a young apprentice in the company. "Stop acting so girly," Patrick scolded him. "I need you to be a stallion, not a mare." Gabe, who already felt insecure about this aspect of his identity, stood frozen in shock. Geoff, the experienced ballet master, quickly intervened and called for a ten-minute break.

The only dancer Patrick did not bully was Marina, a well-known principal dancer he had cast as Alex's partner. Unfortunately for Alex, Marina brought with her additional challenges. While working with Alex on the pas de deux, Marina initially gave him the silent treatment and refused to look at him, even though they were dancing together. She later complained that Alex was doing the lifts all wrong and was hurting her by pushing too hard on her ribs. She berated him in front of other company members and said she felt wobbly and unsafe when he lifted her. "I can't believe I have to partner with you," she muttered at the end of a long and frustrating day in the studio. "Patrick clearly made a mistake choosing you." Marina made her discontent known in other ways, too. She gossiped about Alex with other dancers in the dressing room and shared her disregard for him with the artistic director. The mounting pressure and drama made Alex second-guess himself in the studio, leading him to make mistakes even in simple sequences. His missteps fueled Marina's fury and Patrick's discontent. After four weeks, during which he observed rude and abusive behavior toward others and was the victim of mean and passive-aggressive behavior, Alex asked the artistic director to be taken off the new ballet.

Far from the limelight of an elite ballet company, employees working in low-paying jobs in hospitality often encounter injustice. One of these employees, Louisa, is a Latina hotel housekeeper. She was born and raised in El Salvador and migrated to the United States as a young woman.[2] Her workday involves performing repetitive and physically demanding tasks, typically for long hours and under time pressure. Her supervisor often scolds her for being slow, but she knows she must be careful when engaging with chemical and biologically hazardous cleaning materials. Unlike her sister, who works as a schoolteacher, Louisa's English is very

limited. This language barrier led to some awkward moments when she entered the bedrooms and bathrooms of some hotel guests whose Spanish was equally limited.

Like some of her coworkers, Louisa lacks immigration documentation. She suspects that her supervisor is particularly harsh on her because of this status. She earns an hourly wage that's a few cents above the legal minimum, and she isn't paid for sick days or working overtime. To make sure Louisa does not reach a forty-hour workweek, her supervisor forces her to clock out while she is still working. Louisa learned that reaching the forty-hour mark would make her eligible for full-time status and the benefits that come with it. Her supervisor, it seems, wants to make sure this does not happen.

Even though Louisa works with toxic cleaning products, her hotel does not provide her with gloves and masks. She is forced to spend a portion of her low salary on supplies. Last week, she had to clean the guests' dirty bathrooms on her hands and knees because her mop handle broke, and her supervisor said it would be a while before she would buy new equipment. When Louisa complained, her supervisor ridiculed her accent and intonation, yelled at her, and threatened to fire her. After her complaint, the supervisor assigned her dirtier hotel rooms and more hotel rooms to clean. Louisa also got the worst vacuum cleaner and the most-worn-out washcloths. She is looking for a new job with the help of her sister, but until she finds one, she will likely continue to endure this mistreatment.

You may have felt anger, indignation, and moral outrage while reading about Denise's, Alex's, and Louisa's experiences at work. These intense negative emotions are common reactions to injustice. Encountering injustice in a broken hierarchy conflicts with our desire to live in a just world. A workplace where people can be mistreated or dismissed on the whims of power holders feels unjust and psychologically unsafe; it undermines employee motivation, performance, and well-being.

All hierarchies involve inequality. Therefore, inequality alone does not make a hierarchy broken. Broken hierarchies are unjust because they impose on people *experiences and outcomes they don't deserve*, and they use *illegitimate processes* to allocate or assign these experiences and outcomes to people. Denise, Alex, and Louisa are examples of employees who encountered experiences and outcomes they did not deserve:

intimidation and rudeness, relational aggression, and withholding of essential resources.

Some of the negative experiences and outcomes that employees face in broken hierarchies include demeaning treatment, verbal or physical abuse, unsafe jobs, and unwarranted layoffs. However, these hierarchies may also provide employees with positive experiences and outcomes they don't deserve, such as privileged working conditions, unmerited recognition, and unearned promotions given to relatives and friends. Thus, different forms of favoritism, such as nepotism and cronyism, can also be seen as violating common standards of justice.[3]

Employees working in broken hierarchies experience three primary forms of injustice. *Interactional injustice* captures multiple forms of interpersonal mistreatment, including demeaning and derogatory language, hostility, harassment, and bullying. It reflects unkindness, disregard for others' feelings and welfare, and a fundamental disrespect toward people. According to one Gallup survey of more than seventy-four thousand workers in 121 countries and territories, over 20 percent of workers—men and women—experience psychological, physical, or sexual harassment at work. This proportion translates into roughly 750 million workers who experience these forms of abuse throughout the world.[4]

Distributive injustice means that the allocation of favorable and unfavorable outcomes is unfair. For example, some employees are underpaid while others are overpaid, relative to what they ought to get, according to their work.

Procedural injustice means that an unfair process is used to allocate favorable and unfavorable experiences and outcomes. For example, a manager who is personally biased against employees with visible tattoos decides to only hire people without tattoos and denies promotions to existing employees who have them.[5]

Accurate estimates of the incidence of distributive and procedural injustice in organizations are hard to come by. Nonetheless, US data on employment discrimination charges shows that perceived workplace discrimination based on protected characteristics, such as gender, age, race, and disability, is widespread.[6] In 2024, more than eighty-eight thousand

new charges were submitted to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.[7]

Although well-functioning hierarchies allocate burdens and benefits unequally, they do so fairly, by using legitimate processes. Two coworkers may receive unequal pay, but this inequality results directly from their different contributions—in terms of the hours worked or the outcomes achieved (e.g., the number of garments sewed, packages delivered, or sales made). Linking inputs to outputs transparently and consistently across employees is typically seen as legitimate and just.[8]

Interactional, distributive, and procedural injustice coexist in broken hierarchies. Thus, employees in these dysfunctional systems often experience all three kinds of injustice, a situation that amplifies their distress and discontent. To examine the interdependence between these three forms of injustice in organizations, consider how young employees in finance must navigate their superiors' challenging demands.

Young employees in large investment banks sometimes face work demands that undermine their health and well-being. Some of these employees find themselves working grueling long hours to meet unreasonable demands from bosses and clients. They are expected to give up sleep, exercise, social life, and other activities as they work hundred-hour workweeks. Having to take work calls with customers in different time zones can mean working at 1 a.m. or 3 a.m. These overworked employees often report to highly demanding bosses who think it makes sense to expect their subordinates to pull all-nighters to crunch numbers, run models, or redo a presentation for big clients. These big clients, in turn, feel entitled to ask for anything and everything at any time. Although some employers instituted policies to reduce the incidence of employees who work to exhaustion, some bosses still expect employees to work more hours than they report. A *Wall Street Journal* story reported that, in some well-known banks, there are no formal limits on hours worked.[9]

The large paychecks that some of these jobs in finance offer are often referred to as "golden handcuffs." They curb employee autonomy and make it difficult for employees to voluntarily leave these positions. When almost everyone around you is subjected to the same unjust burden, it can feel normal to work yourself into exhaustion and poor health. Feeling that your

boss can almost single-handedly shape your career trajectory might lead you to follow their demands to work endless hours to make sure they are satisfied with your work.

As discussed, the ultracompetitiveness and injustice that characterize broken hierarchies tend to go together. Thus, overworked employees in large investment banks with broken hierarchies often have ultracompetitive coworkers who are willing to work longer and harder to outperform them or poach their accounts and clients. These experiences of ultracompetitiveness augment the feelings of stress and threat produced by injustice.

When unreasonable demands and workloads push employees beyond their limits, they often suffer from harmful work-family conflict, unhealthy levels of stress, and poor mental and physical health. All of these are negative experiences and outcomes they don't deserve. Taking a job does not mean that someone has willingly signed up for enduring stress, work-family conflict, or a heart attack. Unfortunately, many employees experience unreasonable demands and workloads, which have been linked to excessive illnesses and mortality in the United States.[10] Several studies suggest that organizational injustice, which is inherent in broken hierarchies, constitutes a public health hazard.[11]

THE BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD

Many of us wish to believe that we live in a just society and work for just organizations. Psychologists call this tendency the belief in a just world.[12] We hold on to this belief because it makes our lives seem more predictable, controllable, and meaningful. We have a psychological need to believe that people get what they deserve, because the alternative is deeply unsettling. The alternative means that innocent people sometimes end up in jail while the guilty walk free. If the world is unjust, then working hard and doing the right thing do not guarantee success and we cannot protect ourselves by making the right choices.

Even people who have encountered extreme injustices in their personal lives will sometimes hold on to their belief in a just world. Both of my grandmothers subscribed to this view. One of them had to depart Egypt with her family as a teenager, leaving everything behind. My other grandmother

survived genocide during World War II as a child in hiding, thanks to the bravery and humanity of Dutch farmers who saved her while most of her family was murdered. In both cases, my grandmothers encountered extreme injustices early in life because of their religion. Despite these early experiences, both of them chose to believe that the world is just.

Believing in a just world is closely related to the notion of reciprocity—a powerful norm that governs many of our social interactions. We expect others to treat us in kind: to reward our good behavior and punish our bad behavior. When others violate this norm, for example, by exploiting our trust and goodwill, we feel wronged. As employees, we carry this same expectation of reciprocity. We expect and sometimes demand to get what we deserve in light of our efforts and contributions at work.

Although positive illusions can benefit individual well-being, they can also produce costs.[13] The problem with believing in a just world is twofold. First, believing that people deserve the negative experiences and outcomes they receive can lead us to blame the victims of injustice, even when they are not at fault. Additionally, it can lead us to view people who benefit from injustice as deserving of their favorable experiences and outcomes. In doing so, we punish victims of injustice further and provide additional rewards to those who behave unjustly. Second, believing in a just world can make us overlook interactional, distributive, and procedural injustice in broken hierarchies. It makes us justify corrupt and dysfunctional systems. Hence, if we believe in a just world, we might be complicit in the perpetuation of injustice. As an alternative to believing that the system is just, we can work to ensure that it is just. Identifying broken hierarchies as unjust is a necessary first step in this journey.

RECOGNIZING INJUSTICE

We know injustice when we see or hear it. Unlike Denise, Alex, and Louisa, most of us don’t work as nurses in a hospital, dance in an elite ballet company, or clean hotel rooms for a living. Nevertheless, we immediately recognize the injustice in their stories. These examples illustrate an important characteristic of injustice in broken hierarchies: Injustice typically involves the abuse of formal or informal power; it punches down

the organizational hierarchy. Those with greater formal authority and power, such as supervisors and managers, belittle and demean those who occupy lower ranks in the organizational hierarchy (interactional injustice), deny them or take away resources they need and deserve, such as breaks and bonuses (distributive injustice), and make decisions arbitrarily or capriciously (procedural injustice). Whereas the ultracompetitiveness discussed in Chapter 2 typically entails punching sideways (i.e., at peers), injustice in broken hierarchies often comes from the top down. Unfortunately, that means that employees in such hierarchies receive punches from multiple directions.

Interpersonal mistreatment at work hurts victims and witnesses alike.[14] The rumination and mental preoccupation caused by close encounters with interactional injustice undermines our ability to do our jobs. Research with teams of physicians and nurses in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) shows that rudeness impacts their ability to identify life-threatening conditions and intervene effectively as a team to prevent the death of a preterm newborn. In the study, hired actors presented mild forms of rudeness, either as a comment from the newborn's mother or from a foreign visitor to the NICU. In both cases, exposure to mild rudeness early in a simulated intervention undermined the medical teams' collaboration and effectiveness.[15] Rudeness usually spreads within organizations and has lasting adverse effects on victims and observers.[16] The contagious nature of interactional injustice and the harms it inflicts on targeted victims and observers alike make it particularly detrimental.

EXPLAINING INJUSTICE

Why do we see so much injustice in organizations? When considering its origins in broken hierarchies, it's helpful to distinguish between explanations that focus on the traits and motivations of bad actors and those that focus on the harmful effects of bad situations. Importantly, person-based and context-based processes are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they often coexist and complement each other in fueling injustice in organizations.

Bad Actors

Psychologists have identified three characteristics jointly known as the dark triad of personality: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. People who score high on these traits tend to be disagreeable, emotionally cold, and socially malevolent. They engage in self-promotion, deceive others, and behave aggressively.[17] We're not talking here about people who are so exceptionally high on these characteristics that they merit clinical diagnoses of personality disorders. Rather, our focus is on employees in organizations, including bosses and supervisors, who show subclinical levels of these traits, which lead them to demean and mistreat others.

How can you tell if someone has these characteristics? Researchers have developed tools to measure these personality traits. Narcissists are likely to strongly agree with statements such as "I get bored hanging around with ordinary people" and "I know that I am special because everyone keeps telling me so." Machiavellians tend to strongly agree with statements such as "I am willing to be unethical if I believe it will help me succeed" and "Team members backstab each other all the time to get ahead." Psychopaths often strongly agree with statements such as "Payback needs to be quick and nasty" and "People who mess with me always regret it."

Power holders with these characteristics are much more likely to act on selfish goals and harmful intentions than are less powerful employees, for two complementary reasons. First, power liberates its holders to act on their desires.[18] It fuels a psychological inclination to approach, act on, and pursue one's own goals.[19] Hence, when power holders have high levels of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, they are much more likely to manipulate, demean, and otherwise mistreat others. Second, power reduces accountability. Those in power often face fewer sanctions and negative consequences for their actions. The lower risk of retribution means that narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths with power are more likely than those without power to harm others.

To what extent do the personal traits of supervisors and managers shape the daily experiences and actions of employees? To answer this question, let's review evidence from studies of CEOs and school principals. In the first study, CEOs of publicly traded companies completed surveys assessing their personal value priorities. CEOs with stronger benevolence values—

those who prioritized care and concern for others as a guiding principle in their lives—presided over organizations with more supportive cultures. In these cultures, people experience warmth, friendliness, and helpfulness and exhibit more employee satisfaction.[20] Importantly, these findings are correlational rather than causal; hence, this association might plausibly emerge because organizations with more supportive cultures appoint more benevolent CEOs.

In another study, the researchers surveyed school principals, teachers, and children twice over a two-year period to examine how principals' values influence those of children. Principals who prioritized benevolence (care and concern for others) and universalism (fairness and justice for all) created more supportive school climates. These supportive climates, in turn, promoted values of benevolence and universalism among children and encouraged more supportive in-class behaviors, as reported by the children's teachers.[21]

Similar to the findings of the CEO study, principals who endorsed values consistent with care, kindness, and justice positively influenced the culture of their organization toward greater social support. Unlike the CEO study, the findings concerning school principals' impact come closer to establishing the causal influence of leaders' values on the organizational environment and their followers. That's because principals' values predicted the *change* in students' values over a two-year period. Over time, children's values became more similar to those reported by their principals two years earlier. Hence, these findings show that the personal characteristics of people at the top of an organizational hierarchy can potentially shape organizational climates and, through them, members' experiences of justice or injustice.

You may wonder whether people who possess dark triad traits are more likely to become bosses and supervisors than those who are kind, agreeable, and helpful. It's a great question, to which researchers have offered mixed answers. Some researchers concluded that "nice guys and gals finish first," in light of findings that generosity can help people gain status in the eyes of others.[22] In contrast, other researchers concluded that "nice guys and gals finish last," finding that agreeableness is linked to lower income, financial

hardship, and a lower likelihood of emerging as a leader, especially among men.[23]

The reality is that people gain status and power through multiple paths. Some of these paths enable people who behave unjustly to reach and maintain managerial positions. But other paths propel people who act justly to secure positions of influence. Broken hierarchies are characterized by injustice in part because they enable employees who demean, mistreat, and harm others to get ahead. Well-functioning hierarchies, on the other hand, foster justice in part because they promote employees who respect, support, and care for others.

Some people seek to control resources and other people for their own selfish purposes. They engage in political behavior to accumulate power and embrace dominant, aggressive behavior to instill fear in others and coerce them into deference. Consistent with the dark triad traits discussed earlier, people who rely on dominance to gain and maintain power and status tend to manipulate others, form alliances with powerful people, and mistreat those with less power. They make threats, isolate people, cut off people's communication lines with others, and undermine people's relationships with others to stay in control.[24] Consistent with their pursuit of control, supervisors who rely on dominance refrain from teaching their subordinates how to solve problems independently, because such autonomy-enhancing help is seen as empowering their subordinates. Instead, they take over tasks and solve subordinates' problems in ways that enhance and maintain their subordinates' dependence on them.[25]

Dominance is not the only way to gain power and status. Some people invest their time and effort in supporting the well-being of others or contributing to collective success. People who take this more communal approach show generosity, helpfulness, and fairness to others, and these actions earn them a positive reputation that elevates their status in the eyes of others. Another pathway to the top that's consistent with the communal approach entails demonstrating competency, mastery, and expertise and using your talents, knowledge, and skills to benefit others and your team as a whole. People who use this strategy garner respect from others because they add value to their teams and organizations. Researchers use the term *prestige* to refer to this communal approach, which relies on virtue and

competency, to gain and maintain status and power. If your boss tries to control others, makes others fearful, and is willing to use aggressive tactics to get their way, they are likely a dominance-oriented boss. In contrast, if your boss is commonly recognized as an expert, is sought after for advice, and is respected by their subordinates for their helpfulness and generosity, they are likely a prestige-oriented boss.[26]

Considerable research has contrasted the dominance and prestige approaches. For example, a series of studies shows that when dominant leaders break the rules, they tend to be punished more severely than when prestige-oriented leaders do so. Specifically, referees in the National Hockey League in the United States give longer punishments (minutes in the penalty box) to dominant than to nondominant players for the same infractions. Likewise, research participants perceived the same transgression (e.g., tax fraud) as more intentional, immoral, and unethical when it was committed by a CEO described as dominance-oriented rather than prestige-oriented.[27]

Other research draws a direct line from the ultracompetitiveness described in Chapter 2 to the dominance-based approach to navigating hierarchies. For example, take people with a zero-sum mindset. These individuals believe that others must fail for them to succeed and that any gain for themselves necessarily means a loss for others. Employees with a zero-sum mindset are more likely to rely on interpersonal dominance to ascend in organizational hierarchies.[28] Further, dominant leaders tend to instill in their employees a zero-sum mindset, which in turn reduces the employees' willingness to help others.[29] Whereas benevolence-oriented and universalism-oriented CEOs and school principals promote social support in their organizations, dominant leaders promote cutthroat competition.

Bad Situations

Personality psychologists focus on people's characteristics to explain various forms of injustice in organizations. Complementing this perspective, social psychologists study how various situations shape people's behavior, arguing that even good people can act harmfully when

placed in bad situations. The social psychological perspective suggests that interactional injustice in broken hierarchies may be caused not only by bad actors but also by bad situations. These two explanations for injustice in organizations have distinct implications. If interactional injustice is solely caused by bad actors, then changing the types of people we recruit and retain would solve the problem. However, if injustice is also caused by features of the system in which people work, then we should also fix the system to mitigate injustice in organizations.

Many organizational roles involve different levels of power (control over valuable resources) and status (respect and admiration in the eyes of others). For example, a reimbursement clerk, a parking enforcement officer, and a club bouncer all have high situational power, yet people seldom show appreciation for their roles or confer status on them. How much a particular role is imbued with power and status has important consequences for injustice in organizations.

Some years ago, my wife and I traveled with our young children from California to Canada for a visa renewal appointment in the US Consulate. We scheduled the appointment well in advance and arrived on time, as planned. As we walked up the staircase, a security guard standing at the top stared down at us. When we reached him, he told all five of us to go back down the stairs and then walk up again "nicely." We were unsure of what we had done wrong, but it was clear he would not let us through unless we did as he said. So, we walked down the stairs, turned around, and walked up the stairs again. The security guard decided that my wife, our three young children, and I had walked up the stairs to his liking this time, and he let us into the consulate.

This was not the only time we encountered this kind of behavior. On another occasion, we were returning to the United States from a trip to Mexico. An airport immigration officer, while holding our foreign passports in his hands, told us that he hated foreigners. He added that he intended to transfer to a US location with fewer immigrants. How would you feel if you were in my shoes—standing there with your spouse and young children, being told by someone in a position of authority that they hate people like you? You may be familiar with the saying "People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel." That observation resonates with me. I have not forgotten

how that security guard and that immigration officer made me feel. These were not major life events by any means, yet they stayed with me to this day.

Why did these people act the way that they did? They knew they had power over me and my family in those moments. They controlled a resource we needed—access to the consulate or reentry into the country—and they chose to use their authority in a way that made me feel terrible. Was this behavior the result of their personality? I don't think that's necessarily the case. Another explanation lies in the organizational hierarchies in which these employees work.

These negative experiences illustrate what my colleagues and I termed the *power-without-status effect*. This effect happens when an organizational role gives its holder considerable control but earns them little respect, recognition, or appreciation from others. When an employee works in a role in which they feel that others don't appreciate their efforts and contributions, they naturally experience negative feelings. Their situational power allows them to act on these feelings toward those with less power or status than they have. Thus, the combination of negative feelings—produced by others' general lack of appreciation for their role—and being in a position to control others' experiences and outcomes gives rise to demeaning behavior.

My colleagues and I found evidence for the power-without-status effect in the lab and in the field. In our lab study, we manipulated participants' status by randomly assigning them to a more prestigious *idea producer* role, which involved coming up with ideas, or a less prestigious *worker* role, which involved checking typos. We manipulated power, keeping it independent of status by randomly giving some participants the power to decide which tasks their partner in the experiment would need to complete to qualify for a $50 drawing. Participants randomly assigned to have high power could choose for their partner less demeaning tasks, such as "write a short essay," "tell the experimenter a funny joke," and "clap your hands," or more demeaning tasks such as "say 'I am filthy,'" "say 'I am not worthy,'" and "bark like a dog." Participants in roles characterized by high power and low status were more likely than participants in other roles to choose demeaning tasks for their partners in the experiment. We know that a bad situation caused this behavior rather than the personality traits or values of

the participants, because we randomly assigned participants to roles with different characteristics. This study showed that putting undergraduate students in roles that combined high power with low status made them more demeaning toward others.[30]

Our field studies also showed that roles with high power and low status tend to lead to the mistreatment of others, which in turn contributes to harmful interpersonal conflict in organizations. For example, we found that powerful managers in the federal government who had lost status over the preceding year experienced more interpersonal conflict with coworkers than those who had gained status. Our research on the power-without-status effect identified organizational roles that combine high power with low status as a particularly toxic compound that fuels interactional injustice in organizations.[31] Further research extended these findings to other behaviors and outcomes by showing that a misalignment of power and status increases people's tendency to withhold information from teammates, thereby undermining team performance. In other words, when team members with the most power were the least respected, a competitive climate emerged where teammates hid knowledge from each other in ways that harmed team performance.[32] Importantly, these findings show that such behaviors are not produced by the traits and values of the specific people who occupy these roles. Rather, they emerge from the structural features of the roles people occupy.

Organizations that have many roles characterized by high power and low status may experience more interactional injustice than do other organizations. Over the years, I encountered many leaders, consultants, and others who wholeheartedly believe in empowerment as a panacea. Giving employees more control over resources, they reasoned, can solve many organizational problems. However, power without status, it seems, does more harm than good. Broken hierarchies need greater respect, recognition, and appreciation for the contributions of employees who feel disrespected and undervalued.

