

Smooth Operator

A young man shopping in a supermarket noticed an old lady following him around. If he stopped, she stopped. Furthermore, she kept staring at him. She finally overtook him at the checkout and turned to him to say, "I hope I haven't made you feel ill at ease. It's just that you look so much like my late son." To which the man replied, "That's okay."

The old lady continued, "I know it's silly, but if you'd call out 'goodbye, mom' as I leave the store, it would make me happy." She then went through the checkout and as she was on her way out of the store, the man called out, "Goodbye, Mom." The old lady waved and smiled back at him.

Pleased that he had brought a little sunshine into someone's day, he went to pay for his groceries. "That comes to \$1211.85," said the cashier. "How is it possible? I only bought five items!" the man stated. The cashier replied, "Yes, but your mother said you'd be paying for her things too."

The funny story illustrates the pitfalls of a loosely-knit ecosystem where players hardly know each other. The interaction between the three strangers, the old lady (smooth operator), the young man (victim), and the cashier (decision maker) was limited to a few moments at the store.

So where does the primary accountability for the mishap lay?

It's on the cashier. As the cashier was the only one on official duty. If only the cashier knew more about the old lady or the young man and followed the protocol of not basing the decision only on a fleeting interaction, the outcome could have been averted.

In a business context, the cashier represents an appraiser whereas the old lady and the young man, appraisees. When appraisers are deprived of opportunities to know their team members well, the smooth operators win undeserving rewards at the cost of innocent ones. The end result is a gradual deterioration of organization culture.

Mature organizations, however, understand that to provide an even playing field for their constituents, it is imperative to create a balance between in-person

collaborations and work-from-home flexibilities. These companies and their teams are the ones who will deliver industry leading performances in tomorrow's digital world!