

The Dignitarian Way

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Author and activist Robert Fuller argues for the end of abuse of rank — at work, in society, and around the world.

Robert Fuller, former physicist, former president of Oberlin College, “citizen diplomat,” and author, has called rankism “the mother of all -isms.” In other words, racism, sexism, homophobia, and similar attitudes are all manifestations of a more prevalent social phenomenon — the desire of people to use their status and position to dominate others.

Fuller coined the term rankism in his first book on the topic, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank* (New Society Publishers, 2003), and codified his concept of a dignitarian society — based on the principle that all people deserve to be treated fairly, no matter what their rank — in his second, *All Rise: Somebodies, Nobodies, and the Politics of Dignity* (Berrett-Koehler, 2006).

These books have generated a large following, but businesspeople have responded with ambivalence; after all, in many companies, the right to abuse rank is seen as one of the perks of a successful career. Fuller argues to the contrary that rankism diminishes both the “somebodies” and the “nobodies” (as he calls people of greater and lesser status), and he proposes that if organizations eliminated their rankism, they would be not just better places to work, but more successful in the bargain. (This despite the fact that many of the “best places to work” in the popular mind, such as Toyota and GE, have often

been described as highly rankist workplaces. GE’s appraisal system, for instance, is famously known as “rank and yank,” and Toyota’s sensei system deliberately diminishes the dignity of new engineering recruits.) Bob Fuller recently sat down with *strategy+business* editors Art Kleiner and Amy Bernstein at our San Francisco offices to discuss the concept of rankism and its implications for society, business, and leadership.

S+B: Just sitting down at the table together, we had a little awkward moment. There are three chairs here, and only one is a swivel chair; and one of us, the person with the greatest presumed rank, seemed to have a claim on the swivel chair. That kind of thing seems so inconsequential...

FULLER: ...but also it’s dynamite. Just the fact that we had this awkwardness shows how sensitive everyone is to even the subtlest issues of status differential. We swim in a sea of it. And until you name it, you don’t notice it. In the 1960s, for instance, women were constantly experiencing indignities, both personal and institutional. Then they gave it a name: sexism. And through the power of naming it, feminists broke its hold on society.

S+B: And now, in writing about rankism, you’re naming something that you say is still more pervasive. How do

you define rankism?

FULLER: Rankism is abuse of the power inherent in rank. I use the term to describe a broad set of practices and attitudes, found in both social and organizational hierarchies, that encompasses racism, sexism, McCarthyism, anti-Semitism, ableism, homophobia, ageism, classism — and indeed any kind of domination wherein “somebodies” use their position to demean and exploit “nobodies” (who have lower status). Rank in itself is not necessarily a problem. It’s crucial to recognize that some people legitimately have more authority or status than others, and differences in rank merely reflect this fact. But the abuse of rank, which is rampant in our culture, is the source of an immense amount of unacknowledged and unnecessary suffering and organizational dysfunction.

S+B: For example?

FULLER: The bullying that goes on in many organizations, where bosses demean the people who report to them, simply because they can; the differentials in pay and status between the headquarters executives back in the “home country” and the executives who are just as capable in some of the far-flung places or functions; and the denigration of people who don’t quite fit in to the organization’s primary way of thinking and acting. Any organization that encourages or tolerates rankism is systematically undermining the creativity and productivity of its own people.

S+B: And yet this desire to hold others back is itself pervasive — maybe even fundamental to human nature.

FULLER: It certainly is pervasive. A while ago I did a book signing for *Somebodies and Nobodies*. A homeless

person came up and looked me over. “I’m not a nobody,” she said. “I’m a somebody.” Many people would have seen things differently, as she was in dire straits. But she pointed down the street to another even more bedraggled woman: “You want to see a nobody? There’s one!”

It brought home to me that status is relative, and how nearly every “nobody” is looking for someone that he or she can feel superior to.

S+B: One of the sources of Jesse Jackson’s popularity in the 1980s was his “I Am Somebody” slogan. He used to have whole rooms chanting it. In your books you cite other examples. Is rankism a fundamental aspect of human nature?

FULLER: Fundamental, yes; permanent, no. Rankism is like racism in that although it’s been around a long time, it can be disallowed and eventually overcome. It’s been a survival technique throughout history to prey upon the weak — to enslave them or exploit them. In our culture, we no longer enslave others, but we still exploit them.

But such predatory practices eventually come to an end. Exploited groups figure out how to organize against the exploiters, the rankists, the abusers of power. Sometimes it takes centuries, but the victims devise strategies that force the dominant group to cease and desist, and to accept a relationship of co-equal dignity. This happened in the United States in the 1960s; the disruptive potential of the black minority was so great — several cities were in flames — that the white majority opted to give up segregation and blatant racism. As a result, we gained the benefits that come with a fairer, more just system.

Now, the world is in a similar situation. And eventually the nobodies in the world are going to organize

against the somebodies. Over the next half-century or so, poor nations will find ways to force the developed world to grant them comparable dignity, much as blacks and women did in the last 50 years, and as gays are doing now. In most parts of the world, it is no longer acceptable to insult the members of these groups. At some point, that will be true for any human being.

S+B: In your new book, *All Rise*, you posit that there's a dignitarian way to run a company or organization. Why should a corporate leader embrace dignitarianism?

FULLER: Because you'll make more money. When your employees feel their dignity is secure, they will be more loyal; they'll go the extra mile. They won't call in sick as often. Living in an environment of constant stress, according to one health study that I read recently, is as bad for people as smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. And working in a rankist environment, under the threat of humiliation, exacts that kind of toll.

