To the Vulnerable Go the Spoils

New evidence indicates that our ability to "click" with colleagues can make or break a career. By Ori Brafman and Rom Brafman

Photograph by Darren Braun
When she started her job as an accounting associate, Heather Moseley was assigned to a cubicle right outside the office of one of her organization's top supervisors, Kelly McVicker. Everyone in the office was curious about McVicker. She was poised, stylish, quietly intense, and very successful at her job. Her office seemed sequestered in a corner and, as Moseley soon noticed, the door was often shut.

One morning McVicker happened by Moseley's cubicle and noticed that she had a picture of Stevie Wonder as her screensaver. It was a seemingly insignificant observation, but it set in motion a series of life-changing events. As chance would have it, the previous week McVicker had seen Stevie Wonder at a restaurant, and she recounted to Moseley how he swayed as he ate his curry. The two colleagues quickly hit it off, and when their conversation turned to Wonder's upcoming local show they immediately decided to buy tickets together. And so began a lasting professional and personal friendship.

Whether it's at a party or the office, we all know what it feels like to "click" with another person. Most of us, however, have not considered how it can impact more than our personal lives. New evidence suggests that clicking—and, in particular, a person's natural ability to click—plays a significant role in determining our career success.

By aggregating new research from various fields—since no specific discipline addresses the phenomenon—we endeavored upon a project to find what actually happens when two people click. More importantly, we wanted to discover if and how these moments shape our lives. While researching this topic, we initially discovered two big surprises. First, some people are more naturally inclined to form clicking relationships. Second, these people are much more likely to succeed in the workplace. Clicking at work can mean a promotion, a raise, or a position at the center of the company's social network. Take someone like Moseley. "I do an accountant's job, which is really administrative," she reflected. "Because of my relationship with Kelly, I now get invited to events, meetings, and conferences that I'd have no business going to as an accountant." Professionally, the relationship was mutually beneficial. "Knowing Heather," McVicker says, "I find out what's on people's minds. As a supervisor this is crucial information."

Moseley wasn't strategically kissing up to a superior. Rather, she possesses a trait that University of Minnesota psychologist Mark Snyder has dubbed "high self-monitoring." By interviewing subjects about their ability to imitate the behavior of others and to become the center of attention, Snyder developed a scale of self-monitoring. High self-monitors, he discovered, are social chameleons. Without even realizing it, they adapt their personalities, behavior, and attitudes to fit the people around them. They pick up subtle social cues and tailor their responses to the situation.

Let's say you've been cornered at a party by someone who is talking your ear off about a topic you're indifferent to. Many of us would try to feign interest for a few minutes before excusing ourselves. A high self-monitor would find a way to make the discussion meaningful for both parties or segue naturally to another topic. In a lab experiment, for example, test subjects were placed next to a woman shaking her leg. Without thinking about it, high self-monitors were significantly more likely to shake their own legs, too.

At work this tendency translates to accelerated progression. When researchers at the University of Pennsylvania followed the careers of a set of business school graduates who were either natural clickers or not, they found the predefined high self-mon-

**Self-Promotion**

Employees who click are more likely to get promoted and be closer to the social nucleus of a company. Here are three quick ways to improve your odds of advancement.

1. **Learn from natural-born clickers.** Certain people, called high self-monitors, have an innate gift for forming instant connections. Emulate these lucky few by tuning in to others' emotional states and mirroring their energy levels.

2. **Despite what you might think, vulnerability is a strength:** The more we open up and share our feelings, the more trust we build and the more likely a connection becomes.

3. **Your odds of clicking with someone rise significantly with every foot of proximity.** Whether it's choosing a desk in the middle of the office or a seat near the middle of the conference table, the closer you physically are to people, the more likely you are to connect.
itors were significantly more likely to get promoted, both in-house and across different companies. A separate study of one particular high-tech firm with 116 employees, compiled by researchers at the University of Cincinnati, the University of Kentucky, and Pennsylvania State University, found that it took an average of just 18 months for high self-monitors to infiltrate the nucleus of their workplace network. For low self-monitors it took a staggering 13 years. “In a social situation, high self-monitors ask, ‘Who does this situation want me to be, and how can I be that person?’, says Snyder. “By contrast, low self-monitors ask, ‘Who am I, and how can I be me in this situation?’”

Being a high self-monitor comes naturally to some people. Think Bill Clinton or Oprah Winfrey—people you’d want to have a beer with. Scientifically there is no way of knowing how much self-monitoring is innate vs. learned. (Psychologists believe it is a combination of both.) This means that even if high self-monitoring comes innately to some, we can all train ourselves to become higher self-monitors. While researching the topic we found several click accelerators. Two especially relevant to the workplace are proximity and vulnerability.

Is your office, for instance, in the middle of the action or off in a corner? McVicker’s was at the end of the hall. While we might assume that she was a private person who selected an out-of-the-way office, what if the office placement itself was what made her appear somewhat aloof? Researchers studying college dorm residents discovered an odd pattern. Those living toward the center of the hall were far more popular than their counterparts at the ends. Regardless of where they lived, students were much more likely to hit it off with their next-door neighbor. Move one door down and the chances for a click went down by 50 percent. Move another door down and the chances went down by half again. The students at the ends of the halls simply had fewer close neighbors—and therefore suffered socially. Think of the person whose office or desk is right next to yours. You’re twice as likely to form a bond with that co-worker than with someone just a single office farther away. Your chances are halved again if you’re separated by two offices. The more frequent our face-to-face interactions with a person, even without conversation, the more we tend to like him or her.

Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh reveal that encountering a stranger on 10 occasions instead of five makes us find that individual more attractive, intelligent, warm, and honest. By extension, showing up in person to a meeting rather than dialing in may be more important than we realize. The same goes for attending optional gatherings, keeping your office door open, and communicating in person rather than over the phone.

How much we reveal about ourselves—and our own vulnerability—also helps us click. One study conducted by SUNY-Stony Brook social psychologist Arthur Aron and his research team paired individuals who didn’t know each other and assigned each a set of cocktail-party-type questions, such as “What did you do over the holidays?” The other half were given questions that required more intimate self-revelation, such as “What are your most treasured memories?” The pairs who were forced to be more vulnerable in their answers formed incredibly quick, deep connections. One pair even married.

Our response to vulnerability is so innate that it can even be triggered by a machine. Harvard students who were asked by a computer to answer intimate questions—such as “What have you done in your life that you feel most guilty about?”—were understandably reluctant to share. Yet when the computer “self-disclosed,” prefacing its questions with a “confession” such as “There are times when this computer crashes for reasons that are not apparent to its user,” students were significantly more forthcoming. It turns out that when we disclose our feelings, we send a message of trust to others, making it easier for them to relate to us more openly.

Office managers, take note: The presence of high self-monitors can be contagious. Reflects McVicker, “I became more invested in the culture, more emotionally attached to my colleagues.”

**It took some workers 13 years to get to the core of their office network. “Clickers” did it in 18 months**