Interactional injustice in broken hierarchies stems from a combination of bad actors and bad situations. People with high levels of dark triad traits and those who attain or maintain influence through dominance contribute to the injustice that characterizes broken hierarchies. In contrast, people who

prioritize benevolence and universalism and seek to influence others through prestige contribute to the justice that characterizes well-functioning hierarchies. We could try to recruit and retain benevolent and prestige-oriented employees and managers rather than Machiavellian and dominant ones, but we should also be mindful of structural factors that shape injustice in organizations. When power holders' egos are threatened, they often lash out. Their hurt feelings, in combination with their high power, push them to demean and abuse others.[33]

Injustice in broken organizational hierarchies often mirrors injustice in societal hierarchies. Stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination based on demographic characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, or country of origin often permeate organizational boundaries and shape interactions between managers and employees. Although societal bias based on group identities is beyond the scope of this book, we should acknowledge the links between societal injustice and organizational injustice.

DIAGNOSING INJUSTICE

Researchers who study organizational injustice created self-report measures that they administer to employees to assess their experiences with injustice. Take the short quiz "Is My Workplace Unjust?" below to assess your own exposure to justice or injustice in the workplace. Questions 1–4 capture experiences with abusive supervision, questions 5–8 address interactional justice, questions 9–12 capture distributive justice, and questions 13–16 reflect procedural justice.[34] Researchers typically assess how much employees experience each manifestation of justice or injustice using continuous scales (e.g., assessing how frequently they encounter injustice). For simplicity, answer each question with a yes or no.

POP QUIZ

IS MY WORKPLACE UNJUST?

MY BOSS…

1. Ridicules me **(Yes / No)**
2. Invades my privacy **(Yes / No)**
3. Puts me down in front of others **(Yes / No)**
4. Reminds me of my past mistakes and failures **(Yes / No)**
5. Considers my viewpoint **(Yes / No)**
6. Treats me with respect and dignity **(Yes / No)**
7. Treats me with kindness and consideration **(Yes / No)**
8. Shows concern for my rights as an employee **(Yes / No)**

MY OUTCOMES…

9. Reflect the effort I put into my work **(Yes / No)**
10. Are appropriate for the work I have completed **(Yes / No)**
11. Reflect what I have contributed to the organization **(Yes / No)**
12. Are justified, given my performance **(Yes / No)**

WHEN DETERMINING OUTCOMES, MY ORGANIZATION…

13. Applies the same procedures consistently **(Yes / No)**
14. Uses procedures that are free of bias **(Yes / No)**
15. Employs procedures that uphold ethical and moral standards **(Yes / No)**
16. Uses procedures that enable me to express my views and feelings **(Yes / No)**

Totals: Yes _____ No _____

If you responded yes to items 1–4 and no to items 5–16, then you are experiencing particularly high levels of injustice at work.

CONCLUSION

Broken hierarchies are characterized by interactional, distributive, and procedural injustice. Employees in these systems are exposed to interpersonal mistreatment, poor working conditions, and arbitrary decisions they don't deserve. Injustice in these hierarchies also involves unfair allocation of positive outcomes, such as when favoritism, nepotism, and cronyism lead power holders to reward relatives, friends, and others with higher wages, easier workloads, and favorable working conditions.

Similar to ultracompetitiveness, injustice in broken hierarchies harms the personal welfare of employees and undermines their collective success. Both symptoms fuel instability, the third symptom of broken hierarchies and the topic of the next chapter. When peers compete ceaselessly and undercut each other's efforts, and when supervisors mistreat subordinates, withhold resources, and make arbitrary decisions, the result is an unstable, unpredictable, and unsafe workplace. The next chapter will give you tools to diagnose instability in broken organizational hierarchies.

4 / UNSTABLE

Carlos Ghosn was the CEO of Nissan between 2001 and 2017. When Renault named him president and CEO in 2005, he became the first person to serve as the CEO of two global Fortune 500 companies simultaneously.[1] His arrest for financial crimes in 2018 was a critical moment in a series of unprecedented events in the company's history.[2] Carlos's daring escape inside a luggage box loaded onto a private jet surprised many and led to "management overhaul, turmoil, chaos, and infighting within Nissan."[3] Several years have passed since Ghosn's arrest in Tokyo, and the executive vehemently denies wrongdoing. In the years that followed, Nissan continued to face multiple challenges, with more than eight hundred thousand vehicles recalled, high restructuring costs, and the collapse of merger negotiations with Honda.[4]

As the story of Ghosn's rise and fall illustrates, the dramatic elements in life come from instability. Popular TV shows like *House of Cards*, *Succession*, *Scandal*, and *Game of Thrones* cater to audiences' fascination with power struggles at the top and the chaos they produce. Instability grabs our attention and rouses our emotions. It adds uncertainty, excitement, and anxiety to our lives. Every week, news headlines tell stories of the rise and fall of politicians, athletes, movie stars, musicians, businesspeople, and organizations. Stability stays on the cutting room floor while instability makes headlines. People tune in and consume these news stories precisely because they find plots of protagonists' rise and fall intriguing and worthwhile. The so-called American dream itself is a narrative built on the unlikely rise of a protagonist from humble beginnings to the pinnacles of a stratified society. US President Donald Trump was elected twice with a

campaign slogan that encapsulated a narrative of decline and resurgence in just four words: “Make America Great Again.”

We pay particular attention to instability because our perceptual system is built to notice changes in our environment, such as changes in the brightness of light or the volume of music in our surroundings. The same sensitivity also shapes our decisions: Investors often base decisions on their recent gains or losses rather than on their absolute cumulative wealth. As discussed in Chapter 2, many people consume ranking lists of the best schools, workplaces, sports teams, songs, books, and movies. They do this not just because the lists are useful but also because these lists change. If these top-ten lists never changed, no one would give them a second look. Change is what makes a ranking list interesting. It’s also what makes instability so impactful.

The uncertainty that instability produces can intensify emotions and fuel interest and engagement.[5] Sports fans around the world follow live broadcasts of games and matches in part because there is a chance that the underdog will win. The biggest stories during every March Madness—the single-elimination college basketball tournament—are the Cinderella stories of little-known teams that unexpectedly knock out top-seeded rivals. It’s all about the rise and fall.

Notably, when teams fall to their competition, head coaches often lose their jobs. Data spanning thirty years shows that two of the major sports leagues in the United States have remarkably high annual turnover rates among head coaches. On average, 30 percent of the head coaches in the NBA and 21 percent of the head coaches in the National Football League leave their jobs every year. Remarkably, this instability in the team’s leadership, which often pertains to general managers in addition to head coaches, does more harm than good. It undermines trust, reduces a team’s ability to attract talented staff and players, and burdens teams financially when they must pay the full contracts of dismissed staff members. Frequently, the churn of personnel continues for a sustained period, creating a culture of instability.[6] Studies have shown that high rates of turnover hurt multiple aspects of organizational performance, even when the exits are voluntary.[7]

The uncertainty that hierarchical decline and recurring personnel

changes produce may remind some Bob Dylan fans of the lyrics to one of his best-known songs, "Like a Rolling Stone."[8] The song aptly describes the experience of falling from grace, with the chorus asking repeatedly, "How does it feel?" Instability in broken hierarchies feels like an amalgam of uncertainty, fear, confusion, jitters, insecurity, alertness, and vigilance.

Ultracompetitiveness and injustice can lead to instability in teams and organizations. As described in Chapters 2 and 3, employees who lose their leadership bids in intra-organizational competitions often leave the organization. Similarly, employees who experience interactional, distributive, and procedural injustice often react by voluntarily leaving the organization. Thus, both ultracompetitiveness and injustice can fuel instability.

Earlier, I used the metaphor of receiving punches from peers (ultracompetitiveness) and bosses (injustice) to capture employees' feelings of being attacked from all directions in a broken hierarchy. The instability of broken hierarchies means that employees feel attacked from all directions while the ground beneath their feet is shaking. People around them are leaving, and their own jobs are at risk.

Importantly, instability typically persists after personnel departures, reinforcing internal conflicts, feelings of threat, and even paranoia. These feelings arise because almost anyone in an unstable hierarchy can lose their power and status and must therefore be vigilant and constantly prepared to defend their position. Rather than providing people with a stable sense of social worth, broken hierarchies continuously emphasize that people may lose standing in the eyes of others, thereby fueling feelings of threat and stress.

The stress, uncertainty, and threat that we experience as employees of an unstable hierarchy also stem from a lack of psychological safety.[9] When a workplace feels unstable, we suspect that others may hold our mistakes against us, deliberately try to undermine us, and fail to help or support us. This lack of psychological safety not only damages our social relations and well-being but also makes us less likely to take risks, innovate, or report issues and problems within the organization. Put differently, unstable hierarchies suppress the voices necessary for reflection, learning, and

improvement. Thus, these systems are broken in ways that hurt employees, their teams, and organizations more broadly.

INSTABILITY AND PARANOIA UP AND DOWN THE HIERARCHY

Paranoia is a state of mind characterized by extreme suspicion, perceived enemyship, and conspiracy beliefs where people perceive themselves as the targets of persecution. Paranoid leaders distrust those around them and fear that others are plotting against them. Consequently, they feel constantly threatened, are hypervigilant, and engage in negative rumination, continuously searching for information to confirm their suspicions.[10]

Paranoia has been a powerful force in the lives of many leaders. Hollywood studio president Dawn Steel recalled in her memoir how her enemies plotted against her.[11] During the Vietnam War, US President Lyndon Johnson became convinced that his advisers, the media, and his political rivals were conspiring with the communists against him. Other leaders, including Apple CEO Steve Jobs and US President Franklin Roosevelt, utilized paranoia as a strategy. Roosevelt noted that "if a leader doesn't have enemies, he had better create them" to rally support from followers.[12] This idea is based on the so-called rally 'round the flag effect, whereby perceptions of external threats fuel anxiety and anger, thereby increasing followers' support of leaders during wartime.[13] Former Intel CEO Andy Grove, whose memoir recounts his early experiences under Hungarian fascist dictatorship, Nazi occupation, and oppressive communist rule, believed that "the prime responsibility of a manager is to guard constantly against other people's attacks."[14] Hence, leaders are not merely passive victims of paranoia. Rather, they often seek to harness it in their efforts to solidify control. Whether paranoia emerges naturally or is deliberately spread, its impacts trickle down to shape the experiences of followers.

You may be familiar with the saying that paranoid people can have real enemies, which is often attributed to Henry Kissinger, the influential former US secretary of state, among other sources. Psychologically, it matters little

whether Steel and Johnson had few or many enemies. What matters is that their experiences of paranoia colored their thoughts, feelings, and actions as leaders. Paranoia can be constructive, such as when it fosters vigilance, strategic awareness, and adaptation. However, it can also be destructive, eroding trust, triggering witch hunts, and destabilizing organizations. Destructive paranoia can fuel harmful instability in broken hierarchies.

Paranoia is not confined to those at the top. It can also be found in the middle and at the bottom of unstable, broken hierarchies. Employees with little power are more dependent on, and vulnerable to, the actions of their managers and leaders. Therefore, they usually pay close attention to every action and inaction by those who have power and influence over them (e.g., "my boss frowned when I spoke up in the meeting," "my supervisor hasn't responded to my email"). Many years ago, when my friend and I were graduate students, we walked on campus and crossed paths with a senior faculty member in our department. My friend greeted them by asking, "How are you?" The response from the faculty member was an angry "What do you care?," which she uttered without slowing down as she passed us. My friend immediately assumed she had done something to upset this faculty member. She was understandably worried about the potential ramifications of this unpleasant encounter. Worrying about what antagonistic or merely ambiguous behaviors by power holders may mean can cause lower-ranking employees to ruminate, worry, and search for additional information to make sense of their experiences. Unfortunately, because our information-seeking processes are generally biased toward confirming our suspicions, this mental search process often reinforces our fears and concerns.

The paranoia that characterizes unstable, broken hierarchies typically falls short of clinical levels of psychological dysfunction. Nonetheless, it's easy to see how even subclinical levels of paranoia can contribute to instability in broken hierarchies. People at the top invest time and effort in identifying potential enemies. People at the bottom monitor power holders in search of cues about what is about to come. Employees up and down the hierarchy come up with conspiracy theories as they strive to make sense of unexpected setbacks and struggles.[15] These conspiracy theories fuel further suspicion and create a sense of threat, accompanied by high levels of stress

that trigger fight-or-flight reactions. Those at or near the top of such unstable hierarchies may choose to use their resources and influence to fight for their positions. At the same time, those at or near the bottom may choose flight as a solution to instability and may leave for another organization. Paranoia as a reaction to instability, therefore, breeds more instability by fueling power struggles and turnover.

INSTABILITY IN TEAMS

As an avid sports fan, I've long been fascinated by the way professional sports teams trade players. As a professional athlete, you can wake up one morning in Philadelphia and learn on social media that you've been traded unknowingly to Minnesota. Or you may be on your honeymoon in Ibiza, Spain, and discover that your employer in Memphis made a deal that transferred you to Sacramento, California. Players have discovered they were traded through conversations with fans and reporters while getting a haircut or when changing in the locker room. The official NBA website recognizes how destabilizing this experience may be for players: "Many players struggle with the news itself when it comes to being traded, especially for the first time. It's an utter shock. And when the public finds out before they do, without any warning to soften the blow, it only makes the experience tougher."[16]

Imagine the uncertainty, uncontrollability, and instability that you would experience if your employer could cut a deal with another employer for your services. Imagine uprooting your life, relocating your family, and starting to work for another organization *tomorrow*. You would have new colleagues and managers and need to learn the norms and culture of a new organization. You would probably ruminate about what led to this trade and invest time and effort trying to get information about the behind-the-scenes moves that led your organization to send you over to another organization. You may wonder who knew about this surprise move and how long they kept the information secret. You may have concerns about the consequences for your family and be worried about your reputation as a professional, including your image in the eyes of your new colleagues. In professional basketball, only a handful of NBA players have been able to negotiate no-

trade clauses in their contracts, a privilege reserved for some of the most accomplished superstars in the game, like LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, and Tim Duncan.

Though professional sports may be unique in some ways, short-term contracts exist in many fields. The ballet dancers my colleagues and I interviewed for this book described the instability and uncertainty that come with their annual contracts. The discovery that their contract won't be renewed for next year or that some friends and colleagues won't be returning creates considerable stress.

Annual contracts are not the only source of instability in elite ballet companies. Injuries are a major source of status shocks in this setting, shaping the relative standing of injured dancers and their replacements in the organization's hierarchy. Additionally, dancers noted that they may get more opportunities to dance when they are the artistic director's "flavor of the month" but then receive fewer leading roles or chances to dance once the director's taste has changed. These arbitrary changes of taste and their impact on the allocation of roles and opportunities to dance undermine feelings of justice within the ballet company, illustrating that in broken hierarchies, injustice and instability tend to be interwoven. Guest choreographers who visit the company may further disrupt the hierarchy, reshuffling casting decisions in ways that upend expectations. They may choose a young and inexperienced corps de ballet dancer for a lead role and have them perform on opening night, prioritizing them over more senior soloists and principal dancers.

Beyond casting uncertainty, other processes contribute to feelings of unpredictability in professional ballet, including the release of the weekly schedule of rehearsals only a day or two before the week begins. This practice makes it difficult for dancers to plan far ahead, integrate their professional and personal lives, or make other commitments outside of work.

UNDERDOGS AND FAVORITES

In any industry, at any given moment in time, we can identify organizations whose members know that they are the underdogs and those whose members know they are the favorites. For example, when Under Armour

was founded, the company was the clear underdog competing against sports apparel giants like Nike and Adidas. When Southwest Airlines was founded, the carrier was a clear underdog competing against United Airlines and other industry giants. A company's underdog position is not just an internal understanding in the firm. Rather, it is often articulated explicitly by leaders. For example, in 1994, Herb Kelleher, cofounder and CEO of Southwest Airlines, recorded a video message for employees about the competition with United Airlines: "United Airlines has approximately 600 airplanes with more on order. United has another 100 United Shuttle 727 warplanes armed and waiting to fly missions against Southwest Airlines. United Airlines' gross revenues are approximately $14 billion per year, roughly seven times the gross revenues of Southwest Airlines. United Airlines has on hand over $1 billion in cash. Obviously, it can fight a war against Southwest, for an unlimited period of time, if it chooses to do so. In terms of size alone, United is truly Goliath and Southwest is truly David."[17] We all remember who won that famous biblical battle.

The rise of underdogs and the fall of favorites produce instability that shapes competitive behavior. Because underdogs are less likely to win a given competition, they are fueled by a drive to defy expectations. Favorites, on the other hand, are more likely to win and must work to meet expectations and maintain their advantage. Studies have shown that when underdogs experience a string of successes, the inconsistency between their low rank and their winning streak creates uncertainty and excitement about their potential rise in the ranks. Thus, instability can be exciting and intoxicating for surging underdogs. In contrast, when favorites experience a string of failures, the inconsistency between their high rank and their failures creates uncertainty and anxiety about their potential decline in the ranks. Thus, instability can be worrisome and even alarming for slumping favorites.

Both underdogs' excitement and favorites' anxiety increase unethical competitive behavior. For example, researchers found that soccer players in England's Premier League receive more yellow cards for aggressive and unsportsmanlike behavior when they play for underdog teams on a winning streak or when they play for favorite teams on a losing streak.[18] Hence,

both sides of instability—the rise of underdogs and the fall of favorites—contribute to unethical behavior in organizations.

The same researchers found similar results in a very different arena. They studied a sample of public defenders who reflected on the practice of coaching a witness, a conduct violation according to the American Bar Association. Underdog litigators during a winning streak experienced more uncertainty and excitement that increased their willingness to coach witnesses. Similarly, favorite litigators during a losing streak experienced more uncertainty and anxiety that also increased their willingness to coach witnesses. Here too, instability and the emotions it evoked fueled ultracompetitive and unethical behaviors like those we encountered in Chapter 2. These findings, especially in the context of the justice system, link all three characteristics of broken hierarchies: ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability.

When employees, teams, and organizations face adverse conditions, ultracompetitiveness can make teammates turn on each other. Looking to make sense of a setback or a failure, employees may unfairly identify some teammates as scapegoats and attribute most or all the blame to them. The intense negative emotions arising from being wronged and unjustly blamed only add to the bad feelings caused by the external adversity the team faces. If some distraught employees choose to leave the team, a search for their replacements is likely to be triggered. This process further fuels ultracompetitiveness and instability: Old-timers may feel threatened by the influx of talented and ambitious newcomers, who in turn experience hostility and uncertainty as they join a team or an organization where employees are engaged in a never-ending tournament over their relative standing. And so, the vicious cycle continues, with instability fueling competition and competition fueling instability.[19]

INSTABILITY HARMS EMPLOYEES, TEAMS, AND ORGANIZATIONS

In animal species in which rank is unstable and subject to change, high-ranking members need to assert their dominance frequently. In species such as savanna baboons, rhesus monkeys, and squirrel monkeys, in which eye

contact from the alpha member of the troop is sufficient to create psychological intimidation, lower-ranking members tend to experience the highest levels of stress.[20] In contrast, the need of dominant dwarf mongooses, African wild dogs, and ring-tailed lemurs to defend their position through fighting produces high levels of stress among high-ranking members of these species. Thus, rank instability is a source of stress for both high- and low-ranking troop members in the animal kingdom.

Instability in human families has harmful consequences for its most vulnerable members. Stability and the certainty and predictability it brings are particularly important early in life. Children who grow up in environments marked by chaos often suffer the consequences. Instability of family structures has been linked to problems in children's socioemotional development and to subsequent delinquent behavior.[21] Similarly, a chaotic household characterized by unstable residences, frequent changes in caregivers, and a lack of predictable routines has been shown to harm the cognitive development of children.[22] Family instability undermines feelings of safety and predictability, thereby hurting those who are most vulnerable.

In organizational hierarchies, instability can mean power struggles at the top, frequent and unexpected personnel changes, unremitting suspicion and worry, and employment insecurity. These experiences commonly produce stress and exhaustion. A longitudinal study that spanned more than two years and included more than sixteen hundred employees in Germany found that job insecurity harmed employees' mental health.[23] Economic insecurity has been shown to increase physical pain in experiments, and household data in the United States shows that economic insecurity predicts consumption of over-the-counter painkillers.[24]

When employees experience uncertainty about their roles at work, they are significantly more likely to leave their jobs.[25] Although we all seek to manage uncertainty at some level, people differ in their needs for certainty and predictability. Thus, instability is particularly difficult for those who need a structured life, feel paralyzed by uncertainty, find it hard to make

decisions in ambiguous situations, and respond to unpredictability with stress and anxiety.[26]

Concerns about economic instability also undermine employees' creative output. Specifically, when the value of workers' homes declines, innovation among knowledge workers drops, as measured by the number of patents they produce.[27] Employment instability also affects employees beyond the workplace. For example, it can delay employees' transition to parenthood (i.e., choosing to have a first child) and reduce the likelihood that employees who are already parents will choose to have more children.[28] Thus, the uncertainty, stress, and anxiety that come from instability at work impact employees' well-being, creativity, and family lives.

The harmful effects of instability go beyond individual well-being and productivity and extend also to teamwork in organizations. Some teams are more competent than others: Their members work effectively on many tasks and perform well across all of them. This quality of teams is known as *collective intelligence*.[29] Stable hierarchies promote collective intelligence in teams by supporting patterns of communication, coordination, and cooperation—patterns that make teams smarter.[30] In one study, the researchers randomly assigned participants to teams with stable, unstable, or no hierarchy. In the stable hierarchy, team members chose a leader by ranking each other according to their preferences. They then learned that the leader would stay in this role throughout the experiment. In the unstable hierarchy, team members similarly chose a leader but were told that they would later vote again and could choose a different leader. Thus, in that group, both the leaders and followers experienced uncertainty about whether the initial leader would stay in this role or be replaced by another team member. In the team with no hierarchy, the members did not vote for a leader and the experimenter did not assign one.

Teams in the stable hierarchy showed more-collaborative patterns of communication, including conversational turn-taking, high-quality listening, and paying close attention to each other's cues. Thus, stability led to greater cooperation within the team. In contrast, teams with an unstable hierarchy or no hierarchy showed more-competitive patterns of

communication: The members talked over each other, were disruptive, and made aggressive interruptions that caused other team members to yield their speaking turn. When the researchers examined whether these patterns generalize across teams with different gender compositions, an interesting pattern surfaced. Collaborative patterns of communication made teams with majority women more collectively intelligent, whereas competitive interruptions made all-male teams more collectively intelligent. This research shows that stable hierarchies produce more-collaborative patterns of communication than do unstable hierarchies—regardless of teams' gender composition. It also explains why, and for whom, hierarchy instability undermines team performance.

Unstable teams and organizations sometimes hurt themselves by pushing away potential investors. Investors in early-stage start-ups pay particular attention to the team of cofounders.[31] Instability at the top can result in missed opportunities, as observed by Valerie Shen, formerly a partner and chief operating officer at G2 Venture Partners. In our interview with her, she noted, "If the team is unstable, we wouldn't invest unless we're investing specifically with the thesis that we're replacing the management team.… If we don't have a specific plan for how we would fix the management team and the management team is unstable, I would consider that a red flag." Hence, instability at the top of the hierarchy can harm executives' and employees' experiences not only in the present but also in the future—by deterring investors and potential partners.

Going beyond the experiences of individuals and teams, hierarchical instability also shapes organizational performance. Analyses of more than thirteen thousand CEO succession events over a forty-year period found that CEO turnover tends to hurt companies' short-term performance without improving long-term outcomes. Hiring an outsider as the successor CEO triggers more-substantial changes that hurt long-term performance, whereas promoting an internal successor is associated with less pronounced changes and greater long-term benefits. Additionally, hiring an outsider as the successor CEO increases competitive attacks from other firms.[32] Prominent examples of individuals who rose through the ranks within their firms to become CEOs include Doug McMillon at Walmart, Mary Barra at General Motors, Elliott Hill at Nike, and Sundar Pichai at Google.