To be sure, a dignitarian environment might mean paying employees more fairly. It might mean the kind of humility that Jim Collins wrote about in his book *Good to Great* (HarperBusiness, 2001) as "Level Five leadership." It might mean more transparency about salaries and about the unacceptability of firing or demoting people for speaking their mind.

S+B: Are there other components to a dignitarian organization?

FULLER: There's also the relationship of the organization to the rest of the world: how it treats its customers and competitors. I was invited to spend a day at Microsoft; internally, it's a remarkably dignitarian system. The programmers I met feel free to propose anything, and there's

a healthy sense of merit and equality. But they were also aware that they are not regarded as a dignitarian entity in the world at large. They acknowledged that Microsoft had used its clout in ways that indignified and angered people, and that this reputation no longer served them. They are now facing Google and its slogan of "do no evil," and they want to change the stereotype.

S+B: What kinds of things have to happen to make organizations more dignitarian?

FULLER: I see flexible hierarchies in which peoples' ranks change as they move from task to task, and where there is no loss of status when a leadership role changes to a staff specialist role. In universities, the system of lifetime job security known as academic tenure needs to change. This can be accomplished without jeopardizing academic freedom. Tenure is a rankist institution in which a few people gain job security at age 30 and are largely unaccountable thereafter. There are now hundreds of applicants for every tenured position, at the same time that there's a teacher shortage. Meanwhile, universities have created a category of second-class teachers called "adjunct faculty." Adjuncts get paid about a third as much as the regular faculty, and have no health benefits or voting rights. Often, they don't even get a parking sticker! They are an exploited group whose low compensation effectively subsidizes tenured faculty and administrators.

Exorbitant executive salaries are another example of rankism. Labor unions are not immune to it either. For example, they should be pushing "dignity security," not just job security, and the two can be quite different.

S+B: Can you elaborate?

FULLER: In the present rankist environment, the loss of

one's job can be a terrible blow to one's dignity. We should thus do more to help people make the transition from one job to another. Dignity security would provide everyone with a fair chance to compete for any job for which they're qualified; and it would guarantee transitional support, in the form of retraining and interim compensation, should they have to find a new one. To be legitimate, rank must be earned in a fair contest with all qualified comers. In practice, this means periodic re-qualification because, with time, there are new aspirants who may be better qualified. Tenure is unfair to the young, much as "whites only" signs were unfair to blacks. It's time to shift the focus from job security to the broader notion of dignity security, and take steps to protect dignity when, inevitably, changes occur in the particular roles and ranks we hold.

I found this out myself at Oberlin, when I resigned as president. Suddenly I went from being a somebody to being a nobody. I knew this was going to happen, and I anticipated the loss of status, but I didn't anticipate the difference it made to my sense of dignity and ultimately to my identity. And I think that is true for everyone who suffers a similar loss.

S+B: You're implying that the abuse of rank can be solved by changing rules, regulations, and job structures.

FULLER: Those are certainly significant steps, just like antidiscrimination laws were a significant step for the civil rights movement. But there will still be indignity and humiliation that targeted people experience as denigration. Behavioral changes — the birth of a new attitude and social consensus — have to go hand in hand with legal and regulatory changes. I've seen this happen firsthand, because I've lived long enough to witness a sea change in the prevailing racial and gender attitudes in American and European culture.

Organizations are not going to become dignitarian overnight. In many of them, rankism is still below the radar. But giving it a name may help them evolve. Until the abuse of rank is recognized as no more legitimate

than abuse based on traits like color and gender, rankism will continue to exact a toll on health, happiness, and productivity. But a dignitarian era is coming, because, in the end, most people don't want to live in a world in which their dignity depends on either superficial traits or rank. Since we are, all of us, once and future nobodies, it's in our interest to make our institutions and our society less rankist and more dignitarian. +

Resources

Jim Collins, *Good To Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't* (HarperBusiness, 2001): Research into how good companies can become great, with case studies of those that have tried and even succeeded. www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0066620996/

Robert W. Fuller, *All Rise: Somebodies, Nobodies, and the Politics of Dignity* (Berrett-Koehler, 2006): Fuller's blueprint for a "dignitarian society." www.amazon.com/dp/1576753859

Robert W. Fuller, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank* (New Society Publishers, 2003): Fuller's introduction to the concept of rankism. www.amazon.com/dp/0865714878

Ann Graham, "The Company That Anticipated History," *s+b*, Winter 2006: By recognizing the value of black customers and employees during the time of apartheid, Eskom, Africa's largest electric company, has shown the world how to combine social leadership and business success. www.strategy-business.com/article/06406

Art Kleiner, "Diversity and Its Discontents," *s+b*, Spring 2004: Analysis of the emotional maturity required in diverse workplaces and the ways in which addressing rankism can foster a healthy environment. www.strategy-business.com/article/04102

Reggie Van Lee, Lisa Fabish, and Nancy McGaw, "The Value of Corporate Values," *s+b*, Summer 2005: A Booz Allen Hamilton/Aspen Institute survey of corporate behavior finds that leading companies are crafting a purpose-driven identity, based on ethical behavior, honesty, integrity, and social concerns. www.strategy-business.com/article/05206

Jack Welch with Suzy Welch, *Winning* (Collins, 2005): An overview of Welch's managerial practices, including the "rank and yank" by which the bottom 10 percent of employees every year are fired. www.amazon.com/dp/0060753943

Breaking Ranks Web site: The Web site devoted to Robert Fuller's analysis of the "dignity movement." Fuller's biography is also available through this site. www.breakingranks.net/

Jim Collins's Web site: Showcases his ideas and work. www.jimcollins.com/

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