



Outstanding — or just odd?

By Lisa Bertagnoli
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You can choose your friends, but you can't necessarily choose your colleagues.

That leaves those who consider themselves normal sometimes having to witness unusual behavior that ranges from odd-but-benign to outright gross.

There's the mildly disturbing: an architect and boss whose desk is arrayed with souvenirs from his international travels, including a coiled, seemingly ready-to-strike snake (deceased) displayed in a foot-high glass jar. And then there's the downright damaging: the senior-level executive who hung a bullwhip on a conference room wall and kept suggestive props on the conference table.

"That was actually an indicator of what his behavior was like in the office," says Julaine Flick, an executive coach who worked with the bullwhip-displaying executive.

The props, an oversize screw and nut, were especially jolting: "That was not a very safe, welcoming environment for women to go in and do meetings," says Ms. Flick, 44, now principal at PowerStone Communications, a Chicago-based executive coaching firm. The executive was eventually fired.

Quirky behavior can work well in the office and even buoy a career, given the right company and the right circumstances. "Rugged individualism can go pretty far in the workplace," Ms. Flick says. "There really is a way where you can, whether it's through dress or expressing yourself, be true to yourself so it works for you and the environment where you work."

She once worked at an advertising agency where the creative director would routinely hop on a conference room table and "almost yell" at clients. However, "he was in a creative environment and he was tremendously talented," Ms. Flick says.

Quirks backfire, though, when they overshadow professional accomplishments. Extremely odd behavior "can be so disruptive to the environment . . . somebody teased, people sending nasty e-mails — that's a very unhealthy environment," says Judith Glaser, the New York-based author of "The DNA of Leadership." "It's an abuse of the time at work. It's really distracting."

Possible motivations for quirky behavior: Either rebellion against a cookie-cutter environment or a calculated "look at me" ploy. Unusual behavior "can bring management's attention to you," Ms. Glaser says. Plus, "too much sameness bothers some people. An iconoclast says, 'Accept me for who I am.' "

POP CULTURE'S WACKY WORKERS

Movies, TV shows and cartoon strips have turned quirky workers into memorable characters.

Some companies try to discourage gossip-producing behavior by dictating what employees can display in their workspaces; usually, the choice is limited to corporate-approved art. Restrictions on the display of personal items have risen with the popularity of open office design, says Jennifer Berman, managing director for training and human resource practices in the Chicago office of Cbiz Inc., a Cleveland-based consulting firm.

"They don't want the clutter and they don't want to have to police it," Ms. Berman says of personal effects such as family photos. Yet such restrictions don't go over well with employees. "Most companies that go that far are often very structured and rigid in other ways."

OFFBEAT BOSS

Of course, if the top executive is an eccentric, all bets are off. "Sometimes, the iconoclast is the person in charge," Ms. Berman says.

That's the case with Scott Sarver, principal at DeStefano & Partners Ltd., a Chicago-based architecture firm, who has the coiled snake on display. "I have many strange things on my desk," Mr. Sarver says. "It's an interesting topic when people come into my office."

The snake was a gift from a client in Hanoi, Vietnam. Along with other souvenirs from business trips to Asia, it's on the desk "to remind me that things are different everywhere," says Mr. Sarver, 45. "Working internationally . . . inspires me to think differently about projects."

Mr. Sarver notices when first-time visitors to his office spot the snake. "I'm talking to someone for the first time . . . their eyes wander, and they stop talking."

How does the snake come off from the other side of the desk? "Scott can be an intimidating guy at times," says Matt Snoop, 30, a junior architect at DeStefano & Partners. "The (snake) is in an intimidating position in the bottle. It doesn't ease your tensions."

Dealing with a quirky boss is one thing; handling quirky colleagues is another. The most popular tactic: ignoring odd behavior unless it goes too far.

Michelle Quinn and her colleagues at an area newspaper did their best to ignore a co-worker whose foibles included leaving a mound of used dental floss on his desk. "We laughed about him," says Ms. Quinn, 36, who is no longer with the paper. It helped that he did his job well. But after one outburst, "he got a talking-to, and they told him to get rid of the dental floss."

Sally Hodge, owner of Hodge Communications, a Chicago-based marketing firm, fired an employee after an array of behaviors proved irritating. "He sat at his desk and chewed with his mouth open," says Ms. Hodge, 55. "I just couldn't stand him."

"The Office" Boss David Brent (played by Ricky Gervais) is the oddball in this BBC TV series. Brent's bungles include disco dancing at an office party and serenading colleagues with his own folk-rock compositions. In the American knockoff, clueless boss Michael Scott (Steve Carell) and egocentric Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson) trade off oddball status.



"Office Space" This 1999 cult movie's most memorable character is Milton Waddams (Stephen Root, above), who forms an unnatural attachment to his red Swingline stapler. When boss Bill Lumbergh (Chicago-area native Gary Cole) takes away the stapler, Milton snaps and sets fire to the boss's office.

"Dilbert" Scott Adams' comic strip chronicles the workplace travails of Dilbert, a socially challenged engineer at a high-tech company whose boss happens to be a technophobe.

"Ugly Betty" The new ABC TV series features actress America Ferrara as an unattractive, socially clueless twentysomething who lands a job as assistant to the editor of a New York fashion magazine. But is level-headed Betty (who wears braces and thrift-store outfits) really the oddball? Perhaps it's the philandering editor or the fashion-victim receptionist.

Other quirks included telephoning or e-mailing Ms. Hodge rather than walking the five feet to her office and, more seriously, his open disdain of the company. "He didn't play well with others," Ms. Hodge says. During a review, she told him she expected his behavior to improve by August. "He said, 'Well, I guess I'll be gone at the end of August.' "

Ms. Hodge adds that during interviews for the job, the employee did and said nothing to reveal his strange side: "He was charming."



Scott Sarver, principal at DeStefano & Partners Ltd., has a jar containing a coiled-up snake on his desk. He says it keeps him feeling creative, but it also gives visitors pause: "Their eyes wander, and they stop talking." Photo: John R. Boehm

SUCCESSFULLY STRANGE

Great talent or a lofty title can excuse an array of odd behaviors. When she was working at a Chicago law office, Jennifer Sara Levin and her colleagues ignored a partner who, every Friday afternoon, stood in a hallway and sang loudly.

"Whatever song came to his head . . . 'Happy Birthday,' and his children were young, so the alphabet song and nursery rhyme songs," says Ms. Levin, 29, now owner of Chicago-based Nate & Dot Image Consulting.

No one ever said anything, however, because the man was a partner and a "major generator" of business. Those two factors also excused another partner, who dressed as though he hadn't bought anything new in "20 or 30 years," she says. A favorite outfit for client meetings was a lumberjack shirt, sports coat with worn elbows and shoulders and faded navy Dockers.

"He was a rainmaker, too," Ms. Levin says. "In my experience, you can be however you want if you generate business. If not, you'd better follow protocol."

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