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Embraceable You: When the CEO Is a Hugger

Handshakes have given way to bear hugs in some corners of the corporate world as top bosses greet business associates with open arms; 'You don't lose your job if you don't hug.'



Sheldon Yellen, right, CEO of Belfor Property Restoration with employee Jason Foster in 2015. PHOTO: TIM FAGAN

By Rachel Feintzeig

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Felicia Flewelling starts her workday with coffee, a quick Facebook check and a whirling embrace with her boss.

"You go in for like a regular hug and then you just spin in a circle," the 31-year-old receptionist says of her morning ritual with the chief executive of her company, Dovico Software Inc. "It makes it a lot easier to come into work."

Handshakes have given way to bear hugs, back pats and lingering embraces in some corners of the corporate world. At luxury clothing brand Ted Baker PLC, TurboTax maker Intuit Inc. and Wheels & Deals Ltd. (called "Canada's Huggable Car Dealer"), top bosses greet employees, customers and other business associates with open arms.

Huggers say their touchy-feely approach breeds teamwork, trust and better business results. Hugges don't always agree. There are legal and physical risks to consider, not to mention the awkwardness of being embraced by the person who does your performance review.

The share of advertising and marketing executives who described co-worker hugging as common shot up 24 percentage points from five years earlier, according to a 2016 survey by Creative Group, a staffing agency owned by Robert Half International Inc. Some

leaders say workplace hugging is part of a broader trend as offices become more casual and the lines between life and work blur.

While interviewing at Dovico in February, Sam Lavoie, a 23-year-old software developer, moved in for a handshake only to find himself in the arms of the Canadian software company's CEO, Yves Doucet.

"I was like, 'Oh, OK, this is happening,'" Mr. Lavoie says. "It wasn't like I had a job or anything. It was two strangers just hugging."

Mr. Lavoie got the job, and quickly informed colleagues of his aversion to embraces.

"I'm an open, self-admitted, nonhugger," he says. "Flat out. Never been, never will be."

Co-workers have respected his wishes, he says, though he and Dovico's nonhuggers comprise a small minority. Mr. Doucet says those employees get a handshake, and no hard feelings. "You don't lose your job if you don't hug."

Mr. Doucet sometimes meets resistance from outsiders, too. At a business conference a few years ago, the CEO met a local government official who was greeting people by touching elbows, due to a cold. Undeterred, Mr. Doucet wrapped his arms around the man.

"He wanted to let go, but I wouldn't," he says. A security guard eventually came over to intervene, according to Mr. Doucet.

At 5 feet 6 inches tall, Sheldon Yellen occasionally has to get creative to get up close and personal with his 7,400 employees at Belfor Property Restoration, of Birmingham, Mich. He says he jumps on a chair to hug a company manager in the Netherlands who tops 7 feet. Mr. Yellen, the CEO, says a Belfor worker once hugged him so hard he broke three of his ribs, sending him to the hospital.

The injury hasn't slowed Mr. Yellen, who estimates he gives hundreds of hugs a week. Embraces ease tensions during tough negotiations, he says, and enable trusting colleagues to move fast on projects at the disaster-recovery company.

Actions like hugging or fetching coffee for a colleague can show "companionate love" at work, according to Sigal Barsade, a management professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. Her research finds that affectionate and caring organizations have less burnout and absenteeism and higher levels of employee satisfaction.

"We don't just hug for the sake of hugging," Ted Baker CEO Ray Kelvin says. He adopted the practice 12 years ago, when bad arthritis made handshakes painful.

A circle around his desk at the company's London headquarters is labeled "hug zone"; about five times a day someone will stand within its confines and receive a hearty embrace, he says.

The circle is about 10 feet in diameter, "enough for two people to get in it, sometimes three if you feel like having a group hug," Mr. Kelvin says.

Employees marking anniversaries at Partners + Napier, a Rochester, N.Y., advertising agency, celebrate with hugs from company leaders at a monthly staff meeting. In March, one worker ran around the room to evade a hug, chased by the company's managing director.

Another nonhugger just kept her arms glued to her side. "She didn't really hug back," says Lisa Baumgartner, a senior account executive at the firm who attended the meeting.

Through a spokesman, the two nonhugging employees declined to be interviewed for this article.



Intuit CEO Brad Smith PHOTO: JOHN MEDINA/GETTY IMAGES

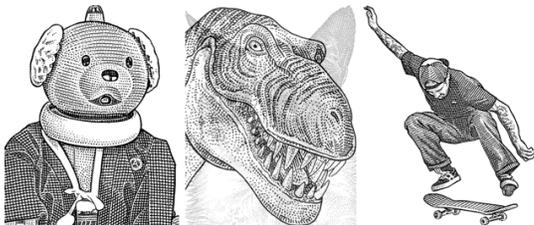
Bill Campbell, an executive famed for coaching Silicon Valley leaders like Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos, often gave warm hugs. A former chairman of Intuit's board, Mr. Campbell died last year. Current Intuit CEO Brad Smith has embraced many of Mr. Campbell's leadership traits. During a recent meeting, Mr. Smith hugged a reporter twice in 30 minutes.

"Greeting people with hugs, whether it is a fellow employee, another CEO, or someone I'm meeting for the first time, is not uncommon for me," he said in a statement.

Alison Green, the author of workplace advice blog Ask a Manager, says she has fielded dozens of questions from employees concerned about office hugging. Many nonhuggers endure embraces silently, not wanting to be rude, "but they're secretly thinking, 'Ugh, I don't want to be part of this hug,'" she says.

Huggers "seem to feel they're really good at judging when someone wants a hug, but based on what the nonhuggers are saying, they're wrong about that," she says.

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Ms. Baumgartner, the advertising-account executive, didn't grow up as a hugger; the first time she hugged her older brother was at her high-school graduation, she recalls. These days, she happily embraces female colleagues in the breakroom and hugs

her supervisor after receiving positive feedback. With members of her team, however, she gives high-fives, and she waits for clients to make the first move.

Aaron Goldstein, a partner with law firm Dorsey & Whitney LLP's labor and employment group, advises against initiating hugs in the workplace, especially after a recent court decision siding with a plaintiff who complained that a supervisor doled out more than 100 unwelcome hugs over 12 years. A San Francisco appeals court in February reversed an initial lower court decision in favor of the defendant, a sheriff, and the case is set to go to trial in 2018.

During training on workplace harassment, Mr. Goldstein takes managers through his taxonomy of hugging. He's dubbed one the HR hug, "the go-to-hug for HR professionals looking not to offend anyone," a one-armed sideways embrace; another the FFBB, "full-frontal but brief." "If it lasts for more than a second it's weird," he adds.

Recently, he added another physical workplace interaction to his list of potentially fraught behaviors, after an audience member caressed his palm during a training session.

"I felt like I needed a long shower afterwards," he says. "Next time someone says it was just a handshake, get the details."

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