

**STYBEL  
PEABODY &  
ASSOCIATES, INC.**



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**Help!**

**Our Corporate Culture  
is SO Silo-Driven.**

**Have You Tried 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 and a verb (“Are you fiking?” and “Come fika with me.”)

### **Fika Versus The American Coffee Break:**

Swedish fikas have nothing in common with traditional American coffee breaks. In the United States, a coffee break is defined as a solitary employee walking to a single cup coffee station, obtaining a cup filled with liquid, and walking back to the desk to continue working.

Fika, on the other hand:

is the use of food and liquid refreshment as the stated excuse for meeting people outside your functional area. The unstated value is that it establishes a corporate culture for informal cross functional conversations.

Stybel Peabody has a system for diagnosing relationships in work settings. In our system, Fikas establish a corporate structure to transform colleagues into chums. (2003, 2013).

Fikas are also an efficient way to encourage informal communication across department and divisional lines.

Newley hired employees learn the “ropes” at Fikas as opposed to the rules they learn from Human Resources.

Below is an example of an American -style Fika:

Client Hedge Fund is normally a function-oriented silo culture. These silos are called investment, compliance, and operations (HR, IT, finance, office management).

How can this silo culture be broken without destroying the client?

The dining room contains a long but narrow table. All round tables have been removed.

A luscious free lunch is brought in by management each work day.

Employees stop work, line up for their portion and sit at this long table.

The only rule: eat with someone you do NOT know and avoid eating with people who are in your functional area.

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 a Planned Parenthood Center.

It was commonly known that certain patients would go to the hospital, the mental health center, and the Planned Parenthood Clinic. Patients would complain about feeling depressed and suicidal. Patients would receive a prescription for the same medication at each center.

Patients would then purchase the medication at a local pharmacy and proceed to sell the medication on the street to students attending the local high 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 Fika in the form of a brown bag lunch limited to front line mental health 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.

Like any Fika, the stated objective revolves around food. The real objective, however, was for front-line professionals to transform the relationship from colleague to chum.

After eight Fikas, workers became comfortable discussing patients by name.

Two people were identified as having gone to two or more agencies with the same complaint and receiving the same psychotropic medication.

One of the Fika members had a chum in the neighborhood police precinct. A sting operation was launched using young actors pretending to be high school students.

Three drug dealers were arrested. Police took public credit for a successful sting operation.

### **Another Example of Fika in Action.**

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 health care providers were dealing with children and adolescents who fell into multiple functional silos. For example, who has primary care responsibility for an adolescent with organic brain damage who is acting out in school, and diagnosed as having dull normal intelligence?

In these complex cases, each agency would play “Not My Problem:” the school would define the problem as a hospital problem; the hospital would define the problem as a mental health problem; and the mental health agency to define the problem as a mental retardation problem.

As each agency politely told a parent, “It is not my responsibility” the parent would become increasingly distraught.

Management had previously attempted to clarify responsibility for patients who fall in the “cracks” of multiple agency missions. But these attempts had failed. Administrative heads viewed the issue as a zero-sum game. If my agency accepts 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.”

A year into our Fika, the issue of patients who fall in interagency cracks was discussed.

Front line service providers agreed on an impartial way to solve the problem: 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. All community agencies would be seen by parents as responsive.

## **How to Manage Your Fikas**

American golf outings have Fika-like properties:

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 good Fika, however, is a regularly scheduled meeting whose stated mission revolves around food consumption. Food is usually an interest shared by all. The Fika structure is can be 20 minutes (Coffee Break Fika) to 60 minutes (Lunch Fika).

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 all the time.

In our community health center Fika, only one mental health professional from each agency could attend the Fika.

The real purpose of Fika is to transform colleagues into chums.

Below are suggested governing rules we employ with our Stybel Peabody 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. You are to sit with someone you do not know well or work with every day. You are to avoid sitting with someone from your Department or functional area.
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.
5. Corporate leaders convene Fikas and then leave the room.

### **Fika Regularity**

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

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

The Swedes can balance consistency of Fika with a demanding work schedule by keeping Fikas to 15-20 minutes during American Coffee Break Time. This is usually between 2:00-3:00pm.



## **Fika Dilemmas**

Employees who work from their homes may be excluded from Fikas and thus deprived of the informal networking that takes place.

Online communication is a great tool for the development of work colleagues. But the lack of informal contact does make chumship difficult.

In theory, home-based workers could “participate” in Fikas remotely just as they participate in work groups today. For example, a Fika organized around coffee and desert could have people in other parts of the world also drinking a beverage.

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 interim employees and consultants used on a regular basis be invited to the Fika? For example:

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

## Conclusions

If your company is plagued with a silo mentality, consider the use of Fika as one component of a culture change tool.

## References

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**For a free 30-minute consult, contact:**

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