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| 1. Mark your confusion by highlighting or underlining anything you don’t understand. 2. Show evidence of a close reading (questions, connections, predictions, reactions, summarizing, clarifying, challenging, etc.). 3. Write a 1-page response. Possible Writer’s Notebook questions:  * What is the author’s main idea? Can you think of specific examples that support or seem to refute this idea? * Do you find this idea surprising or obvious? * What do you think about the experiments used in this research study? * What relevance could this research have to your own life? * Select any passage and respond to it. |

**Why the Office Oddball is Good for Business**

by Jeffrey Kluger, Time Magazine, March 31, 2009



Want to get the most out of your next brainstorming session at work? Bring in an oddball. If you can't find an oddball, try a naysayer or even a mere stranger — anyone who can keep things vaguely uncomfortable. If that sounds like a prescription for one of the worst meetings you've ever had, suck it up and go anyway. It might also be one of the most productive.

Business experts and social scientists have long warned about the perils of any group of co-workers getting too comfortable with one another. A team of like-minded people sharing like-minded opinions behind a closed door — the dreaded groupthink — has produced some of history's worst ideas. (See Bay of Pigs, bundled mortgages, "Mission Accomplished," New Coke.) Better to bring in at least one new face or dissenting voice to shake things up and challenge a few assumptions. But how much shaking does it take? As it turns out, not much. According to a new study published in the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, the mere presence of a newcomer in any group may be all it takes to turn stagnant thinking into fresh thinking and bad ideas into good ones. (See pictures of office cubicles from around the world.)

The findings come from an imaginative experiment conducted by a group of business professors from Stanford, Brigham Young and Northwestern universities. The investigators first recruited 200 student volunteers from various fraternity and sorority houses and divided them into 50 same-sex, four-person teams. The teams were brought in two at a time and given 20 minutes to solve an imaginary murder mystery, relying on made-up evidence and detective interviews. One of the suspects in the mystery was indeed guilty, which meant that the test did have a right answer.

Though frat boys and sorority girls are already a clannish lot, the investigators tried to magnify any team rivalry that might exist by hanging their house banners on opposite walls of the testing room, requiring the participants to wear house T shirts, and dividing the room with a bright line of blue tape. Just as the work sessions were about to begin, one member of each team was taken from the room and asked to perform a task that had nothing to do with the actual study. Those students were brought back in five minutes later and instructed to rejoin a group; some were placed on their original team, others on the rival team. In both cases, the rest of the group had already begun working and the returnee had to be brought up to speed quickly. When the work was done, the subjects filled out questionnaires about how they felt the sessions had gone. The results were striking. (See pictures of Steve Jobs on the job.)

In all the groups — regardless of whether the participants were from the same house or included a member of a rival house — the passage of just five minutes was sufficient to establish a unique response among the three full-time members, which the latecomer did not share. Those who found themselves disagreeing with the late returnee reported feeling closer to the rest of the group, with whom they had formed a closer bond; those who agreed with the odd member felt alienated from the rest of the group. But that wasn't necessarily bad.

"Socially, that [disagreement] can be very threatening," says study co-author Katie Liljenquist of Brigham Young. "These folks are then driven to say, 'Something more is going on here; let's figure out what's at the root of our disagreement.' " The result: the whole group analyzed the data more thoroughly and considered ideas they might otherwise have ignored. (See pictures of life inside the Googleplex.)

When the newcomer was wearing the colors of an opposing house, the results were even more dramatic. In general, mixed groups were likelier to solve the crime than the homogeneous groups were, but — perhaps reflecting feelings of disloyalty that come from making common cause with a perceived rival — the teams didn't realize they were working together so well. Even as they convicted the right man, the heterogeneous teams were likelier to report afterward that they'd done the job inefficiently and not very collegially. Unmixed teams that picked the wrong guy believed they'd worked pleasantly and well. Their watch ran smoothly; it just kept the wrong time.

"From a self-reporting point of view," says Liljenquist, "what people perceive to be beneficial turns out to be dead wrong. The experience in diverse groups may not always be a feel-good session, but the pains can translate into real performance gains."

None of that means that every business meeting has to include a habitual table pounder or eye-roller. The outsider, say Liljenquist and her co-authors, can be someone as subtly different as a member of the accounting department meeting with the sales team or an employee in the branch office visiting the headquarters. If adding that stranger causes you to squirm more, try to put up with it; it may also prompt you to think better than you realize.