

Teams, Work Groups, and Fikas: how to manage Fikas.



There are three types of work groups — fikas, work groups, and teams.

Each has its own set of dynamics. Today we will discuss fikas.

Fika?

This is a Swedish concept and refers to chatting in a relaxed way with coffee and something sweet. In some corporate settings, the intimate nature of fika is symbolized by lit candles in bright factories in the middle of the day. (Larsson, 2017).

Fikas are so common in Sweden, the word is a noun (“I am going to the fika”) and a verb (“Are you fiking?” and “Would you fika with me?”)

Fika Is Not an American Coffee Break:

Swedish fikas have nothing in common with traditional American coffee breaks. In the United States, a coffee break means a solitary employee goes up to the single cup coffee station and returns to a desk to continue working alone.

Fika is the communal use of food and liquid refreshment as merely the stated excuse for meeting: the real value is that it allows for informal cross functional conversations that might not normally happen during a business day.

Fikas help transform colleagues into chums.

In a series of articles, we wrote on the diagnosis of work relationships, Stybel & Peabody (2013, 2005) defined chums as work colleagues you enjoy being with but they are not your “friends.” A “friend” is someone whose relationship is not based on positive reinforcement whereas colleagues have a relationship that is based on self-interest. A chum is a colleague “with benefits.” The benefit is that you enjoy being with the person. But that person is not confused for a “friend.”

Fikas are also an efficient way to encourage informal communication across department and divisional lines. It is where young employees learn the “ropes” as opposed the rules.

Other Forms of Fika:

Friday afternoon pizza is an American version of a Swedish fika. Below is another example of an American fika:

One of our clients is a hedge fund. The core functions revolve around investment, compliance, and operations (HR, IT, finance, office management). The dining room contains a long table and free lunch is brought in by management. Employees obtain the food and sit at this long table. The shape of the table does not permit cliques to go off by themselves. It is designed for informal conversation between investment, compliance, and operations.

Below is an organization development intervention we employed using fika:

A low-income neighborhood contained a high school, a community hospital, a community college, an outpatient mental health center and center for mental retardation. It was commonly known that certain patients would go to the hospital, the mental health center, and the community college physician complaining of symptoms related to “depression.” Each medical professional would prescribe the same medication based on the presenting complaint. Patients would then have a collection of free medicine. These patients would then sell the drugs to children near the local school.

Formal attempts by management to identify these patients had failed because it would violate Federal and State patient confidentiality laws.

One of the authors instituted a monthly brown bag lunch limited to front line health care workers from the different agencies in the same neighborhood. Management was excluded from participation in these luncheons. There was no agenda other than to bring a desert you might be willing to share with others.

Like a fika, the stated objective revolved around food. The real objective, however, was for front-line professionals to share information across organization lines. No record was kept about the proceedings since this was only a brown bag lunch.

As expected, strangers became colleagues. And some colleagues became chums.

During the fika, patient names were shared. Two people were identified as going to different agencies with the same complaint and receiving the same psychotropic medication.

Someone in the fika had a chum in the city police precinct. A sting operation was launched using young actors pretending to be high school students. Police took public credit for a successful sting operation.

Another Example

In this same neighborhood, it was easy to identify that the mental health outpatient clinic has primary accountability if the issue is adolescent drug abuse. But what if the adolescent who is abusing drugs also has organic brain damage? Suppose this adolescent is acting out in high school classes. And this same student is diagnosed as dull normal intelligence?

Who has primary responsibility for one patient whose symptoms touch the local hospital, local community mental health center, local mental retardation center, and the high school?

You know the answer: each agency politely told the distraught parent, “not my responsibility.”

Management attempts to clarify responsibility for patients who fall in the “cracks” of multiple agency missions had failed: administrators viewed the issue from a zero-sum game. “If I accept responsibility, it reduces my pile of cash. If I get you to accept responsibility, your pile of cash is reduced, and my pile is preserved.”

At our brown bag lunch, we discussed this interagency problem.

Front line service providers agreed on an impartial way to solve the issue: if the parent first went to the hospital, then it became a hospital problem. If the parent first went to the mental health outpatient center, then it became primarily a mental health problem.

By letting the parent define the problem, no agency could be accused of “winning” over another agency. And all community agencies would stop playing “hot potato” with complex patient lives.

Managing Fikas for Success

American golf outings have fika-like properties but golf is not fika.

Golf is used as an excuse for people to get together. The real goal is informal exchange of information and the development of chumship.

The problem with golf is that it cannot be scheduled at regular intervals. It also consumes too much time. Not everybody has the patience to play 18 holes. Not everybody enjoys playing golf.

A fika is a regularly scheduled meeting whose stated mission might involve something of common interest. Food is usually an interest shared by all levels in a company and of interest to both sexes.

There is no size limitation to the fika but it should allow for people from different departments and sections of the company to mingle with each other.

Like the long table of our hedge fund client, a good fika would be designed to make it difficult to have the same people to sit with each other.

The purpose of the fika is chumship. Below are rules we recommend to our clients:

1. Mobile devices MUST be turned off during the fika. Devices are forbidden to be on the table. The mere presence of a mobile device at a meeting has been shown to reduce the depth of conversation (Turkle, 2015).
2. Try to sit with someone you do not know well, preferably from another department or team.
3. Be open about sharing your food.
4. There is no stated topic that must be discussed. You are free to share work-related or personal-related matters appropriate to a work setting.

Leaders manage fikas by not managing it. You convene fikas. Let informal communications “happen.”

Fika Regularity

Emile Odback is co-author of *Fika That!* (2017). He points to the importance of regularity rather than making fika the occasional event:

“I think the real magic starts to happen when managers are able to make connection and “chumship” the norm rather than the Friday exception.”

The Swedes can balance consistency of fika with a demanding work schedule by keeping fikas to 15 minutes. Perhaps At our hedge fund client, people are usually spending 20 minutes eating together and then they return to their offices or cubicles.

Experiment with time slots and find one comfortable for your organization.

Fika Dilemmas

Employees who work from their homes may be excluded from fikas and thus deprived of chumship development.

You could create a virtual fika by having one member of a team mail a nonalcoholic drink or food to other members. And during the virtual meeting, all participants are consuming the same beverage or food. It would be great if there is an interesting story behind the food or beverage selection. At the next meeting, another employee volunteers to send out a treat.

One of our clients is a large life science company. It has an impressive telecommunications rooms around the world where employees can speak and view each other sitting around the same wooden table. The design of the room makes the employee who appears on a computer screen appearing to be sitting at the same conference table as everyone else.

As a company uses more “Gig Economy” employees, should consultants be invited to the Fika? For example:

A tax accounting firm uses fifteen regular tax professionals each year for three months. If those people are invited to the Fika, should they be compensated?

Conclusions

We help leaders be more effective in managing work groups. There are three types of “groups:” work groups, teams, and fikas. Each type of group has different dynamics and structures.

Today we have focused on the management of fikas. If you do not have a regularly scheduled fika, consider organizing one as a way of improving inter departmental communications.

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