

**STYBEL  
PEABODY &  
ASSOCIATES, INC.**



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**WE HAVE A SILO MENTALITY  
CULTURE:**

**LET US SHOW YOU HOW TO  
STRUCTURE CORPORATE  
CULTURE CHANGE WITH**

# FIKAS.

## **Fika?**

This is a Swedish concept and refers to chatting in a relaxed way with coffee and something sweet. In some corporate settings, the intimate nature of fika is symbolized by lit candles in bright factories in the middle of the day. (Larsson, 2017).

Fikas are so common in Sweden, the word is a noun ("I am going to the fika") and a verb ("Are you fiking?" and "Would you fika with me?")

## **Fika: Not an American Coffee Break:**

In individualistic America, a coffee break means one employee steps up to a single-cup coffee device and returns to the desk to work in isolation.

Fika is the use of food and coffee as an excuse for having cross-function conversations. It is about creating relationships.

## **Fikas help transform colleagues into chums.**

In a series of articles on the diagnosis of relationships at work, Stybel & Peabody (2013, 2005) defined chums as work colleagues you enjoy being with but they are not your "friends." A "friend" is someone whose relationship is not based on positive reinforcement whereas colleagues have a relationship that is based on self-interest. A chum is a colleague "with benefits." The benefit is that you enjoy being with the person. But that person is not confused for a "friend."

Fikas helps create chumship.

Fikas are also an efficient way to encourage informal communication across departmental lines.

One issue we deal with in our practice is helping leaders manage corporate growth while preserving the unique culture that made the organization so special.

### **An American Fika.**

One of our clients is a hedge fund. The core functions revolve around investment, compliance, and operations (HR, IT, finance). The dining room contains a long table and free lunch is brought in by management. Employees are given free lunch in return for sitting next to someone outside their departments.

Below is an intervention we employed using fika:

A low-income neighborhood contained a high school, a community hospital, a community college, an outpatient mental health center and center for developmental disabilities. It was commonly known that certain patients would go to the hospital, the mental health center, and the community college physician complaining of symptoms related to "depression." Each medical professional would prescribe the same medication, given the presenting symptoms. Patients would then have a collection of free medicine. These patients would then sell the drugs to children near the local school.

Formal attempts by management to identify these patients had failed because it would violate Federal and State patient confidentiality laws.

One of the authors instituted a monthly brown bag lunch limited to front line health care workers from the different agencies in the same neighborhood. Management was excluded from participation in these luncheons. There was no agenda other than to bring a desert you might be willing to share.

Like a fika, the stated objective revolved around food. The real objective, however, was for front-line professionals to share information in an informal setting.

In time, strangers became colleagues. And some colleagues became chums.

During the fika, patient names were shared. Two people were identified as going to different agencies with the same complaint and receiving the same psychotropic medication. Someone had a chum in the neighborhood police precinct. A sting operation was launched using young actors pretending to be high school students. Police took public credit for a successful sting operation.

### **Another Example**

In this same neighborhood, it was easy to identify that the mental health outpatient clinic has primary accountability if the issue is depression. But what if the adolescent who is abusing drugs also has organic brain damage, is acting out in the high school class, and is diagnosed as having dull-normal intelligence? This is a problem where issues fall within multiple agency jurisdictions.

The standard message was for the school to define the problem as a hospital problem; the hospital to define the problem as a mental health problem; and the mental health agency to define the problem as a mental retardation problem.

As each agency politely told the parent, "Your child is not my responsibility" the parent would become increasingly distraught.

Management attempts to clarify responsibility for patients who fall in the "cracks" of multiple agency missions had failed: managers tended to view the issue as a zero-sum game. "If I accept responsibility, it reduces my pile of cash. If I get you to accept responsibility, your pile of cash is reduced and my pile is preserved."

The issue of patients who fall in interagency cracks was discussed at the brown bag lunch.

Front-line service providers agreed on an impartial way to solve the problem: if the parent first went to the hospital, then it became a hospital problem. If the parent first went to the mental health outpatient center, then it became primarily a mental health problem.

By letting the parent define the problem, no agency could be accused of “winning” over another agency. And all community agencies would be seen by parents as responsive.

### **Managing Fikas for Success**

American golf outings have fika-like properties:

Golf is an excuse for people to get together. The business goal is the development of chumship.

The problem with golf is that it cannot be scheduled at regular intervals. It also consumes too much time. Not everybody has the patience to play 18 holes. Not everybody enjoys playing golf.

A good fika is a regularly scheduled meeting whose stated mission might involve something of common interest. Food is usually an interest shared by all.

There is no size limitation to the fika, but it should allow for people from different departments and sections of the company to mingle with each other. Like the long table of our hedge fund client, a good fika would be designed to make it difficult to have the same people to sit with each other all the time.

The purpose of the fika is chumship development across traditional department boundaries.

1. Mobile devices MUST be turned off during the fika and devices are forbidden to be on the table. The mere presence of a mobile device at a meeting has been shown to reduce the depth of conversation (Turkle, 2015).
2. Try to sit with someone you do not know well, preferably from another department or team.
3. Be open about sharing your food.
4. You are free to share work-related or personal-related matters appropriate to a work setting.

### **Fika Regularity**

Emile Odback is co-author of *Fika That!* (2017). He points to the importance of regularity:

“I think the real magic starts to happen when managers are able to make connection and “chumship” the norm in business, rather than the Friday exception.”

The Swedes can balance the consistency of fika with a demanding work schedule by keeping fikas to 15-minute communal coffee breaks. Our client managed it by keeping it down to one hour for lunch. And people would be taking an hour off anyway.

### **Fika Dilemmas**

Employees who work from their homes may be excluded from fikas and thus deprived of the informal networking that takes place.

Online communication is a great tool for the development of work colleagues. But the lack of informal contact does make chumship difficult.

In theory, home-based workers could “participate” in fikas remotely just as they participate in work groups today. For example, a fika organized around coffee and dessert could have people in other parts of the world also drinking the same beverage.

As a company uses more “Gig Economy” employees, should consultants used on a regular basis be invited to the Fika? For example:

A tax accounting firm uses fifteen regular tax professionals each year only for three months. If those people are invited to the Fika, should they be compensated?

### **References**

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