Another study discovered that appointing an interim CEO in the transition period between two permanent CEOs prolongs the experiences of instability and uncertainty for stakeholders (e.g., investors, employees, and customers) and can diminish firm performance during the interim period. Notably, appointing the chair of the board as the interim CEO creates stability, reduces uncertainty, and enforces "appropriate behavior" among top executives during the transition period.[33]

Instability also shapes who ascends to leadership positions. Organizations facing a downturn in performance or uncertainty because of crises are more likely to appoint women to leadership positions than are stable organizations. These leadership positions, however, tend to be risky, precarious, and temporary. Women leaders typically get less latitude to turn things around and are more likely to be forced out and be replaced by men. This phenomenon, known as the *glass cliff*, shows how instability can be a double-edged sword for women and other minority leaders, especially in countries with high gender inequality.[34] Whereas the glass ceiling metaphor is commonly used to describe barriers to women's advancement in organizations, the glass cliff metaphor captures the temporariness of leadership positions held by women in unstable organizational hierarchies.

Consider another occupational minority group in the United States: Asian Americans. East Asians, more than South Asians, are often underrepresented in top leadership positions.[35] A study of nearly five thousand CEOs over five decades found that organizations are significantly more likely to appoint an Asian American CEO when they experience a decline than when they don't experience one. This tendency reflects, at least in part, the belief that Asian American leaders are likely to sacrifice their personal welfare to improve collective welfare and are thus better equipped to lead the organization during a downturn.[36] However, because organizations experience decline only a small fraction of the time (compared to longer periods of steady or improving performance), such leadership appointments remain rare and short-lived.

Finally, evidence from more than 140,000 participants across sixty-nine countries shows that economic decline fuels followers' support for dominant and authoritarian leaders.[37] This effect is driven by people's

desire to regain a sense of personal control. As you already know, dominant leaders tend to behave in ways that are ultracompetitive and unjust. So, by increasing support for dominant leaders, instability breeds ultracompetitiveness and injustice, which further fuel instability.

DIAGNOSING INSTABILITY

Having read this chapter, you can now evaluate the extent to which your workplace—or any other organization that you know well—is showing symptoms of instability. Take the quiz "Is My Workplace Unstable?" to diagnose this condition in your organization.

POP QUIZ

IS MY WORKPLACE UNSTABLE?

Think about the hierarchy in your team or organization. To figure out how unstable your hierarchy is, respond to the following fifteen yes-or-no questions.

IN MY ORGANIZATION…

1. People can be promoted, demoted, or fired very quickly **(Yes / No)**
2. Turnover is very high **(Yes / No)**
3. Supervisors are worried that their subordinates want their jobs **(Yes / No)**
4. Internal turmoil makes long-term planning difficult **(Yes / No)**
5. Team leaders and midlevel managers often get replaced **(Yes / No)**
6. There is an overall feeling of chaos and uncertainty **(Yes / No)**
7. It's difficult to predict leaders' actions **(Yes / No)**
8. Many people are stressed about their job security **(Yes / No)**

9. Resources are often shifted between projects, teams, or departments **(Yes / No)**
10. People's status depends on their recent successes or failures **(Yes / No)**
11. Leaders frequently make surprising decisions **(Yes / No)**
12. Many people are temporary employees or have short-term contracts **(Yes / No)**
13. People feel they can't speak up, because they are on shaky ground **(Yes / No)**
14. Things change very quickly **(Yes / No)**
15. People worry that others may take their jobs **(Yes / No)**

Totals: Yes _____ No _____

How many times did you respond with a yes? The more yes responses you indicated, the greater the instability of your organizational hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

Instability, the third symptom of broken hierarchies, has multifaceted and far-reaching consequences for employee cognition (e.g., paranoia, rumination), behavior (e.g., information seeking, turnover), and well-being (e.g., anxiety, stress). Its consequences are not limited to individuals in organizations. Rather, instability also undermines team functioning and diminishes organizational outcomes. Ultracompetitiveness (e.g., succession wars between peers) and injustice (e.g., abuse of power by leaders) increase instability. By increasing people's tendencies to support dominant leaders, instability reinforces injustice and ultracompetitiveness in broken hierarchies, because dominant leaders typically behave unjustly and promote zero-sum thinking in others. Taken together, the interwoven symptoms of ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability produce the syndrome of the broken hierarchy.

PART 2

TREATMENT

How to Fix a Broken Hierarchy

Part 1 of this book focused on diagnosis, giving you tools to identify the three symptoms of broken hierarchies. Diagnosis is merely the first step, though. Part 2 introduces three broad principles and concrete tools that will help you fix these systems. You already know which traps to avoid and *what not to do* from Part 1. Now, the remedies in Part 2 focus on *what you can do* to repair broken hierarchies.

Some of the remedies you'll encounter on these pages are equally applicable across different roles and ranks, whereas others may be particularly relevant to employees at the top, middle, or bottom of the hierarchy. By introducing multiple remedies, Part 2 enables you to choose those that are most applicable to your situation. By articulating the broad principles that inform these concrete remedies, Part 2 will also help you come up with additional remedies that are particularly relevant to the opportunities and challenges you face. Importantly, there is no one-to-one mapping between broken hierarchies' symptoms and the remedies I will discuss in Part 2. Rather, a particular remedy may address several symptoms, and different remedies may target the same symptom. Using multiple remedies simultaneously will help you make faster progress toward fixing a broken hierarchy.

5 /
COMMON VALUE

On a special evening in December 2023, David Hallberg appeared onstage at the Sydney Opera House. A former principal dancer with the American Ballet Theater and the Bolshoi Ballet, Hallberg wore a white shirt and a blue suit befitting his position as the artistic director of the Australian Ballet. An audience of fourteen hundred ballet enthusiasts directed their gaze at the blue-eyed executive. The dancers onstage had just finished performing *Swan Lake*, one of the most difficult classical ballets. They looked at their boss with anticipation. Hallberg waited for the audience to complete their applause for Marcus Morelli and Jill Ogai, who had danced the lead roles that evening.

Hallberg started speaking, his voice quiet and confident, with a hint of excitement: "There comes a time in a dancer's career where the recognition of hard work, artistic assurance and maturity, and technical brilliance is very hard to ignore. Tonight, it was very hard to ignore. That recognition can happen in many ways. But one way is in front of one thousand four hundred people at the Sydney Opera House. A dancer onstage this evening exemplified that artistic brilliance and that technical assurance and confidence. So, it's very hard to ignore." Marcus took deep breaths and swallowed hard, while Ogai's smile shifted into a focused expression.

Hallberg continued, turning to the crowd: "Please join me in welcoming and applauding the newest principal artist of the Australian Ballet, Marcus Morelli." Morelli closed his eyes as the company's musical director patted his shoulder. When her dance partner's name was announced, Ogai smiled wholeheartedly—with her lips and her eyes—and then covered her mouth with both hands. The crowd cheered and applauded, joined by the other dancers onstage. Morelli took a few steps forward. Teary-eyed, he lifted his

right hand to thank the excited audience that acknowledged how special this moment was for him. Morelli bowed and walked to Hallberg to give him a hug. Hallberg embraced Morelli with a big smile on his face. The dancer returned to center stage and bowed to the crowd one more time. As he received a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses, all the dancers onstage smiled and clapped with enthusiasm.

Hallberg continued his speech with the same quiet and confident voice. Hearing the next few words, Morelli nodded vigorously while a huge smile spread across Ogai's face. The artistic director said, "There's another dancer onstage this evening that exemplified such unbelievable artistic maturity and individuality, and technical confidence in front of you all. So please join me in welcoming and applauding the *now newest* principal artist of the Australian Ballet, Jill Ogai." Ogai put both of her palms on her chest in gratitude as Morelli cheered loudly. The other dancers and the audience applauded in celebration of her big moment. She bowed deeply to the audience and then hugged Hallberg, who waited patiently at the side of the stage. Ogai smiled and laughed with joy. She received her bouquet of long-stemmed red roses alongside Morelli, and the two of them jointly received another round of applause from the audience and their ballet company.[1]

This festive promotion ceremony exemplifies the CPR principles (common value, pluralism, and relatedness), which are at the heart of well-functioning hierarchies. In the Introduction, I suggested that adhering to these principles facilitates learning, performance, and well-being in organizations. The common value principle posits that a hierarchy should reflect commonly held values and promote collective welfare. The pluralism principle postulates that a hierarchy should enable multiple pathways to contribute, thrive, advance, and lead. Finally, the relatedness principle asserts that a hierarchy should strengthen connections between people.

Hallberg promoted justice by explaining publicly and compellingly the basis for promoting Morelli and Ogai. He repeated the phrase "very hard to ignore" three times, suggesting that recognition of Morelli's and Ogai's accomplishments felt only natural and even inevitable, given their demonstrated competency as artists. By providing a convincing justification, Hallberg framed the promotion as a just outcome that resulted

from a just process: They deserved to be promoted and celebrated. He helped everyone see this promotion as a legitimate decision. In doing so, he also reinforced the company's meritocratic norm that promotions at the Australian Ballet are based on talent, maturity, hard work, and other common values within the company and the community of patrons. Hallberg's commendation also sent a clear message to other members of the company that promotions are attainable if they meet these publicly established standards. Hence, the surprise promotion ceremony also served to motivate young and ambitious dancers by informing them that they can expect to be celebrated in the same way, once they have earned their promotions. This ceremony thus reinforced hierarchy's function as an incentive system. Linking positions, privileges, and responsibilities in the company to common values that are widely shared within the artistic community of ballet dancers, staff members, and patrons imbued the hierarchy of the ballet company with legitimacy.

This promotion ceremony emphasized that seniority and leadership can be shared and that multiple people can be promoted simultaneously rather than at each other's expense. By waiting in the wings, at the side of the stage rather than delivering his speech from its center, Hallberg gave Morelli and Ogai the spotlight. In doing so, he demonstrated his willingness to share leadership and to play a supporting role rather than make this event about him. His announcement also illustrated a pluralistic approach to leadership. When Hallberg said that "recognition can happen in many ways," he explicitly acknowledged that there were many ways to accomplish what he was about to do. By displaying humility and open-mindedness, Hallberg modeled pluralism to other members of the organization.

Finally, Hallberg promoted relatedness by orchestrating a promotion ceremony that brought people closer together rather than pulling them apart. Imagine that instead of this festive public event, Hallberg had called each of the promoted dancers to a private conversation in his office. Or that he would have sent them a letter notifying them of their new rank over the summer break. Pursuing these alternatives would have deprived Morelli and Ogai of a precious moment and could have produced unfounded rumors and counterproductive chatter about the criteria and processes that led to the promotion. Pursuing any of these alternatives would have been a missed

opportunity to strengthen ties within the community. The ceremony supported a sense of connectedness among company members and patrons alike. It was like a big bang that spread positive feelings throughout the Sydney Opera House. Years of dedication and effort, manifested in countless hours of arduous work at the studio, came to fruition in a wonderfully orchestrated, festive evening in Sydney.

As this example illustrates, a single leadership act can communicate and reinforce the core CPR principles of well-functioning hierarchies. These principles instill an organizational hierarchy with perceived justice, legitimacy, and social support. They are the antidotes that can help you repair a broken hierarchy characterized by ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability.

PRACTICING THE COMMON VALUE PRINCIPLE

One way to increase collective support and voluntary deference to your organizational hierarchy is to make sure it *reflects commonly held values* and *promotes collective welfare*. These two elements jointly constitute the common value principle. Commonly held values often manifest themselves in moral rules like "do no harm." Embracing such commonly held values and principles leads morally minded people to view the hierarchy as legitimate. A well-functioning hierarchy also needs to purposefully serve the people within it, for example, by adhering to ethical standards like the maximization of overall welfare. Both elements—which philosophers often label deontology and utilitarianism—are instrumental in instilling a system with perceived justice, a sense of legitimacy, and voluntary support from employees.

Align the Hierarchy with Shared Core Values

Everyone prefers respect, kindness, and fairness to disrespect, unkindness, and unfairness. Thus, to fix a broken hierarchy, we need to make sure the hierarchy encourages people to act on these widely held values, duties, and rules. Putting core values into practice not only promotes legitimacy but also helps organizational members answer important questions: Who are we? Why do we do the things that we do? What do we believe in? Addressing these questions makes work more meaningful and rallies people

around shared goals. Making sure that an organizational hierarchy is aligned with widely accepted responses to these questions helps promote justice and purpose.

Mary Barra, the CEO of General Motors, has worked for the company her whole life. She rose through the ranks within the firm and worked in different roles that gave her a chance to learn from various leaders before she became the chief executive. In a public conversation at Stanford University, she shared some of her beliefs about how to engage employees. She noted that winning people's hearts and minds starts with the belief that 99.999 percent of people come to work every day wanting to do a good job, be valued, and be a part of something important. When leaders show they care about employees and help them achieve these goals, employees tend to reciprocate by going the extra mile.[2] She also underscored the importance of consistency in treating people respectfully, noting that "every interaction matters." This approach to leadership stands in contrast to a saying attributed to various politicians: "If you've got them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow." When the CEO of a major corporation explicitly expresses respect, appreciation, and care—and calls on everyone in the organization to do the same—the message comes across loud and clear. It also gives various stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, suppliers, and the media, a clear basis for holding such a leader accountable to these values.

Like other impactful leaders, Barra focuses on the why: Why do employees come to work? Why is GM producing cars? Why do consumers purchase GM products? *Why* is a powerful question that, when asked consistently, points to core values and fundamental principles. An employee might respond to a question about why they come to work by citing the need to earn money for themselves and their family. If you continue asking why these goals are important to them, you will get to core values: sanctity of life, quality of life, and caring for others. Others might say that work makes their life purposeful and meaningful, connects them with other people and the community around them, helps them feel competent and valuable, or boosts their sense of pride and self-esteem. These various responses reflect the many fundamental needs and values that work can fulfill for employees.

The question *why* makes us think abstractly and see the big picture. Asking why we do the things we do helps create a compelling narrative that connects the organization's past to its present and future in a meaningful way. Common values are the threads that run through an organization's story, connecting nostalgia for the past with a vision for the future and thereby creating a sense of continuity and unified mission over time. Common values make work meaningful and help managers and employees make sense of their own and others' jobs. Hence, promoting common values in an organization by asking and answering why helps promote long-term thinking, which stabilizes hierarchy.

Developing a compelling narrative based on common values corresponds closely with forms of leadership that emphasize vision, stewardship, and legacy. Visionary leaders offer a compelling picture of the distant future of their group, organization, or nation. A classic example is Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. By articulating an abstract and timeless vision, such leaders inspire and rally others around common values and beliefs that provide a sense of direction for the future. In organizations, a compelling vision helps connect daily operations to a broader mission, thereby motivating employees to invest their time and effort toward the pursuit of an enduring collective goal. Stewardship involves promoting the long-term interests of a group, organization, or nation. It entails transcending local and shortsighted considerations to promote collective welfare over time. Leaders who act as stewards promote common values that are important to organizational members.

The collective pursuit of valued causes increases stability by pooling people's efforts in the same direction and pulling them away from internal power struggles. As a leader, when you commit to the long-term welfare of your organization, you create a buffer against short-term, opportunistic behavior by followers. Finally, leaders who care about legacy contribute to stability by aligning their actions with those of their predecessors and successors. Like vision and stewardship, legacy entails thinking beyond your own tenure. Leaders and employees who think about their legacy produce work that outlasts them as they seek to make an enduring impact. They select protégés, mentor them, and engage in succession planning before they step down. Thus, by creating narratives that are based on common values and that support vision, stewardship, and legacy, these

leaders reduce ultracompetitiveness, promote justice, and stabilize an organizational hierarchy.

Asking why is a simple practice that can help employees, leaders, and organizations implement the common value principle on their way to fixing a broken hierarchy. You can help redirect your organizational hierarchy by asking questions such as these: Why do we need a hierarchy? And why do we have the kind of hierarchy that is currently in place? Managers and employees may answer these questions by pointing to the instrumental benefits of hierarchies, including their ability to promote division of labor, coordinate expectations, and provide predictability. Such answers may point to gaps between the existing hierarchy and the one that organizational members need and want, thereby mobilizing efforts to fix the hierarchy. These abstract whys can pave the way to more concrete questions, such as these: What kind of hierarchy should we have? How should we change our hierarchy? Starting with why questions and continuing with what and how questions helps us see the big picture and focus on purpose and meaning before we dive into the specific mechanics of changing a given organizational hierarchy.[3] Integrating abstract and concrete thinking can promote organizational effectiveness and efficiency and help organizations achieve their strategic goals.[4]

We often pose why questions when people act in ways that violate rules and norms.[5] Hence, asking these questions when you see coworkers engage in specific behaviors can help fix a broken hierarchy by signaling to others that you see their actions as violating important duties and norms. For example, consider why questions related to observed injustice (e.g., Why didn't you help them? Why didn't you let them speak? Why didn't you respect their wishes?). Asking why can help you hold people accountable for actions that don't reflect the common values you aim to uphold in a well-functioning hierarchy.

When leaders imbue an organizational hierarchy with commonly held values, they do more than motivate their direct followers. They also inspire the next generation of leaders to follow in their footsteps. Professor Fatima Rodriguez, a physician and the vice chair of clinical research at the Department of Medicine at Stanford University, described a visionary leader she aimed to emulate in her role as the section chief of preventive

cardiology: “He was such a visionary leader.… You would just meet with him and [be] inspired to work hard because you’re doing it for the right reason and recognize your value even within the hierarchy.… It does not matter what your level is in the organization. Those are the best organizations, where everyone, from the janitor to the CEO, feels like they are contributing to the shared vision. In our case in healthcare, it is to provide world-class care to our patients.” Commonly held values—like helping patients in healthcare—are enduring and stable values that focus on the collective rather than the individual ambitions of specific individuals. Therefore, coalescing employees around such values helps promote justice and stabilize hierarchies. Thoughtful consideration of our answers to important why questions about the organizational hierarchy can help address ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability.

Ensure the Hierarchy Promotes Collective Welfare

Aligning an organizational hierarchy with shared core values promotes cooperation and imbues the hierarchy with legitimacy and stability, because people usually support systems that adhere to their moral principles. Moreover, by making sure that an organizational hierarchy also promotes collective welfare, leaders can further bolster a hierarchy’s legitimacy and popular support as people see that it serves their collective interests.

If you grew up in the United States, you may be familiar with President Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, delivered in 1863. It’s a relatively short speech—under three hundred words. Perhaps you even memorized it and recited it in class at some point. Let’s test your memory. How many times did Lincoln say “I” during that short speech? The answer is zero. Nor did Lincoln mention the words *me*, *myself*, *my*, or *mine*. How many times did Lincoln say “we”? The answer is ten! Fast-forward 137 years to the turn of the millennium. US President Barack Obama, then an Illinois state senator, ran against Bobby Rush in the 2000 US House primary in Illinois and lost by more than 30 percentage points. Reflecting on this painful defeat and the lesson he learned, Obama wrote in his memoir, *A Promised Land*, “I recognized that in running for Congress I’d been driven not by some selfless dream of changing the world, but rather by the need to justify

the choices I had already made, or to satisfy my ego, or to quell my envy of those who had achieved what I had not."[6]

Fixing a broken hierarchy requires redirecting it to promote collective welfare rather than just the self-interest of a few. Although people often behave selfishly, they readily recognize that promoting collective welfare is a more desirable standard of behavior. That's why people tend to support cooperative and fair rules when voting on binding rules that apply to their entire group. For example, people vote to prevent individuals from overharvesting common resources (e.g., overfishing the ocean).[7] The best leaders recognize that leadership is not about them but is instead about their responsibility for others' welfare. By voting for policies and leaders who promote collective welfare and serve the common good, we can help reorient hierarchies toward cooperation, justice, and stability.

Thinking about the common value principle in terms of collective welfare can help you make tough decisions in your organization. In polarized environments, where people subscribe to different and even opposite beliefs and worldviews, two core values can conflict. For example, achievement can conflict with benevolence.[8] In such situations, ask yourself and others around you which of these principles will promote collective welfare more or harm it less. This question will help you and your team decide which of the two values to enact in practice. Taking the option that benefits everyone the most can serve as a helpful decision aid or the necessary tiebreaker when two core values collide.

A well-known idiom, as well as the title of a classic paper in organizational behavior, is "The people make the place."[9] In accordance with this view, the leaders whom my colleagues and I interviewed for this book shared that attracting, selecting, socializing, and retaining employees who prioritize collective welfare over selfish goals helps them cultivate well-functioning hierarchies.

Professor Theodore Miclau, vice chair of the department of orthopedic surgery at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) and chief of orthopedic surgery at the Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital, shared with us that one of his goals as a leader is to unite others around a shared purpose that's larger than any one person. Everyone who joins the

team, and everyone who wishes to stay with the team for the long term, should buy into the team's shared purpose. They should recognize that trying to outperform or outrank their coworkers undermines the fabric of the team and consequently the effective pursuit of the team's shared purpose.

Professor Miclau, who manages multiple trauma practices throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, aims to hire and retain physicians who buy into this team-first view of medical hierarchy. When a team member argues that they ought to make more money than their peers, Miclau explains to them that they are only able to conduct well-paying procedures because other team members are willing to take care of patients with conditions and illnesses that don't pay as much yet still fall within the team's collective responsibility. Some surgeons, for example, help the team through their willingness and availability to take on tasks that others cannot do, thereby enabling other team members to do surgeries that they enjoy the most, or perform procedures that bring in more money.

Miclau further asks the team member if they are happy with the benefits they get from the team-first system. He suggests that leaving the practice is a legitimate choice if the collectively oriented system does not work for them. Most physicians choose to stay, though a few have chosen to leave. Both kinds of physicians, regardless of their ultimate choice to stay or leave, benefit from having an honest conversation about the common value principle. Those who stay effectively commit to the collaborative view of the hierarchy cultivated at UCSF. As this example shows, enacting the common value principle can help create a strong community where people value the distinct contributions of different team members. Thus, the CPR principles of common value, pluralism, and relatedness often go together, just as the three symptoms of broken hierarchies go together.

You can harness the processes of attraction, selection, socialization, and attrition to cultivate an organizational culture that protects and promotes collective welfare.[10] By crafting a vision, a mission, and an organizational identity that attract candidates with a team-first mentality, you can create a pipeline of newcomers who are motivated to invest time and effort in promoting your organization's collective welfare. You'll want to supplement the criteria that focus on skills and abilities with criteria that

emphasize organizational citizenship and community building. That way, you can help create a workforce that is committed to a team-first culture. Onboarding, training, and mentoring programs that highlight a team-first approach, and organizational rituals that celebrate it, will socialize newcomers to prioritize common goals. Finally, to reinforce a team-first organizational culture, leaders may need to dismiss employees who fail to contribute to collective welfare or who actively undermine it.

Such an organizational culture will help steer colleagues away from ceaseless, career-long promotion tournaments. This view is consistent with the experiences of a senior US government official interviewed for this book. She noted that although people appreciate being considered for high-ranking positions, it's quite uncommon to be actively jockeying for a top job in the federal government. Open competition is not the norm in this environment and is frowned on at the highest levels of government service. The interviewee noted that in such an environment, positioning or lobbying decision-makers in any way that's beyond subtle might be disadvantageous. Notably, high-ranking appointed government officials often work alongside lifelong politicians, who operate in an ultracompetitive political ecosystem. Unlike the appointed officials, politicians must engage in competitions repeatedly as they seek to be elected to office. The coexistence of these two contrasting hierarchies side by side—a hierarchy that discourages fierce and explicit competition and another that emphasizes it—shows that it's possible to foster a less competitive environment even when it exists alongside an ultracompetitive hierarchy.

