

# Chapter 1

## Hi, Call Me

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Every summer, The Company has a Company Picnic. It is similar to an ordinary picnic, a time when families and friends drive out into the country to spend a pleasant day; but there is an important difference. The Company Picnic is not to have a pleasant day in the country; it is always held in a big park in the middle of town. If anyone has a pleasant day, that is just fine, but incidental to the purpose of the event.

The Company Picnic is a genuine ceremonial rite. It is a day for setting aside the usual roles and relationships among employees. Executives shed their corporate uniforms and spend the day on display for the faithful. Ben Franklyn proves to be surprisingly human, and Ted Shelby has memorized the first names of the entire top management team. Perhaps he will come across some opportunities provided by the camaraderie of The Picnic. Similarly, Kerry Drake and Anne Wood let down their guards a bit and chat it up with anyone who approaches them about non-work topics such as children, sports teams, restaurants, and recent vacations. And Stanley, Lesley, Claude, and Bonnie are expected to talk quite casually and openly to anyone, about anything.

This is a day for renewing belief in The Company and reaffirming the values it stands for. The Company as a family is the theme of the day, with this sentiment embodied in the sticky-back tag that all attendees are given when their name is checked off the sign-up lists. The tag says: “Hi, Call Me \_\_\_\_\_,” and everyone from Mr. Marsh to Jimmie Szekely writes in their *first* name and sticks the tag on the front of their shirt. When the tag is securely attached, everyone collects a hot dog and a plastic cup of beer and dutifully mingles. The cups were even printed up especially for this event and contain the company’s name and logo.

I noticed Stanley mingling over on the horseshoe courts, playing a game with a man considerably older than himself. Stanley had been with The Company for about a year. Like most newcomers, he started at one of the outlying locations but had recently been transferred to a “new responsibility.” He was now working out of Company Headquarters in New York. (New York, of course, occupies a place in Company legend – those in outlying areas are simply told by their superiors, by way of justification, that “the people in New York want this,” or more simply, “New York wants this.”)

I hadn’t seen Stanley for quite a while, but I had run into him several days before, just in time to tell him that, since he was in town for The Company Picnic, he really should go. Stanley had gained considerable self-confidence and a sense of importance from his “new responsibilities;” in fact, he tended to overdo it.

As I approached the horseshoe courts, it was clear that he was overdoing it today. Although not an extrovert by nature, Stanley was always willing to give it a try. After all, isn’t it the outgoing people who get ahead? Of course, it didn’t hurt that he had been near the beer tap all afternoon.

“Yes, I was transferred to New York about two months ago,” Stanley was saying. And the emphasis he placed on *New York* revealed how impressed he was with this. Clankety-thud. His last toss knocked away his opponent’s leaner, replacing it on the stake. From closer up, the older man was a rather distinguished-looking, silver-haired fellow.

I don’t think Stanley took notice of this. “I was out at Pawtucket before that, but now I’m working out of the home office here, got a project going in Portland.” Clank. Another ringer for Stanley. He is playing a good game of horseshoes.

“Portland, eh?” said his opponent. “Then you’re with the sales force?”

"The sales force?" said Stanley. "Oh, hell, no! Listen, don't you know about the Expandrium processing line we're installing in Portland, Maine? I've got full responsibility for getting it on stream."

"I guess I hadn't heard about that one," His opponent paused and looked at Stanley's nametag, "Stanley."

"You'd think," said Stanley, as he tossed another ringer, "that in The Company people would have a better idea of what's going on. One thing I've learned, and I'll pass it along for what it's worth, if you don't know what's going on, you'll never get anywhere in this business."

"I won't argue with you there," said the older man.

Stanley tossed another ringer. "That's the game!" he said. "You know, horseshoes isn't as hard as it looks."

"Takes some practice." And looking at Stanley's nametag again, "Thank you for the game, Stanley."

"Don't mention it, see you around," said Stanley.

"It's nice to see you being so democratic here today, Stanley," I said.

"Well, I don't see any harm in talking with the line workers," said Stanley. "They probably don't get much of a chance to talk to management people one on one."

"You don't know who that *was*?" I asked him. Come to think of it, if Stanley had known, he might have acted a little differently.

"I looked at his name tag once, but I don't remember what the name was," said Stanley. "Why? Who was it?"

"That, Stanley, just happened to be Mr. Marsh!"

Stanley blanched, dropping two handfuls of horseshoes on his feet. Yet, I doubt that he noticed. He was more interested in the whereabouts of that distinguished gentleman he'd just trounced in his first game of horseshoes. What should he do, what *should he do*!?

Did Stanley blow it here? Is his bright career nipped in the bud? Will the edict come rolling down from on high, "Send him to Pocatello"?

No, of course not.

There are several reasons why no ill will befall Stanley, no matter what he might say to Mr. Marsh in this situation. In the first place, this is a ritual – a time when the great men leave the men's hut and mingle with the tribespeople. Mr. Marsh must show personal interest in each and every person he encounters. He assumes that all know him and that he is performing a duty similar to that of a prince of the church going among the faithful – that is, to be touched and rejoiced in. His common clothes are only part of the ritual, for his presence remains. And in spite of what his tag says, he is still Mr. Marsh.

Stanley's anguish is unnecessary and is the result of a basic error that he is making. He grossly overestimates his own presence. He sees the world, and particularly The Company, from a very egocentric viewpoint. Whatever interest Mr. Marsh might have shown in anything that Stanley said or did was nothing more than rote role behavior, which Stanley mistakenly interpreted as genuine interest.

The other reason that nothing will happen to Stanley is the fact that there is but one Mr. Marsh, while there are thousands of Stanleys who know who he is or will soon find out. But Mr. Marsh doesn't know who *any* of the thousands of Stanleys are. In truth, there is virtually no way that Stanley could either make it or blow it on this occasion, for the picnic is a solidarity ritual, a gathering of the clan, a reaffirmation of belief. What anybody says or does in this context makes little difference to anybody else.

Some day, perhaps, Stanley will move up high enough in The Company that his behavior on these occasions will indeed be significant. But it will not be so much for the way he deals with the Mr. Marshes of that day as for the style he uses in meeting the faithful. Even then, the judgment will be based on how well he carries out the ritual of "The Company as family."

## Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important for you to attend the company picnic and similar events? If you fail to attend are there any consequences, subtle or otherwise?
2. Do you agree that there is virtually no way that Stanley [or you] could make it or blow it on this occasion? Why?
3. What are some ways you *could* “blow it” at a company social function?
4. Is Stanley’s egocentric view of himself typical of entry-level professionals starting their first corporate job?
5. If your organization sponsors social events, what symbolic functions do they serve? If you have limited work experience, focus on sports teams, your church, your fraternal organizations, or even family events.

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