

# BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

## New look at co-workers after seeing old friends

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Commentator Joel Achenbach of National Public Radio once joked during "Morning Edition" about college reunions. "A reunion is an extremely competitive event," he said. "Your goal going into the big encounter is to put points on the board. You get points for being successful, you get points for being happy and mentally stable (even if that requires medication)."

His sentiment implies that once we're out in the working world, old friends become adversaries — your typical neighborhood Jones's whom you should constantly strive to outrun.

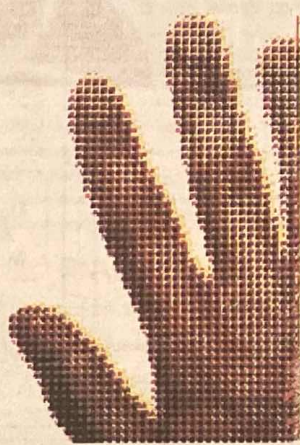
On a recent weekend I attended my 10th college reunion in Central Iowa. It sounds clichéd, but there was something revitalizing about the experience. It changed how I view my work and how I regard relationships with my co-workers.

My job felt different this week. For one thing, until now, I'd been looking at my co-workers as simply eight-hour-a-day associates. Yet, next to my family, I spend more time with these people than any other group.

On returning to Boston from the Heartland, some of my office colleagues asked, did my classmates and I size each other up, seeing who had the most impressive job, the highest salary, and the most charming house? Did we gossip about who succeeded and who failed?

As it turns out, we didn't. I didn't perceive any competition in the air. We weren't there to rack up points. We just sincerely enjoyed being in each other's presence. And honestly, I was surprised.

I hadn't seen the majority of my college buddies in a decade. Eric gained some weight. Jason quit smoking. Channing's hair is turning to a mature salt and



ILLUSTRATION/ANTHONY SCHULTZ

pepper. And Janel is pregnant with her third child. But for the most part, we haven't really changed at all.

A few of us kept in touch via e-mail, zapping the random political joke to each other. But mostly, there was no real direct conversation; just an understanding that we were each out there in the work force, periodically thinking of each other, and that we shared a similar past.

It was in this place, with its strong aroma of cow manure, that we made the precarious journey from childhood to adulthood — from parental subservience to career independence. Even the poet Alfred Tennyson observed that there is a special bond between schoolmates when he wrote, "Softly, thro' a vinous mist, My college friendships glimmer."

When my classmates and I reunited for the weekend's festivities, it showed me the importance of an unspoken connection to friends, and it put work, competition, and my insecurities into perspective. I wasn't concerned about who was higher up on the career ladder.

Being an anxious, impatient, and somewhat career-driven guy, I was glad to shed that concern.

In fact, if there was any envy at all in this group of 40 school friends, it was toward the couple who quit their jobs, sold their house, and traveled around the world for nine months. It wasn't toward

the guy who had "President & Owner" written on his business card. That must say something about my priorities.

Being at the reunion was liberating because, for a moment, I was reinvigorated about my career. It was a kick in the head, and it reminded me that doing good work should be the motivating factor on the job.

Robert Fulghum, Unitarian minister and author of the feel-good classic, "All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten," wrote in another book that a reunion is not about school, "it is about 'Who am I?' and 'What has become of me?'"

So, who am I?

We live in the age of the résumé. I am measured by what I produce and what I do for a living. I am evaluated by my efficiency, not by my compassion. And what the reunion taught me — especially from the job quitters/world travelers — is that this is not a particularly useful way to live.

There's a part of my Type A personality that makes me competitive with co-workers. We're friendly together and we invite each other to our kids' birthday parties, but there is still a strategic amount of distance between us.

When I took my current job, I saw it as a step forward, and I perceived my co-workers simply as professional colleagues who would help to advance me along my

career path. Now I'm rethinking these artificial boundaries I've set up.

Whatever I may gain in career game playing, I may lose in building sincere friendships.

In her book "Home and Work," sociologist Christena Nippert-Eng writes about the blurred lines we draw between our jobs and our personal lives.

Similar to a case study in the book, she would probably say that my feelings are "built on a classic segmentist approach to viewing cross-realm relationships and protecting realm territories." Still confused? Me too.

I was saddened after the reunion, realizing that I didn't put the same emotional investment into the connections with people that I see all day and every day, as I do with friends I see once every 10 years.

The realistic constraints of day-to-day living makes co-worker friendships a bit different from those with school chums. We're engrossed by responsibilities: kids, homes, second jobs, commuting.

I'm wondering if those last few years we spend in school are the last time we have the opportunity to build a camaraderie with a group of people. It is alleged that the average person will switch jobs 11 times during a lifetime, not including that Dairy Queen gig you had during high school. These days you'll find very few employees who stick with just one com-

pany throughout their entire career. In order to move up, we must move on.

What that also means is that we end up with 11 sets of colleagues as friends. Or at least, temporary friends. It's hard to build a community with that much movement. Hard, but not impossible.

My mother-in-law still gets together with co-workers from a job she left over a decade ago. When I asked her why they've been able to sustain their friendship for so long, she said, "Work wasn't what bonded us." There was something else in their togetherness that just clicked.

So I found myself at work this past week looking at my co-workers differently. I saw them as friends instead of just people I work with. And in turn, I found my job more enjoyable.

Ten years from now, I want to look back and think of my past co-workers in the same way that I saw my classmates: as friends. I've been overlooking this reward we get from working with other human beings. To be truly successful, we need to create bonds, regardless of how high up the totem pole we climb.

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