USING THE COMMON VALUE PRINCIPLE TO EVALUATE MERITOCRACIES AND VIRTUOCRACIES

Using the two complementary elements of the common value principle—adhering to commonly held values and adding value for the collective—we can now evaluate the extent to which two established bases of hierarchy, merit and virtue, meet the standards we set for well-functioning hierarchies. Whereas some people view meritocracy as an important ideal that can instill legitimacy, justice, and stability into hierarchies, others argue that meritocracy is a myth intended to suppress opposition to hierarchy by creating the illusion that upward mobility is feasible. The idea of a

virtuocracy is also fiercely debated, though from a different vantage point. In a virtuocracy, individuals confer status and defer to those who are seen as moral.[11] Some scholars noted that virtue can help people rise in social and organizational hierarchies because groups reward generous and principled behavior, conferring status on those who behave morally. However, other scholars have argued that leadership aphorisms that advocate modesty, honesty, and authenticity "are mostly untrue and unhelpful."[12]

Evaluating Meritocracy

In a meritocracy, people gain status and power according to merit. In an organizational meritocracy, promotions are based on excellent performance rather than on favoritism or other biases.[13] Converging evidence from research in lab and field settings shows that placing experts in positions of power improves team performance. These findings are consistent with the instrumental benefits of hierarchies discussed in Chapter 1.[14]

Survey data from more than twenty countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Austria, Hungary, and Latvia, shows that a majority of these countries' citizens believe their society is meritocratic.[15] The view of success through hard work as a virtue potentially explains why workaholism—feeling compelled to work hard and put in excessively long hours—is not listed as a psychological disorder in diagnostic manuals such as the *DSM-5* in the United States and the *ICD-11* in Europe. Although these manuals include other compulsions and addictions, they do not list workaholism.

Let's consider meritocracy by checking whether it upholds the two elements of the common value principle. In national and organizational cultures where most people value mastery and achievement, a hierarchy organized around ability, hard work, and value added to the organization is likely to be seen as appropriate and legitimate. It reflects core beliefs and worldviews that people hold, such as the idea that people get what they deserve (the belief in a just world) and that hard work pays off.[16] Hence, in such national and organizational cultures, meritocracy embodies the moral rules aspect of the common value principle. To the extent that having the most competent, capable, and hardworking people in the organization

ascend to top leadership positions benefits the organization and its members, meritocracy also reflects the second element of the common value principle, namely, promoting collective welfare.

The question of whether establishing a meritocracy can help fix a broken hierarchy depends on how well it aligns with the values of the people in the hierarchy and how much value it produces for the collective. Think back to the example of the promotion ceremony in the Australian Ballet at the beginning of this chapter. David Hallberg's speech emphasized meritocracy as the basis for promoting two dancers to the highest rank in the company. This speech likely resonated with dancers in the company and audience members because meritocracy checks both aspects of the common value principle in Australia.

We cannot repair a broken hierarchy by instituting a meritocracy if people don't endorse mastery values, if meritocracy harms collective welfare, or if it's just a pretense. Imagine an organizational hierarchy where meritocracy is just a facade, such that hiring and promotion decisions, as well as the allocation of resources, responsibilities, and privileges, are based on nepotism (i.e., favoring relatives and friends), social identities (e.g., gender, race, age, nationality, religion), politics (e.g., exercising influence and negotiating deals behind closed doors), or arbitrary criteria (e.g., physical attractiveness or playing golf). While some people may be temporarily appeased by the appearance of meritocracy, others may feel angry and resentful when the hypocrisy becomes clear and when ability and expertise are pushed aside to make room for favoritism and bias.

People sometimes perceive a tension between their beliefs in meritocracy and the common practice of relying on personal connections to secure jobs. Research with young Spaniards found that they perceived the use of connections to get jobs as unfair. They expressed anger and frustration when meritocratic ideals were pushed aside and personal connections shaped job candidates' outcomes. When faced with their own reliance on connections, however, the interviewees tried to justify their actions. They noted they were hired because of their credentials, hard work, and relevant experience and that their use of connections was primarily helpful in getting the employer to evaluate them, rather than influencing the employer to hire them.[17]

Organizations that claim to value meritocracy often fail to implement it, with bias and discrimination based on social identities interfering with their evaluation processes and the allocation of opportunities and rewards.[18] When considering meritocracy as one potential remedy for a broken hierarchy (within the broader CPR framework of common value, pluralism, and relatedness), we need to distinguish between cases where the remedy fails, where it's misused or abused, and where it's rejected entirely. In some instances, meritocracy is misaligned with cultural values, serves as a pretense, or is implemented in ways that backfire.[19] The fact that merit has become a battleground in education, politics, and other public spaces and is an important topic in scientific research reflects the strong feelings that people have about broken hierarchies, the need to fix them, and the importance of identifying solutions that work in practice.[20]

Evaluating Virtuocracy

Virtuocracy is similar to meritocracy with one notable difference: Instead of elevating people according to their abilities and hard work, they are rewarded for their moral character and ethical behavior. People tend to see morality as consistent with widely held beliefs. They also see moral character traits and behavior, including generosity, helpfulness, honesty, courage, and loyalty, as benefiting collective welfare. Therefore, hierarchies that are based on virtue fulfill both elements of the common value principle and are likely to be seen as appropriate and legitimate. When leaders work to establish a virtuocracy in their organization, they offer a promising pathway for partly fixing a broken hierarchy. Importantly, meritocracy and virtuocracy are not mutually exclusive. An organization may use both merit and moral character simultaneously when making hiring and promotion decisions or when allocating responsibilities, rewards, and opportunities. Legitimate leaders should ideally be both moral and competent.

Relying on virtue as the basis for conferring status and leadership has deep roots in ancient schools of thought, including Greek philosophy, Judeo-Christian traditions, and Confucian philosophy.[21] Virtue (albeit under different labels) also recurs in modern theories of ethical and servant leadership.[22] Studies have shown that people tend to confer status on others

who behave generously and helpfully.[23] What's more, ethical leadership, whereby leaders prioritize people and their needs, act fairly, show integrity, communicate clearly, and are open to subordinates' input and influence, is associated with greater effectiveness for both leaders and their teams. Ethical leadership also contributes to employees' commitment, satisfaction, and trust in management.[24] Hence, virtuocracies produce measurable benefits in organizations.

To appreciate the value of enacting virtue at the top, consider research on leader humility conducted in China, a culture characterized by large differences in power between supervisors and subordinates. A study of more than a thousand leaders highlights the benefits of humility. The researchers found that when CEOs displayed humility, leaders on the organization's top management team felt a sense of empowering leadership, which manifested itself in more participative decision-making, expressions of confidence in them as executives, and a sense of freedom from bureaucratic constraints. These experiences at the top of the organization then trickled down to midlevel managers, who reacted to this empowering organizational climate with stronger engagement and commitment.[25]

In interviews that the researchers of this study conducted, CEOs rated as humble by leaders in their top management teams noted how fortunate they were in their careers and how they received support from others along their journey. In addition to recognizing allies and sponsors who paved the way for them, they also expressed appreciation for their team members and confidence that they would grow, learn, and improve in their decision-making. In contrast, the CEOs who were rated as less humble by their direct reports emphasized their own decision-making authority and how they saw little need for discussion. They also often criticized their followers' values, moral character, limited abilities, and outlook on life.

Scholars have distinguished between self-abasing humility and appreciative humility.[26] Self-abasing humility is a negative state characterized by negative views of oneself, often following a performance failure. It's associated with shame, low self-esteem, submissiveness, and disengagement. These emotional states are reminiscent of the negative feelings many employees experience in broken hierarchies. In contrast,

appreciative humility is a positive state that involves accurate assessment of one's own strengths and weaknesses, appreciation of others, open-mindedness, and willingness to learn. It's associated with moral emotions like authentic pride and guilt, which signal self-awareness, and with leadership based on prestige.

In addition to being aligned with commonly held values, appreciative humility can also produce instrumental and relational benefits in organizations. When managers and employees appreciate the unique talents and contributions of different employees and believe that they can learn from them, feelings of appreciative humility open the door to reciprocal mentoring up, down, and across the organizational hierarchy. Mentoring is a relational process whereby a more capable and experienced person shares their knowledge, skills, and advice with a less experienced person seeking to learn and grow in a specific domain. Mentoring does not have to be a one-way street. If Kate is more capable and experienced than Jenn in domain K, and Jenn is more capable and experienced than Kate in domain J, they can learn from each other in a process of reciprocal mentorship. Mentors who believe they can learn from their mentees tend to be more engaged and effective and create a more rewarding experience for their mentees.[27] Appreciative humility decreases the likelihood of treating others with disrespect, which is at the core of interactional injustice, and increases the likelihood of mutually beneficial, reciprocal mentorship.[28]

INTEGRATING MERIT AND VIRTUE

Respect and admiration are both important inputs into status conferral.[29] The highest status is reserved for those who are respected for their competence and admired for their virtue. For example, consider Warren Buffett, one of the world's richest people, who donated more than $60 billion of his wealth to charity.[30] As the founder of Berkshire Hathaway, he has made billions of dollars as a businessperson and continues to live a relatively humble life in Omaha, Nebraska, where he has been living since 1958. In 2006, he pledged to donate 99 percent of his wealth to charity. His donations have been used to alleviate poverty and improve healthcare, among other important causes. Buffett's status in the eyes of the public

stems partly from competence-based respect for his outstanding success as a businessperson and partly from virtue-based admiration for his commitment to commonly held values and the promotion of collective welfare.

Competence-based respect and virtue-based admiration, which underlie meritocracies and virtuocracies, respectively, stand in contrast to the fear people feel and the deference they show toward dominant leaders—those who rise and lead through force, intimidation, manipulation, and coercion. Unlike meritocracies and virtuocracies, which check both aspects of the common value principle, dominance hierarchies rarely support widely held values or promote collective welfare. Interestingly, dominant leaders are sometimes seen as providing value to the group during times of intergroup conflict and economic uncertainty.[31] In such circumstances, they are seen as capable of delivering victory, control, order, and predictability. Importantly, increasing dominance won't help repair a broken hierarchy, given that it undermines collaboration, justice, and connectedness.

Competence, virtue, and dominance are all viable pathways to status attainment, and most people show a combination of these characteristics in their interactions with supervisors, colleagues, and subordinates. No person is one pure type, characterized solely by their level of competence, morality, or dominance. With this view in mind, researchers in one study identified seven profiles of people according to the combination of competence, morality, and dominance they show. For example, "unscrupulous bullies" are characterized by low levels of virtue, intermediate levels of competence, and very high levels of dominance; "forceful underperformers" are characterized by low levels of virtue and competence and relatively high levels of dominance; and "humble champions" are characterized by relatively high levels of virtue and competence and relatively low levels of dominance.[32] To apply the common value principle to fix a broken hierarchy, we need to make sure that our teams and organizations are not led by forceful underperformers or unscrupulous bullies. The repair of a broken hierarchy entails supplanting or supplementing dominance with merit and virtue as the basis for selection, promotion, retention, and leadership.

We have used the two elements of the common value principle—moral

rules and collective welfare—as criteria for evaluating meritocracy, virtuocracy, and dominance-based hierarchy. You can apply these two criteria to evaluate the bases of hierarchy employed in your organization.

TELEVERDE: CULTIVATING A CULTURE CENTERED ON RESPECT

Although respect is universally appreciated, its meaning and expression can be context dependent. The impact of respect is most evident when it's given in an environment sorely missing this sensibility. Of particular interest for our purposes are organizations that have consciously made respect a core value and a centerpiece of their culture. The case of Televerde helps illustrate how incorporating respect into a system where it is often absent can bolster collaboration, justice, and stability within an organizational hierarchy.

Televerde is a leading B2B (business-to-business) marketing and sales organization that has generated $14 billion in revenue for its clients.[33] The company's business model involves a uniquely empowering partnership with incarcerated women who are hired and trained as employees of a call center operating from within the prison. By creating a fully functional business call center there, the program provides these women with skills training, positive identity, confidence, and financial independence after release. The program's graduates have a recidivism rate that's 91 percent lower than the national rate for incarcerated women in state prisons.[34]

One study suggested that the secret to Televerde's success is respect.[35] The environment in a state prison is extremely hierarchical. Not only are the inmates excluded from the rest of society for purposes of punishment, public safety, and rehabilitation but they also feel that the prison staff takes actions to remind them of their low status and extreme powerlessness. Several women interviewed in the study described experiences of eating rotten meat, being hassled as they moved around the grounds, or being treated in harsh and demeaning ways by some correctional officers. Others recounted feeling like they were treated as a number, made to feel small, and required to behave respectfully even in response to blatant disrespect.

While some former workers have criticized Televerde's employment

model, others have emphasized how working for the company was different from other aspects of life in prison.[36] In contrast to inmates' experiences in the yard and other parts of the prison, the respect that characterized interactions in the Televerde program was transformative. Being selected and trained to perform B2B marketing tasks not only connected the women to the outside world but also provided them with a sense of achievement, capability, meaning, relatedness, and self-worth. The work fulfilled the fundamental psychological needs that broken hierarchies often deny to their members. Employees shared that while the yard reminds them that they "are an outcast of society," working for Televerde makes them feel validated, intelligent, trusted, and part of a team. They feel they are doing valuable work and that others are proud of them. The authentic praise they receive makes them feel valued.

Televerde employees feel the general respect that the company affords each of them as people—each person being deserving of dignity and respect as a human right. This form of respect is on display when the company lets everyone know that they have a voice and that their opinion matters. It is also evident when managers empathize with employees, give them the autonomy to be themselves, and join them in spontaneous social activities that strengthen the connections between managers and employees. For example, on one occasion, when the manager thought that employees were feeling weary from working on their phones for too long, she joined them in dancing the conga around the call center. The well-functioning hierarchy in Televerde feels very different from the broken hierarchy in other parts of the prison. An employee described a visit by the CEO in which he expressed complete trust and respect: "He sat back there just like a proud father.… He did not interrupt. He did not correct. It was very respectful and he totally trusted us to carry out an intelligent conversation with the clients that he brought in."

In addition to the general respect they get as human beings, Televerde employees also feel a specific kind of respect that comes from a genuine appreciation of their unique skills, talents, and contributions. This form of respect presents itself in many ways. It might be conveyed through a compliment to an employee (e.g., "You rocked that call") or when they receive a certificate to hang in their workspace to celebrate the revenue they

generated. Or they might be given challenging tasks with explicit expressions of confidence in their ability to succeed. Expressions of trust, pride, and praise from managers are the main rewards for Televerde employees, because government regulations prevent performance-based raises (tenure-based raises that reward long-term perseverance are allowed, however).

In addition to recognizing employees for their abilities and achievements, showing general and specific respect, and providing relational rewards to employees, managers also facilitate interpersonal respect among employees. As one employee noted, "They teach us how to be respectful with one another." This practice helps reinforce the common value of respect and creates a community where employees can see themselves as competent and valued people. In the words of one employee, "At Televerde you are always treated with respect, you are treated like an adult… acknowledged as a human being, someone of value, someone that has worth."

The case of Televerde shows how the common value principle can be applied in a challenging environment to fix a broken hierarchy. The relentless focus on respect instills Televerde's hierarchy with legitimacy and promotes collaboration, a sense of justice, and a stable environment that benefits employees and organizational performance.

CONCLUSION

People want to believe that their actions are significant and that their work lives are meaningful.[37] We find purpose, meaning, and significance in our work when it's intrinsically fulfilling, when it contributes to society, or when it satisfies an important duty.[38] Organizational hierarchies that apply the common value principle help us feel this way about our jobs. Making sure that an organizational hierarchy reflects core values and promotes collective welfare instills it with legitimacy and increases voluntary support for the system, thereby promoting cooperation and stabilizing the hierarchy without the use of force or coercion.

This chapter included multiple examples of concrete actions that people at the top, middle, and bottom of an organizational hierarchy can take when

utilizing the common value principle to fix a broken hierarchy. You may be in a position to implement some, most, or even all of the solutions we examined in this chapter. Take the following short quiz "Can I Harness the Power of Common Value?" to see which solutions apply to you and to remind yourself of the concrete remedies covered in this chapter. For each concrete solution, choose yes or no to indicate whether you can use it in your team or organization. Each question will also invite you to answer one of two follow-up questions. If you answered yes, respond to the how question to indicate how you can apply this solution in your team or organization. Taking this step will make the solution more concrete and contextualized and help you form behavioral intentions or action plans that harness that tool. If you answered no, explain why you are currently unable to apply that solution. This reflection may help you see pathways to changing your circumstances at work in ways that would make that solution applicable in the future.

Hopefully, your answers to this quiz will reveal multiple actions that you can take in your organization to apply the common value principle. Knowing your organization, role, and situation, you could also identify and create other strategies that embody the common value principle to help fix the hierarchy around you. In the next two chapters, we will see how the pluralism and relatedness principles augment the remedies we encountered in this chapter and how they can jointly help transform a broken hierarchy into a well-functioning system.

POP QUIZ

CAN I HARNESS THE POWER OF COMMON VALUE?

IN MY ORGANIZATION, I CAN…

1. Orchestrate promotion ceremonies that reinforce common values **(Yes / No)**

How?

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Why?

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2. Nudge people to see the big picture by asking why **(Yes / No)**

How?

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Why?

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3. Use collective welfare as a tiebreaker when two core values collide **(Yes / No)**

How?

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Why?

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4. Attract, select, socialize, and retain employees who prioritize collective welfare **(Yes / No)**

How?

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Why?

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5. Allocate resources and opportunities based on merit **(Yes /**

No)

How?

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Why?

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6. Allocate resources and opportunities according to virtue **(Yes / No)**

How?

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Why?

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7. Model ethical leadership that emphasizes fairness and integrity **(Yes / No)**

How?

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Why?

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8. Enact appreciative humility **(Yes / No)**

How?

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Why?

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9. Engage in reciprocal mentoring **(Yes / No)**

How?

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Why?

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10. Show generalized respect and person-specific respect to coworkers **(Yes / No)**

How?

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Why?

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6 /
PLURALISM

The pluralism principle posits that a hierarchy should enable multiple pathways for people to contribute, thrive, advance, and lead. This principle does not mean putting all kinds of contributions on equal footing. Some approaches may be better aligned with the organization's mission or may promote collective success more effectively than others. Although some contributions may be more valuable than others, embracing different sources of value can help fix a broken hierarchy by promoting collaboration, justice, and stability. As you will see in this chapter, we can support pluralism in several other ways beyond enabling, recognizing, and rewarding different kinds of contributions. For example, we can establish parallel hierarchies and share leadership. These various manifestations of pluralism facilitate the fulfillment of employee needs and can bolster organizational performance.

Some readers may subscribe to the view that hierarchies require a unity of command. They believe that, ultimately, there needs to be a single decision-maker steering the ship. This view, especially common in traditionally bureaucratic organizations, looms particularly large in circumstances where hierarchical teams—such as a surgical team in the operating room or a military command team—must make swift decisions with life-and-death consequences.[1] As you will see in this chapter, the lived experiences of employees in well-functioning hierarchies reveal that there is ample room for pluralism even in environments such as healthcare teams and military units. These settings, in which pluralism may seem counterintuitive at first sight, often offer powerful examples of how pluralism can benefit teams and organizations.

EMBRACING DIFFERENT SOURCES OF VALUE

Outsiders looking in may sometimes mistakenly believe that all the members of a given team make the same kind of contribution toward the team's success. For example, you may look at the rowing crew of an eight-person boat and think that all of them are pretty much interchangeable on that boat. However, a more careful consideration will reveal that different team members create value in different and complementary ways. The coxswain is unique in the dual role of steering the boat and calling out instructions to the rest of the crew. The rower in the stroke position tends to be the most reliable pacer and consequently is the one who sets the rhythm for the rest of the boat. The rowers in the middle seats are often the strongest crew members; they function as the powerhouse of the boat. In addition to crew members' roles on the water, some crew members fill essential leadership and socioemotional roles out of the water. For example, some rowers model desirable behaviors (e.g., punctuality, responsibility), others support injured athletes, and still others help teammates who struggle with their roles. Clearly, different contributions are necessary for a successful rowing crew. Recognizing the value of this variety is at the heart of the pluralism principle.

Imagine that you are a member of a team where everyone shows up on time, works hard, and contributes in ways that are both visible and quantifiable. Except for one member. This person shows up late, does not pitch in or perform the same duties, and does not seem bothered in the slightest that others are working hard to achieve the team's collective goal. This person's attitude seems unfair and may provoke frustration and anger. You probably find it unjust to have a double standard in the team, with one slacker free riding on everyone else's hard work. Why do they get to sleep in while everyone else is working?

This was the situation that Owen West faced as a member of a mountain climbing team that sought to summit Mount Everest from the northwest side.[2] As a graduate of Harvard and Stanford Universities, a platoon commander in the US Marines, a trader at Goldman Sachs, and the former assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, West has extensive leadership experience across many areas. On this mountain climbing trip, the team included a young French climber and

extreme snowboarder named Marco Siffredi, who wished to be the first person to snowboard down the north side of the mountain. According to West, Siffredi stood out among the team members with his purple hair, earrings, and affection for pot. Of all the international members on the team, Siffredi formed the strongest bonds with the local mountain guides from Tibet—learning their names and origins and adapting his behavior to match the styles of different guides. During the three weeks that the team was approaching the mountain, Siffredi often woke up late and was slower to help with the tents and other team chores. Some teammates were upset and nominated West to talk to the snowboarder.

West considered different ways to convince Siffredi to wake up early, pitch in, and help with the morning work that everyone else was doing. Persuading Siffredi to reform his lax habits would have resolved the double standard by creating consistency within the team, with everyone helping the same way, together, at the same time. Siffredi's reaction surprised West. He explained that he was putting important work into building bridges between the local guides and the rest of the team, thereby supporting the team in a different way. Siffredi visited the guides every night, helped them cook, socialized with them, and motivated them to continuously help the international team achieve its collective goal. His answer helped West see that Siffredi was contributing to the team meaningfully, in ways that didn't involve helping with the ropes or with the tent stakes in the morning. Siffredi was a maverick who brought other important things to the team.

Understanding that people can contribute to the same team in different ways and at different times requires open-mindedness as well as open channels of communication. The conversation between West and Siffredi was essential in implementing the pluralism principle within that team. Seeing value in others' contributions helps create a sense of justice not through symmetry but through synergy and complementarity. Some teammates may not be doing the same tasks at the same time as everyone else, but when we recognize the value of their diverse contributions, it creates a sense of fairness and reinforces that justice is being served. They deserve to be part of the team because they contribute to it in their own authentic and meaningful way, which is unique and valuable.

