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Family and Office Roles Mix
By SARAH KERSHAW

THE office joker. The mother hen. The king. The rebel. The gossip. The peacekeeper. The dude. Anyone who has ever been part of a workplace culture can probably recognize at least one of those characters in the cubicle next door.

But workplace roles and the dynamics among colleagues can go much deeper than those somewhat superficial stereotypes, especially in a nation where many people spend as much time with colleagues as they do with their families, where the office so often mirrors the family.

A boss is not just a boss, in the view of some psychologists who study workplace roles; he can be a stand-in for a disapproving and distant father. An unpredictable, easily angered manager can be a thinly veiled rejecting mother.

Colleagues competing for the boss's attention — or merit raises and bonuses — are siblings in rivalry.

The employees of a company acquired by another in a hostile merger? They can experience seething resentment toward what they feel is an unwelcome stepparent, according to psychologists working with companies to manage emotional fallout during a merger.

There is, too, the workplace spouse, a co-worker of the opposite sex who shares a kind of closeness achieved only through the intense experience of long weeks at the same office.

Given all the stress and uncertainty driven by the economic crisis, some companies, with the help of business and organizational psychologists, are plumbing the depths of these feelings and roles, trying to gauge their effects at a time when emotions are running high. A growing number of business psychologists and executive coaches are also looking at the influence of birth order and other family roles and niches on office behavior.

"Work is nothing more than an entirely complex set of relationships," said Michael W. Norris, a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles, who runs monthly leadership coaching groups and individual sessions with senior executives. "You have partners that are your equals, subordinates, superiors," Mr. Norris said. "It's parents and siblings. All of these dynamics that are exactly the same in the workplace, just the titles are different."

For example, said Laurence J. Stybel, a psychologist in the Boston area who specializes in organizational behavior, "Somebody who is successful at getting resources in the family

environment approaches the corporate environment with a sense of confidence. Someone who was denied resources given to others approaches the corporate environment with the same concept.” Stybel is President of Stybel Peabody Lincolnshire and Executive in Residence at the Sawyer School of Business at Suffolk University.

The use of personality testing in the workplace to measure employees’ “emotional intelligence” or, for example, how they handle conflict, has become increasingly common, said Benjamin Dattner, an organizational psychologist in New York who consults with companies on workplace issues and blogs for Psychology Today.

Tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which measures how people perceive the world and make decisions, are given to millions of employees each year, Dr. Dattner said.

The idea is to help increase their effectiveness, say, by having a team of co-workers better understand their strengths and weaknesses — although the usefulness of such tests is debated.

There are also a number of character typology studies — some frivolous and some more serious — that have sought to define the roles office workers play. In one recent study that T-Mobile in Britain commissioned to gain insight into how its employees interact, a psychologist interviewed workers and came up with eight character types. When times are difficult economically, a workplace character identified as the “mother hen” — with a comforting voice of reason and empathy — may help raise the group’s spirit, Honey Lancaster-James, a psychologist, concluded. The “office joker,” by contrast, “may decide that wisecracking” is “no longer appropriate in such dire times.”

The “dude,” another character in the study, “T-Mobile Workplace Motivation Report,” which is available online, is described as “laid back and relaxed,” and this relaxed attitude “also means that he/she doesn’t transfer pressure onto colleagues — a trait most workmates would be grateful for,” the report says.

One New York company that has recently delved deeply into workplace roles and how family experiences and birth order affect relationships at the office is TAG Creative, a branding communication agency in Manhattan that is owned by three women.

Last summer, the partners hired a team of consultants, including Dr. Dattner, who is also an adjunct professor of psychology at New York University, when they doubled their employees to 16. With twice as many personalities in the office, the three managers wanted to define more clearly their own roles. In the process, they uncovered how some of their childhood experiences and especially their birth order played out inside their sleek and small offices at 30th Street and Park Avenue.

“I sometimes have to tell myself, she is not your mother, she’s your partner,” said Amy Frankel, 53, the chief strategy officer, referring to her two co-owners.

Both Ms. Frankel and her partner Terry Rieser, 58, the chief operating officer, are eldest children, and for them, an important motive in starting the company in 2001 was to be their own

bosses. Like many other firstborns, they said, they are dominant personalities and have trouble with authority.

The third partner, Gina Delio, 52, the chief creative officer, is the second of five children. Her two partners describe her as the peacemaker of the group, true to middle-child form.

Ms. Rieser, whom her partners described as the most direct of the three, is often asked to handle difficult conversations with clients or employees.

The women gained some of their insights about how birth order plays out in the workplace from Dr. Dattner, who has studied its impact in the workplace. He says it can provide useful insights to employees trying to navigate difficult office relationships.

Firstborns, he said, tend to be fearful of losing their position and rank, so they may be extremely anxious at a time of layoffs and downsizing. Second-born children tend to be most adventurous and open to change, he said. In fact, Dr. Dattner said that companies he had worked with found that when sending employees overseas, second-born children tended to fare better than older ones.

As the older of two daughters, Ms. Frankel said she sometimes feels competitive with Ms. Delio, which reminds her of competing with her sister for their parents' attention.

"I feel there are moments where you are sitting there and you can feel it in your body, you're having a reaction, something gets triggered," Ms. Frankel said. "It took on so much more import than it needed to."

She added, "And this is not really about Gina or Terry or what they are doing in this moment, this is reminding me of something that happened a long time ago that gets acted out there."

In the current recession, with corporate budgets shrinking, spending on psychological counseling at work is likely to be curtailed or eliminated, several business psychologists said. But other consultants said they are still receiving plenty of work from companies in crisis, particularly those facing the grim and emotional tasks of laying off employees or merging with other companies.

Heather Amber Anderson, a management consultant based in Stowe, Vt., who speaks regularly to large groups of chief executives of small- and medium-size companies, said she has been telling these executives for the last few months that examining their own and their employees roles and behavior at work is especially important now.

"This is more critical than ever," she said she has advised. "People are watching you right now to set the emotional tenor of the organization.

This is one of the most important conversations you need to have with yourself right now."

For the 50-something women who run TAG, where the employees are in their 20s, 30s and 40s, the possibility of having to lay off workers as the economic troubles squeeze their clients, feels very much like the specter of kicking their children out of the house.

“Having looked at what we may need to do to survive or how the trend in business is going, it’s almost painful in that parental way,” Ms. Rieser said, adding that one of the interns who worked for her called her “mother.” “These are people who are dependent on you; these are people who depend on you for their livelihood.”

One longtime company employee, Matthew Aldrich, who is the youngest of three brothers, feels very “taken care of” by the three partners, whom he calls “the ladies.” “They look after me like a son,” he said, adding that sometimes he even feels spoiled, reminding him somewhat of life in his family. “It’s a nurturing role.”

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