Harnessing the power of pluralism to fix a broken hierarchy begins with acknowledging the value of multiple kinds of contributions. The members

of elite ballet companies acknowledge the many ways in which dancers in the company may contribute to the company's collective success. To illustrate this principle, consider the following quotes from dancers in an elite ballet company. As you read these short excerpts from our interviews with them, see how many distinct kinds of contributions you can identify:

- "You have to be… respectful to the other dancers… who have been there longer and are higher ranking.… Usually where people will often start to make judgments on people [is based on] their decorum in the studio rather than their dancing ability."
- "She is an alien. Everything that she does is beautiful. Her body is in such good shape."
- "I put pointe shoes in the hallways. The kids haven't started pointe yet. I see them watch. They're always curious, right?… I've had some of them come and ask me a question.… And I have always loved to give advice and tell them."
- "Seeing how hard she worked and how dedicated she was, what she did… you can appreciate what they do and how hard and how much they give to what they do. So, I definitely respect that."
- "I think I have more teeny-tiny ballerina girls following me on Instagram than anything."
- "We're touching each other's bodies… how they dance, how physically they move, their coordination, their body.… There are really good partners, and you can feel that the girls are really comfortable with them when they dance. They don't even think."
- "People who I'm looking up to are the people who are able to handle stressful situations really calmly and conduct day-to-day activities with people who are very difficult in their response."
- "They want someone who is fast thinking.… You go in, they show you a phrase of steps… it'll be pretty long and multiple steps. You've never seen it, so you don't know if you're doing classical, contemporary… they want to see if you get it. [They say,] 'Move like a snake on water,' and you're supposed to be able to do the choreography he showed you, making it look like that."
- "A lot of it comes down to who you look good next to. It's a very

> physical art form, so they want things that look like they go together."

How many distinct kinds of contribution did you identify? Dancers in an elite ballet company can add value through their technical skills and accumulated experience, by serving as role models through their decorum in the studio and impeccable work ethic, by offering advice to younger dancers, through their unique physical characteristics and abilities, and by promoting the company on social media. The dancers we interviewed described how their colleagues contribute to the company by being reliable partners, by being competent actors and actresses, by having an appearance suited for specific roles, by maintaining their health and consequently their availability to dance, and by sharing the workload with others in the same role—whether they dance in the first, second, or third cast in a given production.

Take the perspective of a young dancer in the corps de ballet. They lack the experience and repertoire of a principal dancer but can still earn respect through their work ethic and decorum in the studio. A pluralistic environment also enables a dancer to shift how they contribute over time. For instance, a forty-year-old dancer who approaches retirement is likely to contribute to the company in different ways than a twenty-year-old dancer who recently joined the company. As another example, a dancer recovering from injury may not be able to help the company by dancing, but they may be a valuable source of advice in the studio and beyond. They might assist ballet masters, external choreographers, and teachers in the company's ballet school or help with public relations efforts by giving interviews to the media. As these examples illustrate, acknowledging the value of different contributions within an organizational hierarchy enables members to stay engaged, feel valued, and remain connected to others in the company even when they are unable to partake in certain core activities. In a pluralistic hierarchy, the members can feel authentic and unique in their inputs and can adapt their contributions over time as their career evolves and as they grow and change as people.

Think about the alternative to pluralism in the case of such a ballet company. Imagine that the only contribution that is valued, recognized, and rewarded is technical perfection. Surely such an environment will be

demotivating for company members who possess other qualities, such as strong acting skills or the ability to partner with various other dancers. If technical perfection is the only metric of evaluation, these dancers might feel undervalued, become demotivated, and disengage from the company. They may seek to move to another ballet company that will recognize and value their contributions. Failing to recognize and reward different kinds of contributions as meaningful can marginalize, alienate, and push out some members of the team.

RECOGNIZING AND REWARDING DIFFERENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Well-functioning hierarchies not only create opportunities for employees to contribute in different ways—they also recognize and reward these contributions, privately as well as publicly. Many armed forces have pluralistic recognition systems, as evident from the many kinds of badges, ribbons, and medals that service members wear on their formal dress uniforms. For example, the US Army practices the pluralism principle by recognizing the multiple ways in which officers and soldiers contribute to the success of missions. Some awards, such as the Medal of Honor, the Bronze Star, and the Service Cross, are awarded for risking one's life and displaying heroism in combat. Other awards, such as the Distinguished Service, Meritorious Service, Achievement, and Commendation Medals, recognize personal merit and accomplishments. There are also awards that recognize good conduct, achievements in training, service in specific campaigns, and more. This pluralistic approach clearly signals that service members can contribute and add value in a variety of ways in the armed forces.

Certain exceptional soldiers, such as Audie Murphy, may earn multiple awards for various contributions. Murphy, who appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine in July 1945 as the "most decorated soldier" and was later described by the Association of the United States Army as "the greatest soldier in the 200-year history of the United States," was a short, underweight soldier rejected by the US Marines and paratroopers.[3] As an enlisted soldier, he fought in North Africa and Europe during World War II,

earning more than thirty decorations, including the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star Medal, Bronze Star Medal, and Purple Heart, alongside awards from France and Belgium. After the war, he became a Hollywood actor, starring in more than thirty films, including a Universal Pictures production about his own life, titled *To Hell and Back*. A pluralistic recognition system may allow rare individuals like Murphy to accumulate many awards and honors. On a larger scale, it creates an inclusive environment that offers people with distinct skills and talents multiple opportunities to contribute, excel, and add value in various ways. In doing so, the system also operates as an organizational incentive system that motivates people to contribute to the success of the mission because they know that their contributions will be recognized and rewarded.[4]

An organization that embraces different sources of value helps employees feel appreciated and respected. It helps them fulfill the needs for competence and uniqueness, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will thrive at work. By creating different pathways for people to contribute and thrive in a hierarchy, organizations also craft multiple pathways for advancement and leadership. Thus, another primary manifestation of the pluralism principle in well-functioning hierarchies involves sharing leadership.

SHARING LEADERSHIP

Leadership can be shared in several ways. Some of these ways are structural, such as when two or more leaders share the same job title and rank or when an organization establishes several hierarchies side by side. Sharing leadership can also take dynamic forms. In a dynamic approach, formal ranks and roles are temporarily suspended to respond to emerging circumstances that require greater flexibility. Sharing leadership structurally as well as dynamically involves humility and mutual respect. Thus, sharing leadership can help fix a broken hierarchy by promoting collaboration and justice.

Structural Pluralism

What do Apple, the Beatles, Disney, and Microsoft have in common? Or Ben & Jerry's, Berkshire Hathaway, Google, and Hewlett-Packard? Famously, all these companies owe their start, fame, or both, to very successful duos.[5] Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak at Apple. John Lennon and Paul McCartney of the Beatles. Brothers Walt and Roy Disney. Larry Page and Sergey Brin at Google. Warren Buffett and Charlie Munger at Berkshire Hathaway. Bill Gates and Paul Allen at Microsoft. And the list goes on. As much as we like to believe in the myth of the lone leader, the lone genius, or the lone savior, success often requires the ingenuity, hard work, and collaboration of multiple people. Indeed, research shows that teams, rather than single scientists working alone, dominate the production of high-impact scientific discoveries and inventions.[6] A meaningful proportion of companies have chosen to reflect the importance of collaboration in their hierarchical structure by appointing co-CEOs to lead the organization together.

One example comes from Hollywood, where Pamela Abdy and Michael De Luca serve as cochairs and co-CEOs of Warner Bros. Motion Picture Group. On February 25, 2023, the Producers Guild of America bestowed on Abdy and De Luca its most prestigious award—the Milestone Award—which "recognizes those who made historic contributions to the entertainment industry."[7] Past winners include household names such as Walt Disney, Alfred Hitchcock, and Steven Spielberg. Announcing the award, the guild noted that "Michael and Pam are an incredible team, excelling as both trusted creative producers and successful studio heads."[8] Over the years, Abdy and De Luca contributed in different roles to the creation of cultural landmarks such as *Moneyball*, *Licorice Pizza*, *The Social Network*, *House of Gucci*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *The Big Short*, *Seven*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Magnolia*, and *Boogie Nights*, among many other films. After Amazon's acquisition of MGM Studios in March 2022, the two executives left their positions at MGM (Abdy as president and De Luca as chair). Soon after, they joined Warner Bros. Discovery as cochairs and co-CEOs of the company's motion picture group.

I had a chance to hear this celebrated duo in person when they took the stage at the Future of Art, Media, and Entertainment Conference at Stanford

Graduate School of Business. I was particularly captivated by the mutual respect and complementarity they projected, as two leaders who are simultaneously coworkers, longtime friends, and powerful executives in an industry constantly in the spotlight. They completed each other's sentences during the event so seamlessly and fluently that it seemed as if they could read each other's minds. The sincere affection between them was unmistakable. Yet, they ran a large operation in a fiercely competitive industry, facing tough contests for consumers' attention, time, and money among major studios and the likes of Amazon, Netflix, and Apple. Readers who subscribe to the unity-of-command view might expect to see a single forceful, dominant executive at the helm. What I saw was a collaborative duo that shared power willingly and well.

Multiple companies have tried the co-CEOs model at some point, including Netflix, SAP, Oracle, Comcast, Unilever, Chipotle, Marks & Spencer, Spotify, and Goldman Sachs.[9] Nonetheless, most organizations take the unity-of-command approach and place a single executive at the top. Consequently, co-CEOs remain a relative rarity in the business world, with fewer than 5 percent of US companies adopting the model over the past quarter century. Yet, some evidence suggests that companies with co-CEOs often outperform those with a single CEO in terms of value produced for shareholders.[10] Although the co-CEOs model may not work equally well for all organizations, a study of 111 co-CEOs in publicly traded firms showed some promising findings.[11] This leadership model benefits organizations when the two leaders complement each other in their educational background, allocate their executive responsibilities efficiently to avoid redundancy, advise each other, and monitor each other to improve decision-making. Other researchers have found that financial markets tend to respond positively to firms' announcements of co-CEO appointments, that co-CEOs' tenures are roughly comparable to those of solitary CEOs, and that firms led by co-CEOs outperformed comparable firms with a solitary CEO.[12]

Shared leadership models that are similar to the co-CEOs model can be found in many organizations. These include universities where the president and the provost jointly lead the institution, artistic organizations led

simultaneously by an artistic director and a business manager, and newspapers whose chief editor serves alongside a business leader.[13] And, of course, many families operate this way, too—just ask the many millions of parents who tried it at home. Although these examples highlight cases of coleadership at the top, shared leadership can also create value when implemented at other levels of an organizational hierarchy.

In some healthcare organizations, certain employees share the same rank and job title and colead their team, department, or division. For example, a psychiatrist and a psychologist may serve as cochiefs of a psychiatry and psychology division, bringing complementary expertise and perspectives to their shared leadership role.[14] Their experiences within the same unit may differ in terms of their schedules, patient load, and compensation. Nonetheless, the coleadership structure reflects an acknowledgment of the synergetic value of integrating their distinct contributions. Professors Jacob Ballon and Fatima Rodriguez, the Stanford Medicine leaders we met in earlier chapters, shared with us the benefits they see in this pluralistic approach. Ballon noted that the opportunity to colead alongside a psychologist and their mutual respect for each other's unique expertise proved extremely beneficial. Rodriguez noted that medical director roles are often intentionally designed for coleadership and that she had benefited from a shared leadership role with a different leader, collaborating with and learning from a senior nurse manager.

In our interviews with collegiate athletes, many noted that their teams have multiple captains who share that role and the responsibilities associated with it. They also said that these captains often bring distinct and even opposite leadership styles to the team. If one captain is seen as stoic, scary, and seemingly unapproachable, the other captain is seen as caring, funny, and easygoing. Cocaptains' distinct characteristics allowed them to make complementary contributions to team functioning and success.

The athletes we interviewed rarely distinguished their cocaptains on the basis of their competency as athletes. They usually perceived all their captains as outstanding athletes who are intense and locked in on the field, on the court, or in the pool. What distinguished the cocaptains were their leadership styles. Consistent with the concepts of prestige and dominance introduced in Chapter 3, collegiate athletes described prestige-oriented

captains as friendly, talkative, welcoming, helpful, and supportive. They described dominance-oriented captains as serious, strict, in-your-face, intimidating, and supercompetitive.

The collegiate athletes we interviewed came from very different teams. Regardless of the differences between teams in roster size, championship pedigree, athletes' gender, and the number of roles on the team, all the teams had multiple leaders. Some leaders were closer to the prestige-oriented prototype, while others were closer to the dominance-oriented prototype. Although cocaptains had different leadership styles, they often got along well because they saw the benefits of allocating tasks according to the leaders' complementary strengths and skills. Prestige-oriented captains created a welcoming environment that attracted new recruits and helped newcomers integrate into the team. They helped injured athletes cope with rehab challenges such as uncertainty and social isolation, and they acted as mediators when problems surfaced on the field or in the locker room. In contrast, the dominance-oriented captains played a more central role in setting and enforcing team norms related to punctuality, alcohol use, and maintaining gear. In addition to their role in disciplining any norm violators, these captains were sometimes the preferred representatives when the team needed one of its captains to advocate assertively for the athletes in discussions with the coaching staff.

Some captains are gifted orators who can rally their team before a game or lift people's spirits during halftime. Other captains are much better as active listeners who give thoughtful advice in late-night, one-on-one conversations. Some team leaders are emotional, intense, and loud, whereas others possess maturity, patience, and people skills. Given the many roles that captains of a large National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) team need to fill, it's highly unlikely that any single person will excel at all of them. Appointing cocaptains with complementary characteristics creates beneficial synergy and ensures that all the necessary functions are being filled by one or more of the leaders.

Pluralism in collegiate athletic teams makes sense for several reasons beyond the need to rely on diverse talents. The cocaptains can share the workload and burdens of the job, exchange advice, and provide each other with social support needed to avoid feelings of isolation at the top. Including prestige-oriented captains with dominance-oriented captains, who

are more intimidating and rely on forceful behavior (e.g., hard tackles, threats, shouting), can soften the forceful captains' impact on the team and help redirect these captains' assertive behaviors toward external competitors, namely, other NCAA teams. Pluralistic leadership also keeps the captains humble by balancing power, status, and influence across styles and personalities.

Finally, appointing athletes with different leadership styles as cocaptains has an important signaling function. It signals to young athletes who aspire to become captains one day that there is no one correct way or single path that leads to that role. The existence of multiple role models within the team shows young athletes that many kinds of contributions are valued and that players can ascend to a leadership role through a variety of approaches, thereby reinforcing the pluralism principle. Because people tend to form stronger connections with others who are like them (a phenomenon researchers sometimes call *homophily*), the appointment of cocaptains with different styles means that different team members can find a leader who is similar to them and with whom they can connect. Thus, appointing cocaptains with different characteristics and leadership styles promotes broad coverage of the team in terms of the captains' ability to forge strong connections with different members of the team.

Structural pluralism in well-functioning hierarchies often has another manifestation beyond the coleadership model. Many organizations have parallel hierarchies that provide people with different pathways to advancement. These parallel structures have separate promotion schedules, rely on different evaluation criteria, and use distinct titles or ranks. For example, hospitals have parallel hierarchies for physicians, nurses, and administrators. The physician hierarchy typically includes a medical director, department heads, attending physicians, fellows, chief residents, residents, interns, and medical students. The nurse hierarchy often includes a chief nursing officer, a nursing director, charge nurses, nurse practitioners, registered nurses, and nursing assistants. Finally, the administrator hierarchy generally includes directors (e.g., of finance, human resources, facilities), managers, supervisors, and support staff.

Although physicians, nurses, administrators, and staff work together to provide patient care, hospitals don't compare them with one another; healthcare organizations make evaluation and promotion decisions

separately within each hierarchy. Parallel hierarchies embody the pluralism principle by creating different pathways to contributing and advancing and enabling multiple people to ascend together.

Armed forces also use parallel hierarchies. In our interview with Colonel Everett Spain, the West Point scholar and officer introduced in Chapter 1, he talked about the essential partnership between officers and enlisted soldiers: "As a platoon leader, you have a platoon sergeant. As a company commander, you have a first sergeant. As a battalion commander or a garrison commander, I have a sergeant major." Officers are commissioned leaders placed in a command position after their successful completion of a training program (e.g., at West Point). They have overall responsibility for the success of missions. Sergeants are experienced soldiers who come from the enlisted ranks of the army. They have overall responsibility for everyday operations and serve as a bridge between the enlisted soldiers and the officers. These partnerships between officers and sergeants allow units to achieve more through the division of labor and collaboration between leaders across parallel hierarchies, just as the partnerships between physicians, nurses, and administrators enable hospitals to fulfill their missions. Thus, even organizations that may seem to us the most hierarchical and bureaucratic recognize the value of pluralism.

Dynamic Pluralism

Pluralism in organizational hierarchies does not necessitate the establishment of parallel hierarchies or the appointment of coleaders with identical job titles. Rather, pluralism can also arise more dynamically, for example, when specific tasks or special circumstances require the temporary suspension of formal ranks and roles within the organization to ensure successful task completion. Although dynamic sharing of leadership tends to be bounded in time, it creates a sense of partnership, camaraderie, and collaboration among organizational members. These sensibilities can help fix some of the ailments of broken hierarchies. By promoting collective success, dynamic sharing of leadership produces positive feelings and a sense of accomplishment that strengthen ties within the team. As you will see, dynamic pluralism exists in organizations that span US Navy SEAL teams, urban hospitals, haute cuisine restaurants, and large garment

factories. Importantly, the dynamic sharing of leadership does not mean that all the team members lead simultaneously or that team members use a rotating leadership system in which they take turns occupying the top formal position in the team. Rather, everyday differences in power and status are relaxed for a short time in ways that promote coordination, collaboration, and collective success.

Researchers have termed this approach *hierarchical adaptability*. Teams vary in their ability to shift back and forth between flatter and more hierarchical processes. Flatter processes are helpful in tasks that require divergent thinking (such as brainstorming), whereas more hierarchical processes are helpful when decision-making and execution are needed. Members of teams that are better at adapting their internal influence hierarchy—moving flexibly as necessary between flatter and more hierarchical structures—experience higher levels of coordination and psychological safety, which improve team performance across different tasks. Examples of hierarchical adaptability can be found in various organizations. For example, US Navy SEAL teams that use a strict command-and-control hierarchy during deployment remove physical symbols of their ranks, such as stripes, pins, and insignia, to facilitate more balanced discussion and brainstorming in post-action reviews in the debrief room. Similarly, in some hospitals, teams remove scrubs that signify ranks through different colors to facilitate more open discussion in post-procedure reviews.[15]

Medical organizations often feature steep hierarchies. They have clearly demarcated ranks, each tied to distinct levels of power, status, authority, and responsibility. At the same time, they tend to recognize the importance of pooling together different talents, capabilities, and contributions. Think about the typical surgery team in a large teaching hospital. The team consists of a surgeon, an anesthesiologist, nurses, technicians, residents, and physician assistants. For the team to function well, each member must recognize the value of everyone else's contributions to the operation.

Even though surgical teams tend to operate within a clear hierarchy, teams in hospitals' emergency trauma centers often exercise flexible and shared leadership that aligns with the pluralism principle. In large urban hospitals' emergency centers, there is a never-ending flow of trauma

patients from car accidents, violent crimes, workplace accidents, and other emergencies. The work involves rapid decision-making and is intense, unpredictable, and taxing. The 24-7 nature of the operation requires shift work, resulting in transient teams whose members rotate in and out. These teams' success hinges on high levels of coordination and collaboration that must be established despite constant changes to their composition. The work can be highly rewarding but also strenuous and stressful.

In these trauma centers, there is a clear and strict hierarchy that's well understood: The attending surgeon is at the top, followed by the surgical fellow and then the admitting resident. The nurses support and monitor the work of all three to ensure the best care for patients but remain largely outside the physician hierarchy. The nurses sometimes work in the trauma center longer than the fellows and residents and may therefore be more experienced and knowledgeable than they are. They will typically follow the directions of the attending, fellow, and resident, with exceptions made in situations where patient safety is at risk—for example, when a nurse intervenes to prevent a serious mistake.

When a patient experiences cardiac arrest and is at risk of dying, a single leader gives orders in the team, making decisions swiftly and autocratically, as there is no time for consultation or consensus seeking. However, the leader giving those directions may not be the most senior person in the room. It may be the resident or the fellow, for instance, with the more experienced attending standing quietly a few feet back, observing the situation and monitoring the care being provided. By staying back, the attending delegates complete authority over the team and procedures to the junior member of the team who is actively leading in those moments. This delegation is dynamic and may change from moment to moment depending on the patient's condition. The attending surgeon may step in and take over at times, only to later retreat to an observer role as the situation unfolds.[16]

These fluid shifts of leadership depend on multiple factors: the urgency and novelty of the patient's condition, the extent to which the attending has confidence in the junior team member, and whether the attending believes that they, the attending physician, will be able to correct mistakes if necessary. Thus, although there is a clear and strict formal hierarchy in the medical unit overall, the leader in action at any moment may be the most

junior, a more senior, or the most senior person in the room. This dynamic delegation of decision-making power, authority, and responsibility supports two core values of many large teaching hospitals: providing the highest quality of patient care and training the next generation of competent physicians. The willingness to share leadership in critical moments highlights how the principles of common value and pluralism cooperate to create a well-functioning hierarchy.

Dynamic pluralism can also be found in much less critical, though very intense, environments in restaurants. The staff of haute cuisine restaurants is often referred to as a kitchen brigade, reflecting its hierarchical structure and strict division of labor. The brigade typically consists of a head chef, who creates the menu and recipes, selects ingredients, approves dishes before they leave the kitchen, and supervises the team of cooks, whose number may range from under a dozen to a few dozen. Commensurate with their status, the head chef is the only team member whose name and title are embroidered on their jacket. Next in line is the sous-chef as the second-in-command, several station chefs who focus on preparing particular foods (e.g., fish, pastry), and line cooks who are assigned to each station and who report to the station chef.

Every afternoon, the kitchen brigade prepares for the evening service, which will span several intense hours. During the preparation period and at the beginning of the service, the hierarchy is maintained quite rigidly. Each staff member stays in their station, final checks are being made, and supplies from the pantry are transported to different corners of the kitchen as needed. As orders start to come in, the head chef announces them one by one in a loud voice, and the team responds in unison, “Yes, Chef!” It’s akin to service members in a military drill. When orders come in slowly, there is ample time for the chef to check each dish, determine if it meets their standards of excellence, and send it back to the station if they think it needs more preparation: “Overcooked. Let’s do it again. Five minutes.”[17]

However, when rush hour is in full swing, the strict hierarchy gives way to a pluralistic form of governance as the team adapts in real time to high pressure and unexpected challenges. For example, when the dishwasher is overwhelmed, the head chef may jump in for several minutes to help the dishwashing station take care of the overflow of dirty dishes. This act

shows high flexibility in terms of the hierarchical structure, as dishwashing is considered the least prestigious job in the kitchen. Sous-chefs shuttle ingredients from the refrigerators to their cooks at the stations. Plates for guests are co-assembled by multiple people. Communication shifts from loud verbal exchanges to quick nonverbal gestures: a look, a nod, a frown, or a quick touch of the meat. Timelines for assembling and sending dishes out are adjusted by cooks as needed, and plates are sent out by coordinated groups of cooks rather than solely by the head chef. This pluralistic form of leadership enables the kitchen brigade to manage the workload during the most demanding peaks that push everyone to their limits. It also allows the team to respond to unexpected events, such as an unforeseen rain that suddenly brings in all the guests from the terrace while the brigade remakes and re-serves dishes for some of the tables within a few short minutes.

Once the rush subsides and the kitchen closes to new orders, the kitchen brigade assumes its hierarchical structure again. People are back in their stations performing their own roles. However, the atmosphere is less tense after the service than it is before the service hours. Accordingly, the hierarchy does not feel as strict. The high degree of relatedness within the brigade after a successful service is evident from the jokes and laughter that fill the kitchen. There is a validating sense of accomplishment—of sustaining high standards of excellence together through a collective transformation of the team during the evening, powered by a temporary suspension of the formal hierarchy.

When leaders show flexibility and a willingness to suspend the formal hierarchy, they send a strong signal to employees. For example, consider frontline workers in large garment factories in India. Many thousands of women work extremely long hours every day doing repetitive, monotonous tasks on a long assembly line. They stitch sleeves, attach zippers, and sort buttons alongside other women. Occasionally, employees fall behind schedule in meeting quotas because of circumstances they can’t control, such as malfunctioning machines. When a leader joins the employees and performs their tasks together with them in such moments, the relaxation of the formal hierarchy increases the workers’ motivation and productivity. Research shows that female leaders in these factories occasionally perform so-called subordinate scut work alongside workers. They reinforce loose stitches, make garment alterations, provide a personal example of how to

meet the required standards, show employees how to sew pockets more quickly and less effortfully, iron garments when necessary, and help employees clean up at the end of the workday. By rolling up their sleeves and joining the workers, these supervisors in garment factories suspend the hierarchy and boost employee engagement and performance.[18]

The dynamic forms of pluralism illustrated in the examples of the armed forces, the trauma unit, the elite restaurant, and the garment factory are especially striking because these environments tend to have strict formal hierarchies, which sometimes give rise to interactional injustice.[19] The dynamic sharing of leadership in these settings unfolds over time and in response to emerging circumstances rather than taking the more enduring and stable forms of coleadership or parallel hierarchies we encountered earlier. Although dynamic pluralism is temporary, it serves to promote collaboration and justice in organizational hierarchies.

HOW PLURALISM HELPS FIX BROKEN HIERARCHIES

How exactly does pluralism help fix a broken hierarchy? Pluralism increases collaboration, justice, and stability through several complementary processes. One process we encountered earlier in this chapter, in the context of elite ballet companies, is fulfillment of people's fundamental needs for competence, meaning, uniqueness, and self-worth. Fulfilling these needs boosts intrinsic motivation and helps attract and retain talent. Pluralism also increases collaboration, justice, and stability by reducing the harmful impact of social comparisons, diluting the influence of dominant leaders, giving people the opportunities they deserve, and increasing organizational resilience. Let's consider each of these processes in turn.

REDUCING THE HARMFUL IMPACT OF SOCIAL COMPARISONS

Pluralism helps fix broken hierarchies by lessening the harmful effects of social comparisons. As discussed in Chapter 2, people's natural tendency to compare themselves with others can fuel ultracompetitiveness within

organizations, especially in those that use forced-ranking systems. Instead of denying this human tendency, pluralism embraces social comparisons and enables different team members to feel valued and accomplished in different ways. When a team or an organization values just one kind of contribution—such as the ability to think fast, speak eloquently, or generate creative solutions—social comparisons on that single dimension loom very large. Team members begin to tie their self-worth and social worth to where they rank on that one metric of evaluation. Consequently, how they feel about themselves and others fluctuates according to successes and failures in that single dimension. In contrast, when everyone on the team acknowledges the importance and value of different kinds of inputs and contributions, social comparisons become less harmful. Evaluating people on many dimensions makes it harder for any one metric to define someone's worth. Anne may be better than Brittany at task A, but Brittany is better at task B. Chelsea outperforms Dorothy on dimension C but falls short when it comes to dimension D. Hence, simultaneous social comparisons on multiple dimensions can help keep teammates humble and increase mutual respect for others' strengths. Somewhat ironically, adding more dimensions of social comparison can lessen dysfunctional ultracompetitiveness and other harmful consequences of social comparisons.

DILUTING THE INFLUENCE OF DOMINANT LEADERS

Pluralism helps dilute the impact of dominant employees and bosses in the organization. Sharing leadership structurally either through parallel hierarchies or coleadership helps reduce the impact of a single dominant leader. Surrounding a dominant leader with several prestige-oriented leaders not only lessens the dominant leader's power but also sends a strong signal to employees. It communicates that competence, collaboration, virtue, and kindness are valued and rewarded and constitute viable pathways to the top.

A pluralism mindset to recruiting and retention practices can further help dilute the harmful impact of dominant leaders. By avoiding the hiring of bullies, tyrants, and abusive supervisors and by choosing not to extend or renew the contracts of current employees who engage in such behaviors, organizations reduce the proportion of employees who promote

ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability. This approach also sends a message to current employees and prospective candidates that ultracompetitiveness and injustice, even from highly talented people, are not tolerated. Finally, leaders can hire, promote, and retain employees who promote collaboration, justice, and stability to reinforce such behaviors as the organization's norms. This practice increases the likelihood that at least some employees will push back against ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability when witnessing these manifestations of broken hierarchies.

GIVING PEOPLE THE OPPORTUNITIES THEY DESERVE

Hope is a powerful emotion. Pluralism supports hope by showing low-ranking employees that there are multiple pathways to upward mobility. The availability of various paths matters even if not everyone chooses to walk them. Injustice is often manifested in closed doors and blocked paths that prevent people from getting the opportunities they deserve to contribute, thrive, advance, and lead. Pluralism opens doors and clears paths for people. Making opportunities available to everyone who deserves these opportunities promotes justice, thereby increasing the legitimacy of the hierarchy and the likelihood that people with various talents will choose to stay in the organization. Hence, by promoting justice, pluralism also helps stabilize organizational hierarchies.

INCREASING ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

Many processes operate to make an organization more homogeneous over time. People with similar preferences are attracted to the same work environment and apply for positions in the organization. Organizational recruiting and selection processes, such as hiring based on employee referrals and favoring candidates who are similar to existing employees, tend to reinforce the current composition of the organization. Additionally, employees who feel that they don't fit the mold are more likely to leave.[20] These attraction, selection, and attrition processes may result in hiring and retaining "more of the same" kind of employees over time. If we embrace the view that there are meaningful individual differences between people in their abilities, traits, and skills (e.g., some people have remarkable

mathematical and spatial abilities, while others have outstanding verbal, social, and emotional skills), then we should structure teams and organizations to reflect and benefit from those differences. Organizations that recognize the value of complementary abilities and contributions to collective success are more likely to establish a pluralistic hierarchy. Cumulative evidence from thousands of teams shows that shared leadership, one of the previously examined manifestations of a pluralistic hierarchy, boosts positive attitudes, processes, and performance in teams.[21]

Pluralism strengthens teams and organizations by enhancing collective resilience.[22] An employee who has many talents and capabilities is less susceptible to various shocks in the workplace, such as downsizing, a merger, the transition to remote work or a new role, and technological changes such as the AI revolution. Similarly, teams and organizations that implement pluralism are more resilient in the face of external challenges and shocks, such as the rise of alternative business models (e.g., the sharing economy), new and unforeseen competitors, geopolitical events like a pandemic or a war, regulatory changes (e.g., unexpected tariffs), and shifting customer tastes and preferences. Companies that implement pluralism enjoy greater flexibility for coping with uncertainty. Specifically, pluralism enables teams to respond to changes by drawing on a larger and more diverse set of human strengths and capabilities.[23] Therefore, fostering pluralism supports an organization's ability to adapt to a changing environment.

To understand this point, consider how pluralism helped some family businesses survive and flourish in the face of multiple challenges. Some families successfully transfer control, and even expand their assets, across generations. Others, despite having similar resources, collapse and crumble with time. The successful family businesses are characterized by high levels of pluralism and relatedness, which contribute to their stability. In contrast, low levels of pluralism contribute to the instability and eventual unraveling of the unsuccessful businesses.

Take, for example, two automakers—Fiat in Italy and BMW in Germany. The Agnelli family founded Fiat in Italy in 1899 and subsequently expanded into banking, media, and real estate, among other industries. Over time, the family managed to overcome multiple shocks to

its leadership, including two unexpected deaths of successors. These deaths required the family to skip a generation and transfer control of the business from grandfather to grandson. Another leadership blow occurred after World War II, when the Italian government demanded that the company replace its leader who was accused of collaborating with the Mussolini government during the war. The Quandt family in Germany, whose members serve as the main shareholders and board members of BMW, have similarly managed shocks to its leadership when family leaders were arrested in the late 1940s for their connections with the Nazi regime.[24]

Both families showed high pluralism by having multiple family members share leadership. Because younger members of the family were already involved in the businesses when the setbacks happened, the companies found it easier to ensure stability and continuity when senior members of the family could not fulfill their leadership roles. Such stability and continuity also characterize Hermès, the French luxury and fashion business. Pluralism at Hermès is manifested in the tendency to share leadership, for example, when the three sons-in-law of Émile Hermès jointly took over after his death. Shared leadership at Hermès was also reflected in the tendency to involve many family members in different roles, such as directors, managers, and designers, in the firm.

Pluralism helped stabilize family business dynasties in a couple of ways. First, recognizing that there are multiple ways to contribute to the success of the family business, successors and nonsuccessors found ways to collaborate after leadership transitions. By offering nonsuccessors various roles in the company or by developing partnerships between the family business and nonsuccessors' independent ventures (e.g., a new racing car company in the case of BMW, a new fashion house in the case of Hermès), successors helped ensure that nonsuccessors felt included and were motivated to collaborate with the family business and contribute to its success. These efforts prevented nonsuccessors from using their inside information to form new rival organizations that might have threatened the family business. Second, using pluralism to keep various family members engaged and committed to the success of the family business motivated them to pool their resources and defend against hostile takeover attempts by

outside investors. In this way, pluralism promoted the long-term stability and continuity of the family dynasty.

In contrast, the stories of the Vanderbilt and Gucci dynasties involved infighting for control and influence, the exclusion of family members from the business, and an inability to respond to sudden leadership changes or external threats. These examples bring to mind the three symptoms of broken hierarchies we encountered in Part 1. Importantly, the stability of the Agnelli, Quandt, and Hermès family business dynasties should not be equated with stagnation. Rather, these organizations changed over time in various ways. These changes included adding expertise, experience, and resources through marriages. Accepting newcomers in the form of in-laws, rather than sidelining them, helped the development and growth of these dynasties through pluralism. Other changes included the expansion of these family businesses in new directions. For example, the Agnelli family acquired the Juventus Football Club, and Hermès expanded into perfumes. Finally, Hermès increased gender equality in company leadership. These expressions of pluralism show that stability can facilitate positive change in organizations.

CONCLUSION

Pluralism may look different in an emergency trauma unit, an elite ballet company, a collegiate sports team, the US Army, and a Hollywood studio. Nonetheless, the underlying principle is the same: Creating multiple pathways to contribute, thrive, ascend, and lead helps employees fulfill fundamental needs at work and gain recognition and respect for their complementary contributions. In doing so, pluralism increases engagement, motivation, and value-adding behaviors that facilitate collective performance and success.[25] Pluralism lessens the harmful effects of social comparisons, helps dilute dominance, and promotes organizational resilience.

As this chapter illustrates, there are many ways to practice pluralism in your organization even if you don’t have co-CEOs or parallel hierarchies. In a public conversation at Stanford, General Motors CEO Mary Barra described herself as a leader who endorses pluralism. She noted, “My

leadership style, I really try to be inclusive. I don't have all the answers. I want the benefit of people who've come from different industries, have different perspectives, different countries. As we have to make some pretty tough decisions and deploy a pretty sizable amount of capital, I want to have that debate and that tension as we make those decisions." Giving voice to different perspectives and seeking advice from multiple colleagues is consistent with a pluralistic approach to organizational hierarchies.

There are various concrete actions that people at the top, middle, and bottom of the hierarchy can take when employing the pluralism principle to fix a broken hierarchy. These actions range widely, from working alongside frontline workers in a large garment factory to displaying open-mindedness to unique forms of contribution in a team of Himalayan mountain climbers. You may be in a position to implement some, most, or even all the solutions we covered in this chapter. Take the quiz "Can I Harness the Power of Pluralism?" to see which solutions apply to you and to remind yourself of the concrete remedies covered in this chapter. Just as you did for the quiz in Chapter 5, if you answer yes in response to a given solution, proceed to indicate how you might apply it in your organization. These answers will help you form concrete action plans for harnessing the power of pluralism in practice. However, if you answer no in response to a given solution, proceed to reflect on why you are currently unable to apply that solution. This exercise may help you discover ways to change your circumstances at work.

POP QUIZ

CAN I HARNESS THE POWER OF PLURALISM?

IN MY ORGANIZATION, I CAN…

1. Be supportive of colleagues who make different kinds of contributions **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____

_

Why?

_____
_

2. Create opportunities for employees to contribute in different ways **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

3. Publicly recognize and reward different kinds of contributions **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

4. Seek input and advice from multiple colleagues when making decisions **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

5. Establish parallel hierarchies **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

6. Choose to colead with someone who complements me **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

7. Appoint coleaders with complementary leadership styles to lead teams **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

8. Share leadership by delegating dynamically during specific times **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

9. Work alongside junior colleagues in a support function **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

10. Mentor, train, and empower junior colleagues **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

7 / RELATEDNESS

Broken hierarchies poison relationships. They spur conflict, jealousy, and resentment. Well-functioning hierarchies bring people closer together instead of pulling them apart. Applying the relatedness principle to fix a broken hierarchy begins with a simple question: How can I bring people closer together? Individual actions and organizational practices that undermine relationships should be replaced by those that support employees' fulfillment of the fundamental need to belong.

Fulfillment of the need to belong is essential for employee well-being.[1] Research shows that even brief experiences of social exclusion, such as being left out of a virtual ball-tossing game, are processed in our brain similarly to physical pain.[2] Conversely, interventions that support a sense of belonging in school can boost minority students' academic persistence and performance over time.[3] Investing time, effort, and money in other people promotes happiness and gives our lives meaning.[4] We are a social species, and much of our behavioral repertoire as humans—including hard work, conformity, and behaviors aimed at making a positive impression on others—is largely driven by our need to be included, liked, and respected by others.

Bringing people closer together does more than help fulfill employees' need to belong. It can also influence organizational survival and success. Leaders who understand the power of relatedness work to create a sense of solidarity among coworkers, thereby inspiring and motivating collective action among their followers. As described in Chapter 4, Herb Kelleher, the cofounder and CEO of Southwest Airlines, referred to the company's competition with United Airlines in a speech he recorded and shared with

employees. To rally all Southwest employees around the flag, he noted, "Why do I say that the United Shuttle potentially represents a grave threat to *all* of the people of Southwest Airlines? *All* of the people of Southwest Airlines. *All* of the people of Southwest Airlines. Do you hear the *all*? *All* of the people of Southwest Airlines. I say that, because *all* of the people of Southwest Airlines, and the future of *all* of the people of Southwest Airlines, are in jeopardy if we lose the initial battle with the United Shuttle."[5] (Watch the video online to hear his repeated emphasis of the word *all*.) Creating and emphasizing common fate is a powerful way to promote relatedness in your organization and to motivate greater effort and perseverance.[6]

As you will see in this chapter, there are many ways to promote relatedness on the path to fixing a broken hierarchy. Some of these involve changes to our everyday behavior, such as using verbal and nonverbal communication thoughtfully to strengthen connections among coworkers. Other ways involve system-wide changes, such as rethinking the incentives we use to motivate employee performance. These various approaches help employees feel validated, fulfilled, and connected to one another, thereby reducing tendencies toward social comparisons, ultracompetitive behavior, and destabilizing power struggles. When people feel greater inclusion and a sense of shared identity with others, they are more likely to take joy in others' successes and derive satisfaction and pride from collective accomplishments. Strong ties between coworkers help promote a culture where employees see and hear each other, respect others' perspectives as humans and coworkers, and value their colleagues' contributions to the organization. The following story about Upstand illustrates solutions that you can use to promote relatedness at work.

RELATEDNESS TAKES WORK

Upstand is a small improvisation ensemble.[7] It's governed by two simple rules that are easy to articulate but much harder to practice consistently. The first rule is "Be kind to yourself and others." The second rule is "Make your partner(s) look good." That's it: just eleven words that capture Upstand's philosophy and help its dozen members navigate the onstage and offstage

uncertainties of improv performance. “Coming onstage with no ideas and no preconceptions requires extreme trust in others,” says Julian, one of the founding members of Upstand. “You rehearse and you prepare meticulously, and yet you go onstage with basically nothing, like, you’re naked out there. You have got to be willing to take risks. You have to be okay with constantly performing on the edge of not knowing what the hell is happening.”

Upstand started without a director, but as the ensemble grew from four to twelve members, it transitioned to a rotating director system to promote coordination and facilitate decision-making. Some of the members had worked in film and scripted theater before, where having directors was the norm. “We don’t have a script, and we create our characters on the fly,” says Lydia, who works as a high school teacher in her full-time job. “So, there is no way for me to know what the other person is going to do next. We could be playing a scene together, and you would do something radical that I don’t expect.” Weaving stories together in front of an audience often feels like a tandem tightrope walk—without a safety net. “It’s just me out there,” she says. “My choices, my voice, my mistakes. I can’t blame the screenplay writer or the director if the scene does not work.”

The members of Upstand vividly recall moments when things did not work well for them, on the stage and off. Stage hogs who hoard speaking time, actors who steamroll others’ offers onstage, and stand-up comedians who try to shine at their partners’ expense are not accepted at Upstand. If they are mistakenly invited as guests, they are usually not invited back. “There was this one guy,” Susan recalls, “who just crapped all over what I was creating onstage. Deliberately. He just didn’t like the story I created so he changed it.”

Failures to connect also happen occasionally among regular ensemble members. Dorothy asks her colleague Ben, “Do you remember that show, when I came onstage and told you I was pregnant and thinking about an abortion, and you just kept making origami swans? What was your character thinking just then?”

Ben nods in acknowledgment and adds, “And there was this one time when Joe kept picking me up and literally moving me onstage. Do you remember that?” He looks around to see if others recall that incident. “I had to tell him very directly after the show that I am not okay with him

physically laying hands on me and pushing me around onstage like that," he says. Everyone remembered the debrief in the pub after that show. It was a difficult conversation despite the fact that Joe readily agreed he should not have done that.

That experience led the group to start doing regular check-ins before each practice and performance to gauge each member's level of comfort with different forms of communication. The check-ins helped everyone know how to interact with each other during scenes, whether someone was feeling particularly sensitive about a specific gesture or topic, and whether someone would like the others to give them more space that evening. These meetings also took away the pressure of trying to read others' minds in the moment. It was clear to all the members of the ensemble that there were limits to the improv philosophy of "yes, and…" both onstage and offstage, and it felt good to know these boundaries.

Relatedness takes work, and the members of Upstand invest time, effort, and thought into strengthening the bonds that connect them to each other and to the art form they love. They need to set their egos aside during workouts (the improv jargon for rehearsals) and ensemble meetings for that to happen onstage during performances. The same is true for listening, coordination, and cooperation. Communication exercises such as mirroring each other's verbal and nonverbal actions and telling *shared-control stories*, where one person continues where the other left off, help ensemble members achieve focus, synchrony, and coordination. Preshow rituals and warm-up exercises also help strengthen their connections. These include activities such as making up lists together ("Quick, ten things you can find in a jungle!") and synchronized tapping, where ensemble members follow the leader's rhythm and adapt to the changes the leader introduces, to maintain synchronicity within the group.

Working on relatedness helps Upstand members be present and focused *on others*. It helps them take a deep breath before jumping onstage into a scene, so that they can give other actors who are slower to react a chance to step forward first. Ensemble members' sense of relatedness reminds them that sometimes their character's role is to be the sidekick, letting another actor take center stage in the unfolding story. It teaches them to give others space and not keep score.

This strong sense of relatedness helps the members of Upstand to be

respectful and kind not only to fellow actors but also to the fictional characters they portray. Strong norms of relatedness ensure that all characters are well-rounded human beings rather than flat, cartoonish caricatures. Rather than asking, “What comes next? What should my next line be?” Upstand members intentionally ask themselves, “What else is happening in this person’s life? What else should I know about them?” These questions cultivate relatedness by constantly reminding ensemble members how rich and complex others’ lives are. By working hard to build their connections with each other and with the craft, the actors also deepen their connections with audience members, reducing the risk of unintentionally offensive performances.

The story of Upstand highlights how each of us individually, and all of us together, can foster relatedness by investing time and effort in trying to understand the lives of others. This story also illustrates the power of mindful communication for cultivating relatedness. It echoes some of the earlier examples we encountered about the power of mindful communication, such as Owen West’s active listening to Marco Siffredi when tension arose within their mountain climbing expedition, and David Hallberg’s thoughtful orchestration of a surprising promotion ceremony in the Australian Ballet at the Sydney Opera House. The next section considers several concrete actions you can take to promote relatedness through mindful communication.

THE POWER OF SHARING

When I got married, one of my graduate school advisers included with his gift a card that consisted of just two words and a letter: “Always play C.” He was a game theorist, and given the conventions in that field, I assumed he meant that I should always cooperate with my wife. Over the years, I have come to associate the C in his wedding card with communication rather than cooperation. Having been married for more than twenty years, I know how important communication is in a relationship.

Communication not only liberates our thoughts and feelings from the confines of our minds. It also helps others by reducing the need to guess how we feel and what we think. Employees don’t enjoy having to guess what their peers and bosses think. Research on leadership shows that

employees are much more likely to criticize their leaders for under-communicating than for over-communicating. Leaders who under-communicate are seen as less empathetic and therefore less qualified for a leadership role.[8] Don't expect others to read your mind. Instead, share what's on your mind. Find the right time, place, and way to communicate. If necessary, create opportunities to communicate by inviting them for lunch or a walk.[9] When you share with another person, you are not just expressing closeness; you are actively creating it.

Researchers studying close relationships have developed tried-and-true instructions for increasing interpersonal closeness between strangers in under an hour.[10] Their method is built entirely on self-disclosure. It involves a one-on-one conversation that begins with relatively mundane questions. They used questions such as "Would you like to be famous? In what way?," "What would constitute a 'perfect day' for you?," and "For what in your life do you feel most grateful?" Their second proposed stage moves into more personal topics that involve sharing more private information: "Is there something you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?," "What is your most treasured memory?," and "If a crystal ball could tell you . . . anything… what would you want to know?" The third and final stage involves sharing even more intimate feelings and allowing oneself to be vulnerable, which shows trust. For this stage, the researchers created questions such as "When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?," "Tell your partner something that you like about them already," and "If you were to die this evening… what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?"

Disclosing personal information makes people feel closer to one another. Research participants who followed this disclosure procedure reported greater overlap with the other person than did those who only engaged in small talk based on the researchers' instructions (e.g., chatting about favorite ice cream flavors, countries they would like to visit, or the last concert they attended). Sharing with others is a powerful way to generate relatedness, not only in controlled experiments but also in real-world interactions. Talking to strangers you don't expect to meet again may be

easier in some ways.[11] However, confiding in others in your organization may facilitate giving and receiving social support and instrumental help at work.

Keeping secrets creates social isolation and loneliness.[12] What's more, employees who are required to keep organizational secrets on behalf of their companies experience higher levels of stress, in part because secrecy limits their opportunities for connection and social support from others.[13] Numerous people are required to keep secrets at work every day. Attorneys and psychologists, police officers and physicians, government scientists and financial advisers, and many other employees must conceal information about their clients, projects, and their organization's plans. Sharing nonsecret information about your life may help you compensate for the secrets that you have to keep because of your job. It will help you connect with others, and it will help them see you as a well-rounded person with a rich and complex life that goes beyond what they typically see at work. Imagine learning that a coworker you barely know is married to their high school sweetheart, used to work in a circus, has a dozen grandchildren, or keeps a collection of rare coins from all over the world. Wouldn't that change how you see them? Finally, research on the power of sharing also shows that workplace performance tends to be significantly higher when employees have opportunities to share constructive suggestions and feel that others listen to them.[14]

All of us can occasionally benefit from helpful reminders to take a break from work and share with others. Some organizations invest considerable time and money in organizing various social events (e.g., off-sites, holiday parties). However, you could also use clever and much cheaper means to remind employees of the importance of sharing. For example, Professor Hooria Jazaieri of Santa Clara University introduced two-sided wristbands on campus to help community members remember to share with others. One side of the wristband reads "Ask me about my day #AMAMD," whereas the other side reads "Tell me about your day #TMAYD."[15] Wearing such a wristband on your arm or backpack, keeping it in a visible location on your desk, or giving it as a gift to someone else serves as a physical reminder of the power of sharing and the role that each of us can

play in boosting relatedness in our organizations. You can help fix a broken hierarchy by making time and space for connecting with others through sharing.

If you wish to increase relatedness in your team or organization, you don't have to wait for leaders to organize a three-day off-site or produce "Tell me, Ask me" wristbands. You could simply rethink some of your daily routines. If you eat your lunch in front of the computer to get more work done during your workday, slow down and make time to have lunch with others. If you typically rely on AI or other online resources to find answers to your queries, consider reaching out to your colleagues occasionally—either to seek their advice or to share advice in light of what you learned and discovered. If you commute to work—on foot, by car, or by train—try occasionally sharing part of your commute time with others. Walking and talking or even riding the train together can help promote relatedness.[16] While cultivating sustainable relatedness requires investing time and effort, this investment does not have to come all at once. Many small actions and moments add up to a meaningful whole.

Sharing with others how you feel—whether you are stressed or upset, happy or proud—can facilitate social support. Beyond deep conversations, there are multiple other ways to communicate how you feel and to give and receive social support. We can understand a wide range of emotional expressions conveyed through even a simple touch on the arm. These emotions include gratitude, sympathy, love, fear, anger, and disgust. We recognize these emotions in much the same way that we do from someone's tone of voice or facial expression. We can infer them not only when someone touches our arm but also when we observe a touch among others.[17]

Avoiding touch also sends a strong signal. Think about a professional soccer player who has just scored a goal. Some scorers run toward their teammates, hug them, and celebrate together, thereby expressing gratitude and appreciation for the pass that led to the goal, for being part of the team, and more. Such actions reinforce bonds among the players and potentially signal that the scorer is willing to share credit for the goal. In contrast, some scorers run away from their teammates and toward the audience in the stadium, celebrating the achievement and expressing their emotions in a

more individualistic fashion. This behavior potentially signals to teammates and observers that they wish to claim more of the credit for themselves or that they don't feel a strong sense of connection to teammates.

Research shows how communicating through touch helps NBA teams succeed. This nonverbal communication happens through fist bumps, high fives, chest bumps, half and full hugs, team huddles, and more. Teammates who communicate through touch frequently early in the season generally behave more cooperatively later in the season. For example, they pass the basketball to teammates who are less closely defended, set screens to help teammates escape defensive pressure, and help teammates on defense. These cooperative behaviors, in turn, predict both an individual player's performance and the team's performance.[18] A similar pattern was observed in NCAA women's basketball. Researchers found that when a player misses a free throw, a quick touch from a teammate—a hand tap on the shoulder, the back, or another body part—positively predicts the likelihood of making the second free throw. These simple, split-second displays of social support help players perform in stressful situations.[19]

There are many ways to communicate our support to those around us, and it's up to us to choose those that are most desirable, feasible, and appropriate, depending on the circumstances. High fives and team huddles may fit some situations, whereas a pat on the shoulder or a handshake may be more suitable elsewhere.

Another way to communicate to others how you feel and to give, receive, and acknowledge social support is a letter of gratitude. Consider the real case of one student who sent hundreds of heartfelt thank-you letters and notes of appreciation to her teachers over the years.[20] Her handwritten letters of gratitude continuously supported and encouraged more than seventy teachers and staff members long after she had moved on to other classrooms and schools. By writing hundreds of letters, this young student promoted a culture of kindness and strengthened relatedness in every school she attended. She supported pluralism by acknowledging the different ways that teachers had helped her overcome challenges as a student and person. And she reinforced respect as a shared common value, recognizing the unique and valuable contributions of each teacher.

Gratitude letters sometimes come from the very top of the organization.

When Douglas Conant was the CEO of Campbell Soup Company, he used his long hours of daily commute to handwrite personal thank-you letters to employees.[21] Upon his retirement, he calculated that he had sent more than thirty thousand of these letters to employees in more than thirty countries. These letters acknowledged the employees' contributions and helped create a culture in which contributions are recognized and celebrated. As these examples illustrate, anyone can write gratitude letters, regardless of their role, rank, or tenure in the organization. Over the years, I have been fortunate to receive multiple heartwarming, meaningful, and memorable thank-you notes from students, research assistants, journal editors, and other people with whom I have worked. An organization where gratitude flows in all directions—from the top down, sideways, and from the bottom up—is far more likely to fulfill employees' need to belong than is an organization characterized by ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability.

THE POWER OF PROSOCIAL EMOTIONS

The ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability that characterize broken hierarchies produce multiple negative emotions. Ultracompetitiveness fuels greed, jealousy, and disappointment. Injustice breeds frustration, anger, and hostility. Instability propagates worry, fear, and distress. Hence, you might assume that any positive emotion would help counteract the harmful effects of broken hierarchies. However, one particular class of emotions—*prosocial emotions*—is uniquely positioned to bring people closer together. Importantly, although not all prosocial emotions are positive, they all reflect an external focus on others (or society and the world more broadly) and a concern with others' welfare. You can help repair a broken hierarchy by expressing prosocial emotions—such as gratitude, empathy, compassion, embarrassment, awe, and guilt—and by encouraging others to do the same. Expressing these emotions is a powerful way to show care and concern for the people around you. It helps those around you feel seen and appreciated and supports a norm of respect in your organization.

Our experience of prosocial emotions facilitates behaviors that strengthen our relationships with others. For example, embarrassment

occurs when we recognize that we have failed to meet a certain standard of behavior. This self-conscious emotion motivates us to do better. It propels us to appease others, thereby strengthening our connection with them.[22] Our embarrassment also signals to others that we are self-aware, that we care about how they see us and our relationship with them, and that, therefore, they can trust us to act in socially responsible ways in the future.[23] Guilt is another prosocial emotion that supports relatedness in two complementary ways. First, it predisposes us to avoid transgressions in the first place—we are less likely to offend others if we are prone to feeling guilty as part of our psychological makeup. Second, guilt motivates us to take remedial actions after a transgression.[24] The tendency to feel guilt makes people more committed and responsible toward others, qualities that employees and organizations wish to see in leaders.[25] Finally, empathy (the ability to connect with others' emotional needs and experiences) and compassion (attending and reacting to others' misfortunes and suffering specifically) also facilitate connection and collaboration.[26] These emotions decrease the likelihood that employees and managers will engage in unkind and unjust behaviors that hurt others in the organization.

While feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and empathy can be taxing and unpleasant to experience, other prosocial emotions such as gratitude, awe, and pride are distinctly positive.[27] They motivate us to behave prosocially by shifting our attention away from ourselves. We might focus instead on others who supported us (gratitude).[28] Or we might appreciate a collective experience that is greater than ourselves (awe).[29] Or we might focus on socially desirable standards of behavior that we aspire to meet or exceed (pride).[30] Prosocial emotions promote behaviors that increase relatedness, and positive reciprocity helps create a virtuous cycle of prosocial behaviors and feelings when we respond to others' actions in kind. Hence, when we experience and express prosocial emotions, we can help steer broken hierarchies away from the ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability that characterize them.

THE POWER OF FAMILY LABELS

Another communicative behavior that can increase relatedness among coworkers is the use of family metaphors and roles to frame teamwork. Labels such as mother, father, sister, and brother are more common at work in places like the Philippines and Puerto Rico than in the mainland United States.[31] Family metaphors evoke feelings of closeness, safety, and long-term commitment, which are meaningfully different from the feelings evoked by teamwork metaphors taken from the domains of sport and military life. As the following example illustrates, the use of family labels can do more than reflect feelings of closeness. It can mobilize social support in times of need. To see this strategy at work, consider the experiences of Ayesha, a constable in the Pakistani police force.[32]

Ayesha's family initially objected to her decision to become a police officer, an uncommon occupational choice for women in Pakistan. They were worried that working alongside men who are not immediate family members, sometimes alone and occasionally at night, would tarnish her reputation and dishonor her family by portraying her as an immoral and promiscuous woman. Ayesha shares these concerns. While on duty, she often encounters public taunts that specifically target her reputation. Ayesha employs various strategies to cope with the challenges she faces at work. To manage her own worries and to make sure that she is treated professionally, Ayesha veils her face, wearing a chador and niqab in addition to an abaya over her uniform. The full-length cloak and veil, which leave only her eyes uncovered and hide her uniform and rank below additional layers of clothes, violate formal police force requirements that uniforms and ranks be visible on duty. However, her attire helps Ayesha manage concerns about culturally improper ties with men at work.

Ayesha sometimes finds herself in challenging situations, such as when an assignment makes her the only woman in a particular space at work. In those situations, Ayesha uses family roles when communicating with coworkers. She refers to a colleague of similar age and status as "brother" (bhai) and to a colleague of older and higher status as "uncle" (chacha). She then explains the situation from her perspective and asks for their help in resolving it. This strategy is sometimes also directed at more senior women colleagues, whom she calls "mother" (amma) or "aunt" (khala). The

practice of addressing coworkers and even strangers by family labels is common in many cultures, and much of its power comes from its ubiquity and cultural appropriateness. Hence, this relatedness-enhancing strategy is consistent not only with the relatedness principle but also with the common value principle in our framework.

This simple strategy enables Ayesha to recruit others' support as she manages challenges at work. Her use of family labels at work is a subtle, powerful, and culturally appropriate strategy that does not challenge or change the workplace hierarchy; instead, it reshapes its relational meaning. This strategy influences how other people—and specifically the senior men in the police force—perceive the situation and their responsibility to protect Ayesha's reputation. This wonderfully simple approach helps Ayesha feel better protected at work.

The use of family labels does four things simultaneously. First, it conveys respect toward more senior colleagues. Second, it creates strong bonds by activating the notion of family ties in a cultural setting where family is an extremely powerful source of identity and meaning. Third, it invokes strong cultural norms that require family members such as a father, mother, uncle, aunt, and brother to protect a young woman, including safeguarding her reputation and honor. For example, family members should not place a young woman in an uncomfortable situation with unfamiliar men. Finally, these labels promote feelings of safety by desexualizing the situation. Reframing everyone's roles through the lens of family relationships and values activates the duties to protect and care for others. This readily available linguistic tool draws on rich cultural knowledge and helps Ayesha navigate difficult situations at work. It increases relatedness between coworkers and shifts some of the burden of protecting her reputation to more senior colleagues at work. By sharing this burden, Ayesha lifts some of the responsibility off her own shoulders while strengthening her connections with others. She thus recruits and mobilizes others to act in helpful and supportive ways.

The story of Ayesha shows how a simple and readily available communicative tool can help a low-ranking member of an organizational hierarchy cope with injustice—having to face hardships and reputational risks they don't deserve—by increasing relatedness with coworkers. It also highlights the importance of identifying relatedness-based solutions and

strategies that work within the context of one's work organization and national culture.

While using family labels to recruit others' social support at work may not apply everywhere, the underlying idea of reframing the situation by using communication to change its relational meaning applies in many settings. If others' use of sports metaphors fuels intense and counterproductive competitiveness in your organizational hierarchy, you could try to change the conversation by introducing less competitive metaphors.

THE POWER OF HUMOR

Using appropriate and inclusive humor can increase relatedness among coworkers by infusing interpersonal warmth and levity into work situations.[33] Research on impression management shows that appropriate use of humor that signals competence and warmth can strengthen relationships by increasing a person's status, increasing interest from potential employers, and promoting business collaborations between founders and investors.[34]

The appropriate use of humor can also help employees with low-status roles influence employees in higher-status roles without damaging relationships, even in stressful situations that require swift action. These findings come from research on social influence in interactions between 911 dispatchers and police officers.[35] The dispatchers' primary responsibility is to send police officers to respond to emergencies. They get information about problematic situations around the city and use the radio to dispatch officers quickly to the location where their help or intervention is needed. Even though dispatchers' work is an essential component of the operations of a police force, officers sometimes disrespect dispatchers. For example, they label them "call center people" and use other terms they see as demeaning. Unlike police officers, dispatchers are not sworn into duty. They have civilian status, and they have desk jobs. There is often also a gender gap, with more women among the dispatchers. The problem is that officers sometimes ignore dispatchers and don't respond to the radio even

after repeated calls. Their reluctance to comply with dispatchers' instructions is quite concerning for all of us!

The low regard often given to dispatchers makes it difficult for them to influence police officers, which is a necessary aspect of their jobs. This form of mistreatment by the police officers not only harms dispatchers' well-being and relationships with coworkers but also undermines their ability to do their work and the public's ability to receive timely responses to emergencies. Clearly, this is not just a workplace issue; this is an all-of-us issue.

What would you do if you were a 911 dispatcher working in a broken system? What if you couldn't do your job because police officers didn't respect your role? You could try to accommodate the problematic officers by deviating from protocol—for instance, by using a private radio channel and making personal appeals. Perhaps you could offer to do their paperwork for them even though it's not your responsibility. But taking on such a job would be unfair, and indulging noncompliant coworkers may only make your life more difficult. You could try to escalate things up the hierarchy. However, supervisors and sergeants don't like being dragged into conflicts and prefer that you—the 911 dispatcher—solve these issues on your own, without asking them to discipline others.

The solution to the problem in this case came from a thoughtful and creative use of humor that simultaneously increased dispatchers' influence and promoted relatedness in the workforce. Dispatchers humorously bantered about the nonresponsive police officers on the peer radio channel. For example, noticing that the police car was situated next to a barbecue place, they would comment that they heard that place had fantastic pulled pork and potato chips. Or if they saw that the police car was stationed next to a casino, they would comment that the officer should probably give it a try if they have spare time because someone recently won a lot of money there. When other officers heard the bantering over the radio, some of them weighed in ("He's a blackjack pro, I heard." "Has a poker face too." "Wasn't he a dealer too, way back?"). The peer pressure from other police officers who responded to the dispatcher's humor then made the reluctant police officer succumb to the collective bantering and respond to the radio.

Using humor to produce peer pressure in a lighthearted way illustrates how thoughtful communication that shapes others' emotions and actions

can help address a hierarchy-related problem. The dispatchers' thoughtful use of humor facilitated collaboration with the police officers, helped the people in both roles perform their jobs better, and kept everyone in the community safer.

Similar to sharing, expressing prosocial emotions, and using family labels, humor influences people by shaping their feelings. The effectiveness of the relatedness-enhancing solutions discussed in this chapter often comes from their impact on other people's emotions. When we scale these communicative behaviors from the level of individual employees to entire teams and work units, the result is an emotional culture that emphasizes joy and companionate love.

EMOTIONAL CULTURES OF JOY AND COMPANIONATE LOVE

Your organization's emotional culture is a serious matter. When Patricia (Patti) Poppe joined Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) as its CEO, she thought about the safety of employees and customers as more than just an operational challenge with financial implications. Rather, she thought about it as an essential aspect of the cultural change she sought to promote. In a public conversation at Stanford University, she defined safety as an expression of "leading with love." According to Poppe, caring for coworkers means keeping them safe. As a PG&E employee, you show your love for coworkers and customers "by having the courage to say to someone more senior than you: 'Wait, I don't understand,' or 'Are you sure that's safe?'… Leading with love is something that we do every single day."

Poppe chose to prioritize relatedness as one of the main solutions to the crises that led PG&E to recruit her as CEO. But as an outsider who did not rise through the ranks within the company, she faced skepticism from company insiders who heard of her ideas for cultural change. She recounted, "My union president… said to me one day early on in my tenure… , 'Patti, you've got to drop that "lead with love" business.… You're losing credibility.' I said, 'Oh, Bob, no, no, wait, buckle in. There's more where that came from. I'm going to love you right through all this.'… A year or two later, he pulled me aside and he's like, 'You know what, I think there's something to it.' He and I attended too many serious incident

reviews, and we know that… to make our communities safe, we have to insist that we keep each other safe." A culture of love and concern for each other was Poppe's pathway to creating an organization where caring about safety and caring about coworkers and customers go hand in hand. It was her way to create a hierarchy where subordinates can bring up safety issues with supervisors.

Teams and organizations where employees regularly express anger, annoyance, frustration, grumpiness, and irritation have an emotional culture of anger (note that the emphasis is on expression rather than experienced emotions). Organizations whose employees regularly express affection, care, compassion, and tenderness have an emotional culture of companionate love. And groups whose employees regularly express cheerfulness, enthusiasm, excitement, happiness, and joy have an emotional culture of joy.[36]

Broken hierarchies are typically characterized by negative emotional cultures. Ultracompetitiveness generates envy and jealousy, injustice generates anger and frustration, and instability generates fear and distress. In contrast, well-functioning hierarchies make employees feel appreciated, supported, and connected and give rise to the positive emotional cultures of joy and companionate love. When scaled to the level of teams and work units, the relatedness-oriented solutions we encountered earlier, including getting close to others through sharing, expressing prosocial emotions, and using appropriate and inclusive humor, create cultures of joy and companionate love.

When I think about a team culture of joy and companionate love, I think of the Stanford University women's volleyball team. Attending many of the team's games, my daughter and I saw genuine joy and affection. We saw teammates who laughed, huddled, and enjoyed being together. We saw teammates who had fun doing what they did and supported each other as they worked toward shared goals. Their joy was contagious, and it put a smile on our faces too. When you smile at another person genuinely, they are likely to smile back at you. When you enter a room with excitement and energy, you are also likely to lift the spirits of others in that room. When you ask someone, "How do you feel?" with genuine care and take the time to listen attentively to their answer, both of you are likely to feel better.

Emotions are often contagious. Therefore, the emotions you express are likely to spread and make others feel the same way. There are other ways beyond temporary emotional expressions to influence the emotional culture of a team or an organization, such as those we encountered earlier in this chapter. By taking steps like writing letters of gratitude or using appropriate humor, everyone—regardless of their rank or role—can contribute to a positive emotional culture in their organization. When many people regularly use these tools, joy and companionate love become the norm. Most of us wish to behave appropriately and to conform to established norms. Hence, conformity can further reinforce a positive emotional culture.[37]

You may think that the joy young athletes on a university campus experience simply reflects a momentary celebration of success. Why wouldn't these athletes smile, come together, and enjoy the moment? You are correct that celebrating successes helps sustain a culture of joy. Yet emotional cultures of joy or companionate love aren't limited to teams of young athletes or to the immediate moments following collective successes. Furthermore, you can probably think about teams and organizations with broken hierarchies where employees don't feel joy or companionate love around their coworkers and don't express these emotions publicly even after collective achievements.

Tara VanDerveer, the celebrated basketball coach mentioned in the Introduction, tells the story of a walk-on athlete who never got to play in games because other players were more capable than her. When VanDerveer asked her players to write on index cards what they saw as their contribution to the team, this athlete wrote, "Spread sunshine." From the bottom of the hierarchy of a national championship team, she saw her role as offering support, kindness, and positivity. This informal role was valued and appreciated by the team, consistent with the principle of pluralism, which was essential for keeping her highly motivated and reinforcing the team's overall positive emotional culture.

Another story from VanDerveer illustrates how sisterhood and kindness don't stop at the boundaries of the team. These qualities also extend to outsiders and can reveal themselves even in unpleasant circumstances. One time, the team traveled to Kyiv, Ukraine. It was a freezing January night,

and the team was scheduled to leave the hotel at 3:30 a.m. As athletes boarded the bus, one of the players noticed a group of women in very thin jackets begging outside of the hotel. This player not only gave the women the money she had in her pocket but also opened her suitcase and started handing out some of her belongings. Inspired by her actions, other teammates opened their suitcases and did the same. Expressions of compassion and sisterhood were on display, even when the team encountered strangers in need on a freezing night in Kyiv.

It's extremely difficult, if not impossible, to maintain kindness 100 percent of the time under all circumstances. However, emotional cultures of joy and companionate love can promote resilience (bouncing back from adversity) and help employees cope with challenging experiences and hard times. A survey of more than fourteen hundred employees at a German childcare company asked the employees to what extent they expressed emotions such as joy, excitement, affection, and compassion in their work unit. The researchers found that a culture of joy strengthened coworker relationships, thereby promoting team resilience.[38] In a study of a very different work environment, US Army tank crews were surveyed about the extent to which they observed their crewmates express hope, optimism, and eagerness, either verbally or nonverbally. The researchers found that a culture of optimism enabled crews to bounce back from poor performance in a high-stakes, international training exercise.[39] Hence, positive emotional cultures are beneficial both when things go well and when they don't.

Some organizations embed their desired emotional cultures into their corporate values and mission statements. Explicitly endorsing a culture of joy or companionate love sends a strong signal to employees, customers, and other stakeholders that they are expected to express positive emotions and engage in daily acts of kindness and support. Some organizations in the hospitality industry explicitly endorse an emotional culture of joy, and some healthcare organizations explicitly endorse an emotional culture of companionate love.[40] Positive emotional cultures can help reduce ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability on the path to fixing a broken hierarchy.

An airline that uses a heart with wings as its symbol (Southwest

Airlines) or a pharmacy that greets you with a large sign that reads "We are happy to help" (a Safeway pharmacy with kind and helpful employees in my neighborhood) can signal and support a positive emotional culture. The same holds for an office whose tradition of holiday decorations turns organizational spaces into spectacles of playfulness and affection. Whether it's Halloween, Thanksgiving, or other holidays and events during the year, the time, effort, and creativity that the staff members at my school invest in decorating their office spaces lights up the hallways for several meaningful weeks every year. Such organizational symbols and practices help reinforce positive emotional cultures. They communicate to employees, customers, and others that the organization values these expressions of joy and companionate love, and they help bring people closer together. When such emotional expressions come from role models at the top of the organization, the effect is amplified and broadcast to a large audience. However, such expressions are also impactful and meaningful when coming from other directions. Everyday acts of kindness—a sincere smile, active listening, or an honest expression of concern—can come from anyone, at any level in the hierarchy.

The relatedness-enhancing solutions we reviewed so far focus on individual actions. In addition to individual actions, relatedness can be promoted through institutional means, by compartmentalizing competition, rethinking incentive systems, and focusing on kindness explicitly when selecting, training, and retaining employees. The following sections shift the focus from individual action to institutional remedies.

COMPARTMENTALIZING COMPETITION

In Chapter 2, I distinguished between healthy competition that motivates employees to show initiative and do their best and harmful ultracompetitiveness where employees undermine and sabotage each other's efforts and achievements. You may wonder how encouraging healthy competition aligns with relatedness. Applying the relatedness principle in your organization does not mean advocating for zero competition. Rather, it underscores the importance of creating amicable, respectful, and collectively beneficial rivalry within organizations. Rivalry is a long-term relationship. It involves giving someone mental real estate in

our minds, keeping track of how well they do, and potentially imitating and learning from them as we try to perform better. No one has a rivalry with someone they disregard or disrespect. While rivals can be a consistent source of struggle and frustration in our lives, they can also be a source of reflection, growth, inspiration, learning, and achievement.[41]

If you're a tennis fan, you know that Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal are two of the most decorated tennis players and storied rivals in the twenty-first century. When Federer announced his retirement, Nadal posted a public letter that reveals his respect for his rival:

> Dear Roger, my friend and rival.
> I wish this day would have never come. It's a sad day for me personally and for sports around the world.
>
> It's been a pleasure but also an honor and privilege to share all these years with you, living so many amazing moments on and off the court.[42]

Nadal holds an overall 24–16 win-loss record against Federer in ATP tournaments. His expression of gratitude and respect to a rival to whom he had lost ten finals over the years highlights the essential role that respect plays in rivals' relationships, even in a highly competitive and very hierarchical sport that rank-orders all athletes ceaselessly. Notably, this expression of gratitude and respect does not diminish Nadal's achievements. If anything, it elevates him in the eyes of other tennis players and the public. A few years later, when Nadal retired, Federer posted on social media an announcement and photo that showed both of them side by side, in tears. He thanked Nadal for the unforgettable memories and honored his incredible achievements, many of which came when the two of them competed directly with each other.[43]

One of the hallmarks of relatedness is positive reciprocity. Expressing prosocial emotions like gratitude and conveying respect propel people to respond in kind. People who feel secure in their status are more likely to acknowledge and celebrate others' successes and to share credit with those around them. In contrast, people who experience status insecurity worry that sharing credit or attracting attention to others' accomplishments will

diminish their status. However, research demonstrates that these fears are misplaced. Sharing status enhances the status of both the giver and the receiver in the eyes of others.[44] Expressions of gratitude that highlight others' contributions and pay them respect not only bolster relatedness but also signal security in your own status. This sense of security, in turn, reduces the likelihood of ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability.

Fierce competition can coexist with respect, admiration, gratitude, and positive reciprocity if we can make sure competition stays on the court. To cultivate healthy competition within a team or an organization, we need to confine it to specific times and places where it's necessary and useful and require collaboration and support in all other interactions. Compartmentalizing competition spatially and temporally—explicitly deciding that competition is only appropriate in given locations and during specific tasks—can help reduce the likelihood of its spilling over to other situations and damaging relationships. This solution helps protect relationships and the integrity of the team, thereby enabling healthy competition to exist while maintaining high levels of relatedness.

As illustrated in the story of Julie and Laura's seat race in Chapter 2, a head-to-head competition with a teammate can be a source of considerable strain. To prevent seat races from undermining relatedness within the team, a rowing coach might designate seat races as the only time when fierce and intense competition within the team is appropriate. Defining the boundaries of that competition clearly and distinguishing it from all other spaces where collegiate athletes interact (e.g., dorms, classrooms, dining halls) can help rowers manage the challenging experience of competing against their closest friends. It can also help lessen the concern that competing fiercely on the water will impinge on other aspects of their shared lives.

Limiting competitiveness to certain times is not easy to accomplish. However, it seems to work better than allowing competitions to be ever present and to permeate all interactions. The rowers we interviewed for this book referred to this practice as "leaving competition on the water." Here is how one of our interviewees described this approach:

> I'd say seat racing is very difficult to kind of come to terms with as a team. I don't think there's really a lot of other sports that pit

> teammates against each other this way, where one teammate's win is another teammate's loss. And there's kind of a ladder that's created. … I'd say it's also hard for those people that see themselves not doing well in the seat racing ladder, because their self-confidence is really demeaned, especially since the whole team can see their result, … and they feel pretty alienated and bad about themselves.… I've been on both sides of it, and I'd say there's no good way to really handle it. I think, ideally, I would like to be someone who sort of leaves what happens on the water, like what happens on the water happens on the water; we compete on the water, we come back and we're still a team.

Other rowers noted that despite the fierce competition during the seat races, teammates managed to leave rivalry on the water. They acknowledged what happened and moved on, in part by accepting that the rowers selected for the boat would be the best ones to represent the team in an upcoming regatta. Collegiate athletes in other sports similarly noted in the interviews with us that their teams aim to protect relationships and maintain a highly supportive team spirit by keeping competition on the field, on the court, or wherever the particular sport is played.

Despite the challenge of restricting competition, people's passion for what they do, the existence of strong bonds between teammates, and people's commitment to the integrity of their team and its shared purpose enable them to buy into this approach. The solution requires consensus among teammates. If some teammates revisit, relive, and rehash their experiences of winning or losing competitions against other teammates at various times, this behavior may undermine the effectiveness of the solution. No one likes to be reminded of a stinging loss. By collectively agreeing to confine competition to specific times and places and to make all other spaces safe from intense competition, teams may avoid slipping into dysfunctional ultracompetitiveness while still maintaining high levels of healthy competition and relatedness.

RETHINKING INCENTIVES

Another institutional approach supporting relatedness modifies the traditional use of incentives. With this approach, organizations offer incentives that don't create a strict rank ordering of their members. This solution applies to both material rewards and nonmaterial rewards such as recognition. To avoid pitting teammates against each other in head-to-head competitions for relative standing, organizations can shift the emphasis of their incentive systems from "win-centives" to "we-centives." To this end, organizations can offer rewards that are equally accessible to all the members of a particular group or category of employees, for example, team-based bonuses and recognition rather than individual rewards for winners of competitions.[45]

Many kinds of incentives in organizations are based on membership rather than relative standing. For example, when an organization provides favorable working conditions or a desirable work environment, all the employees who are located in the same space will typically have access to these incentives. Think about public goods such as free food and drinks, shuttle services, childcare, gym access, fitness classes, educational programs, and cultural events. Normally, these organizational benefits are equally accessible to all the members of a particular location or division. These perks increase positive feelings of pride and joy, thereby supporting collaboration. Additionally, they promote relatedness when team members consume these benefits together, such as when they take their meals or attend a concert together. In this way, "we-centives" create opportunities to connect and intensify positive emotions through shared experiences.[46]

Incentives don't have to be given identically or simultaneously to everyone to dissuade harmful ultracompetitiveness. Other allocation rules, such as turn-taking, are readily available. A manufacturing plant, a bank, or a nonprofit that wishes to recognize the contributions of outstanding employees or volunteers can celebrate them and reward them in turn. When a single employee gets a certificate and a cash reward for being named employee of the month, this practice does not create a rank-ordered hierarchy between those who are better off and those who are worse off. Different people can get the same recognition and financial reward, in turn, if they meet or exceed the criteria set by the organization. As long as the allocation of these rewards adheres to established principles of justice, such

as transparency, consistency, and lack of bias, they can serve an important motivational function without undermining relatedness among coworkers.

SELECTING, TRAINING, AND RETAINING PEOPLE FOR KINDNESS

Opportunities to promote relatedness exist throughout the employment cycle. This cycle begins when a job candidate first learns about the organization and considers joining it and ends only after the employee leaves the organization. To reap the benefits of relatedness, we should emphasize it during recruiting and selection, training and promotion, and even dismissal.

The emphasis on relatedness in recruitment corresponds with what Robert "Bob" Sutton, our colleague at Stanford, called the "no asshole rule" in his book by that name. This rule, which was designed "to keep demeaning and arrogant jerks" out of the hiring process, became a legitimate hiring consideration in his department, according to Sutton.[47] At the other end of the employment cycle, Theodore Miclau, the previously mentioned orthopedic surgeon at UCSF, shared that physicians who struggle to buy into the norms of relatedness he promotes at UCSF sometimes opt to search for organizations that offer a better fit for their self-first approach.

When employees join a new workplace, they go through numerous experiences that teach them not only how to get the job done but also the norms and culture of the organization. These experiences provide opportunities for the organization to introduce and reinforce norms of relatedness. Consider the norms that new employees encounter during work meetings. Fatima Rodriguez, the previously mentioned section chief of preventive cardiology at Stanford Medicine, makes sure that everyone is heard during work meetings. She does so by encouraging everyone to voice concerns related to patient care and safety, regardless of whether they are a nurse, a medical assistant, or a physician. She prevents any one person from dominating discussions and is very intentional in inviting quieter people to speak up. If some people shut down or withhold their comments, she respects their choice but follows up with them one-on-one after the

meeting. She seeks to learn about their decision to keep silent during the meeting and checks how they feel about the group discussion. By applying this process consistently, she has made contributing to group discussions the norm in her section.

We often overlook opportunities to improve organizations through subtractive changes.[48] Are there policies, procedures, and practices in your organization you could eliminate, reduce, or simplify to promote relatedness? Before Mary Barra became the CEO of General Motors, one of her roles in the company was vice president of global human resources. Reflecting on her time in HR, she recalled how removing the dress code was an opportunity to express trust in employees' judgment, thereby redirecting organizational culture toward greater relatedness: "You know, looking at the dress code, it was long. And you think about it, we have people who work in assembly plants,… we have people who are meeting with government officials,… people who are meeting with dealers. How can you possibly put in a manual how everyone should dress? And then, frankly, if most of these people we're trusting to… keep people safe or… [be] responsible for huge things and we can't trust them to wear the right clothes? So, we changed the dress code to 'Dress appropriately.'" This change in the HR policy did more than reflect trust in employees' judgment. It also enabled people to bring more of who they are to work, thereby opening new avenues for employees to connect with coworkers by sharing and expressing themselves at work.

Socialization processes can also promote relatedness by training employees to be kind. Supervisors often provide employees with feedback, and because honest feedback is valued, there is a risk that some bosses will use feedback sessions to be mean, cruel, or brutal in the name of honesty.[49] Sometimes, negative feedback is unavoidable. However, this kind of feedback does not need to be unkind. Rather, it should be delivered constructively. Research shows that feedback is most effective in enhancing performance when it's positive and helps employees find actionable solutions to problems. Discouraging feedback does not promote subsequent performance.[50] To make sure that honest feedback is shared respectfully, we should train supervisors on how to give kind and effective feedback.

This sort of training in kindness (i.e., interactional justice) can have

lasting effects on employee well-being. Research in healthcare found that organizational changes that resulted in pay cuts caused a spike in insomnia among the affected nurses, making them literally lose sleep. Insomnia levels remained high for several months among nurses whose supervisors did not receive training in kindness. In contrast, insomnia levels decreased substantially among nurses whose supervisors were trained to enact greater kindness—to treat nurses with politeness, dignity, and respect and to provide emotional support. This effect was evident immediately after supervisors' kindness training and six months later.[51] These findings suggest that kindness from bosses can improve employees' coping abilities and well-being during adverse experiences such as significant reductions in pay.

To treat employees with dignity and respect, you'll want to show kindness also when they leave the organization—when they resign, retire, or are dismissed. You can help people feel seen and heard by investing time and effort in high-quality listening, which has been shown to have powerful effects in organizations.[52] Asking people who have worked in an organization for a long time to quickly clear their desks or offices disregards the important role that workplace relationships play in the lives of those leaving as well as those who stay behind. When you give people the time and space to say their goodbyes respectfully, you promote kindness in organizations in a way that's consistent with the relatedness principle in the CPR framework.

Showing an employee respect and gratitude even during dismissal is important both for the departee and for those who remain. It is also important for the managers who must communicate these decisions and for the organization's reputation among candidates, customers, investors, and partnering organizations. Consider the *keeper test*, a concept introduced by Reed Hastings, the cofounder and executive chair of Netflix. Hastings recognized that dismissing an employee who works hard but who is not effective in their job can feel like a disloyal action and can disrupt the need to balance excellence in performance with honoring relationships. He wrestled with the question of how to be honest, fair, inclusive, and thoughtful as a leader while achieving excellence. The keeper test was his solution. It forced managers to consider whether they would fight to keep

someone if that employee were thinking of leaving. If the answer is no, then the managers should respectfully part with the employee. Respect is conveyed by acknowledging the dismissed employee's hard work and career goals and making it clear that the decision is not a judgment of their character. Respect is also reflected in recognizing their needs and supporting them through generous severance packages. By instructing managers to be respectful and by offering financial support, organizations help dismissed employees and their managers cope with the negative feelings that arise when professional relationships end. Giving employees time to process the news and making managers available to answer questions later, as employees try to make sense of what happened, also shows respect and consideration of employees' needs.

Not all exits are forced; some employees leave voluntarily or retire. These transitions are also opportunities to reinforce relatedness. Taking the time to say goodbye properly will promote kindness and justice, giving employees the recognition they deserve. It conveys that although change and innovation are welcome, people's past contributions created a legacy that's valuable and worth cherishing. In well-functioning hierarchies, even relatively young employees recognize the importance of respect when the time comes for a particular coworker to leave or retire. For example, a young dancer we interviewed shared this view of retirements in professional ballet: "I watched the dancers retire, and it's a very respectful thing because it's your identity. You've been doing it since you were four. It's very emotional.… Some dancers handle it well, some really don't.… You give them space, you give them time… because everyone kind of knows anything else you do after this career is going to be second.… This is their whole life dream, so once you move on, it's very delicate." When young employees show such maturity, empathy, and compassion by appreciating the emotional and relational challenges of transitions they have yet to experience personally, their actions contribute meaningfully to others' experiences of relatedness at work.

CONCLUSION

There are many ways to increase relatedness at work. Some of the tools presented in this chapter focus on mindful communication. Active listening,

reciprocal sharing, checking in to see how people are feeling, writing gratitude letters, showing up with energy and a smile, using family labels or appropriate and inclusive humor, and expressing prosocial emotions are communicative behaviors available to many employees regardless of their role, rank, or tenure in the organization. When you aggregate positive behaviors that take place one-on-one and in small-group interactions across hundreds or thousands of employees in an organization, you get a positive emotional culture that promotes relatedness and decreases ultracompetitiveness, injustice, and instability.

Going beyond everyday communicative behaviors, you can also shape organizational policies and practices to promote relatedness at work. Compartmentalizing competition, reorienting incentive systems toward public goods, encouraging contributions to group discussions, simplifying policies such as dress codes to signal trust, training supervisors in interactional justice, and treating retirements and dismissals with respect and care all help bolster relatedness in organizations. These institutional interventions supplement positive everyday communication on the path to a repaired hierarchy. You may be able to implement some, most, or even all the solutions covered in this chapter. Take the brief quiz "Can I Harness the Power of Relatedness?" on the following page to see which solutions are most relevant to you. As you have done in Chapters 5 and 6, if you answered yes to a particular question, proceed to answer the how question that follows it, to develop concrete action plans. Alternatively, if you responded no to a particular question, respond to the why question that follows it, to reflect on how you might change your approach over time.

POP QUIZ

CAN I HARNESS THE POWER OF RELATEDNESS?

IN MY ORGANIZATION, I CAN…

1. Create opportunities for reciprocal sharing **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____

_

Why?

_____

_

2. Check in with coworkers and engage in active listening **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____

_

Why?

_____

_

3. Send personal gratitude letters to others **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____

_

Why?

_____

_

4. Express prosocial emotions, such as empathy, guilt, and pride **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____

_

Why?

_____

_

5. Use nonverbal communication to support others **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

6. Use appropriate and inclusive humor **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

7. Use culturally sensitive language to mobilize social support **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

8. Compartmentalize competitions **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

9. Create or change incentive systems to focus on shared experiences **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

10. Simplify policies to signal trust **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

11. Train supervisors in interactional justice **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

12. Promote a positive emotional culture throughout the employment cycle **(Yes / No)**

How?

_____
_

Why?

_____
_

EPILOGUE

Imagine two groups, each composed of six coworkers. Each group sits at a round table and plays a unique card game called *Promotion!* It's a strategic game in which their own choices and those of the others influence their power and status. The first player, or players, to accumulate five power and five status cards will win a promotion. Everyone starts this strategic game with equal levels of power and status. However, within minutes, a hierarchy invariably forms at each table. The hierarchy reflects people's choices: the cards they play, the coalitions they form, and their communications with others around the table. As the game unfolds, some colleagues accumulate more power and status than others.

The coworkers at the two tables are playing the same game, with identical rules and decks of cards. However, the hierarchies they form are profoundly different. In the first table, a culture of secrecy and cutthroat competition emerges. Colleagues hide their cards from each other and play cards that undermine, block, or frustrate one another. In the second table, a culture of transparency and collaboration arises. Colleagues play with their cards visible on the table and make choices that support others, helping them accumulate power and status.

I invented this strategic game to help people see how their choices shape the hierarchies around them. I had a chance to play it with CEOs and scientists, physicians and engineers, managers and employees, graduate and undergraduate students, athletes and coaches. I watched their choices and the ensuing dynamics in their groups with genuine fascination. The people who played this game created different kinds of hierarchies through their choices. In all cases, people's choices also shaped their relationships, their reputations, and the norms and team cultures they created at their table.

Imagine this process in a six-thousand-person organization, rather than a six-person table. It's easy to see how competitive and harmful choices by

numerous people would produce a broken organizational hierarchy, whereas collaborative and helpful decisions would produce a well-functioning one.

LOOKING BACK

Like you, I've had numerous experiences with hierarchy at work over the years. Before I started my faculty position, a wise mentor who was well versed in organizational politics advised me to mostly listen for the first couple of years and to refrain from expressing my opinions in meetings. I found it difficult to always follow this advice. On one occasion, early on in my career, I pitched an idea to my colleagues with great enthusiasm during a lunch meeting. My interest was dismissed by older colleagues, who told me quite directly that I have "youthful blood." Recalling my mentor's advice and this lunch meeting reminds me of the scene in the musical *Hamilton*, where Aaron Burr gives Alexander Hamilton political advice: "Talk less, smile more."

I vividly recall another experience where I stood in the office of a senior colleague and shared my opinion that we should hire a promising young researcher as a member of the faculty. I was a new assistant professor at the time and well aware of the precarious nature of my employment. The senior colleague, seated behind their large desk, responded with three words: "Remember your rank." It might have been a threat. Although I can't rule out that possibility, I chose to interpret these three words—*remember your rank*—as advice, as an attempt to warn me that other people may react unfavorably to a junior colleague advocating with conviction for a major decision. Regardless of this person's intention, every freedom-loving bone in my body resisted the explicit mention of ranks. I shouldn't be afraid to speak up, I thought. Yet, there I was, worried about retaliation at work by someone who had power over my career and often had opinions and preferences that differed from my own. I am almost certain that this person has forgotten all about that exchange; it's usually the people in low-power positions who pay close attention and remember in detail what they have been told by power holders.

I have been studying hierarchies for more than fifteen years. This work has helped me appreciate how ubiquitous and diverse people's experiences with organizational hierarchies are. From the top down, organizational

hierarchies look and feel different from how they appear from the bottom up. They also take different forms in armed forces and ballet companies, in improv ensembles and sports teams, and in the healthcare, finance, tech, hospitality, and many other industries we encountered in this book. We have seen the pervasiveness of broken hierarchies in many of these settings. Yet we have also seen that these hierarchies often coexist alongside well-functioning hierarchies, suggesting that there are pathways to harnessing hierarchy's functions while keeping many of its dysfunctions at bay.

Because multiple forces make hierarchies ubiquitous and sticky, the eradication of these systems altogether is highly unlikely. Getting rid of hierarchies completely would also mean eliminating their useful functions along with their dysfunctions. Instead of trying to eliminate hierarchies completely, we can help fix broken ones. We can do that by aligning our actions with the common value, pluralism, and relatedness (CPR) principles. There are many actions, small and large, that you can take to help fix a broken hierarchy. Many of these are available to people regardless of their role or rank. The three CPR principles, and the solutions derived from them, build on one another. Therefore, I encourage you to use them together as an integrated solution for maximal impact when seeking to fix a broken hierarchy.

If you answered the questions in the short quizzes, you likely identified several actions you can take to repair a dysfunctional hierarchy. Hopefully, these quizzes also inspired you to think about additional actions that fit your situation. You know best which solutions are relevant and appropriate. When you come up with novel remedies, check to see if they meet the CPR criteria: Do they reflect commonly held values and promote collective welfare? Do they enable multiple pathways to contribute, thrive, advance, and lead? Do they strengthen connections between people? Use the CPR framework as your checklist in your journey to fix a broken hierarchy.

NEXT STEPS

South African Bishop Desmond Tutu is credited with saying, "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in." Fixing broken hierarchies has the potential to address many of the dysfunctions and much

of the discontent that people encounter in organizations. I don't know what the future holds, but I believe wholeheartedly that you can help shape it. If thinking about hierarchy makes you think about inequality, oppression, and dominance, take actions to steer it toward respect, mentorship, and shared leadership.

In the opening sentence of this book, I observed that hierarchy is the protagonist of the human story. Any story about organizational hierarchy is primarily a story about people. About their needs and feelings, relationships and values, struggles and successes. We saw what happens when a broken hierarchy thwarts the fulfillment of the needs for safety, meaning, competence, predictability, relatedness, and self-esteem. We observed workers in various organizations experience the anger, frustration, discontent, envy, fear, and anxiety that grip ultracompetitive, unjust, and unstable hierarchies. We learned how social comparisons, forced-ranking systems, endless tournaments, power without status, paranoia, and other problematic processes create toxic environments that poison relationships and stifle creativity, engagement, and performance. Yet we also encountered the gratitude, humility, respect, and compassion experienced by employees in well-functioning hierarchies.

If you love thinking abstractly and appreciate opportunities to come up with your own solutions, the three CPR principles offer you a framework grounded in psychological and organizational research that you can rely on as you develop your own unique and creative solutions to the problem of broken hierarchies. If instead you appreciate concrete solutions and clear guidelines concerning how you can start fixing these hierarchies today, revisiting our short quizzes will help you create action items you can start implementing. This book is what *you* will make of it. I hope that it made you curious about and interested in learning more about hierarchies. I also hope that it motivates you to take action to repair broken ones and that you will share with others what you have learned about the ubiquity, diversity, peril, and promise of organizational hierarchies.

APPENDIX
INDEX OF TOOLS FOR FIXING A BROKEN HIERARCHY

Solution	
✓ Learn from others' successful strategies	here
✓ Align the hierarchy with shared core values	here
✓ Ensure the hierarchy promotes collective welfare	here
✓ Create a true meritocracy	here
✓ Create a true virtuocracy	here
✓ Recognize and reward different contributions	here
✓ Establish structural coleadership	here
✓ Establish parallel hierarchies	here
✓ Enact dynamic hierarchical pluralism	here
✓ Add multiple dimensions of social comparison	here
✓ Dilute the influence of dominant leaders	here
✓ Give people the opportunities they deserve	here
✓ Build on differences to boost resilience	here
✓ Create and seize opportunities for reciprocal sharing	here
✓ Send personalized gratitude letters	here
✓ Express prosocial emotions	here
✓ Use family labels appropriately	here
✓ Use appropriate and inclusive humor	here

✓ Contribute to emotional cultures of joy and companionate love	here
✓ Compartmentalize competition	here
✓ Rethink incentives: from “win-centives” to “we-centives”	here
✓ Select, train, and retain people for kindness	here

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BASIC
BOOKS



Credit: Tal Halevy

Nir Halevy is a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University. His research on influence, power, status, and leadership has appeared in top scientific journals and has been featured in numerous media outlets, including the *Economist*, *Forbes*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, *BusinessWeek*, CNN, and MSNBC. He lives with his family in the Bay Area of California.

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RAISING READERS

Books Build Bright Futures

Thank you for reading this book and for being a reader of books in general. We are so grateful to share being part of a community of readers with you, and we hope you will join us in passing our love of books on to the next generation of readers.

Did you know that reading for enjoyment is the single biggest predictor of a child's future happiness and success?

More than family circumstances, parents' educational background, or income, reading impacts a child's future academic performance, emotional well-being, communication skills, economic security, ambition, and happiness.

Studies show that kids reading for enjoyment in the US is in rapid decline:

- In 2012, 53% of 9-year-olds read almost every day. Just 10 years later, in 2022, the number had fallen to 39%.
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TOGETHER, WE CAN COMMIT TO RAISING READERS AND CHANGE THIS TREND.

HOW?

- Read to children in your life daily.
- Model reading as a fun activity.
- Reduce screen time.
- Start a family, school, or community book club.
- Visit bookstores and libraries regularly.
- Listen to audiobooks.
- Read the book before you see the movie.
- Encourage your child to read aloud to a pet or stuffed animal.
- Give books as gifts.
- Donate books to families and communities in need.

Books build bright futures, and **Raising Readers** is our shared responsibility.

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Sources: National Endowment for the Arts, National Assessment of Educational Progress, WorldBookDay.com, Nielsen BookData's 2023 "Understanding the Children's Book Consumer"