



FEATURES

The Boss Stops Here

A nonhierarchical workplace may just be a more creative and happier one. But how would you feel if the whole office was in a state of constant flux—whether to hire you—and when to give you a raise?

By [Matthew Shaer](#) Published Jun 16, 2013 [ShareThis](#)

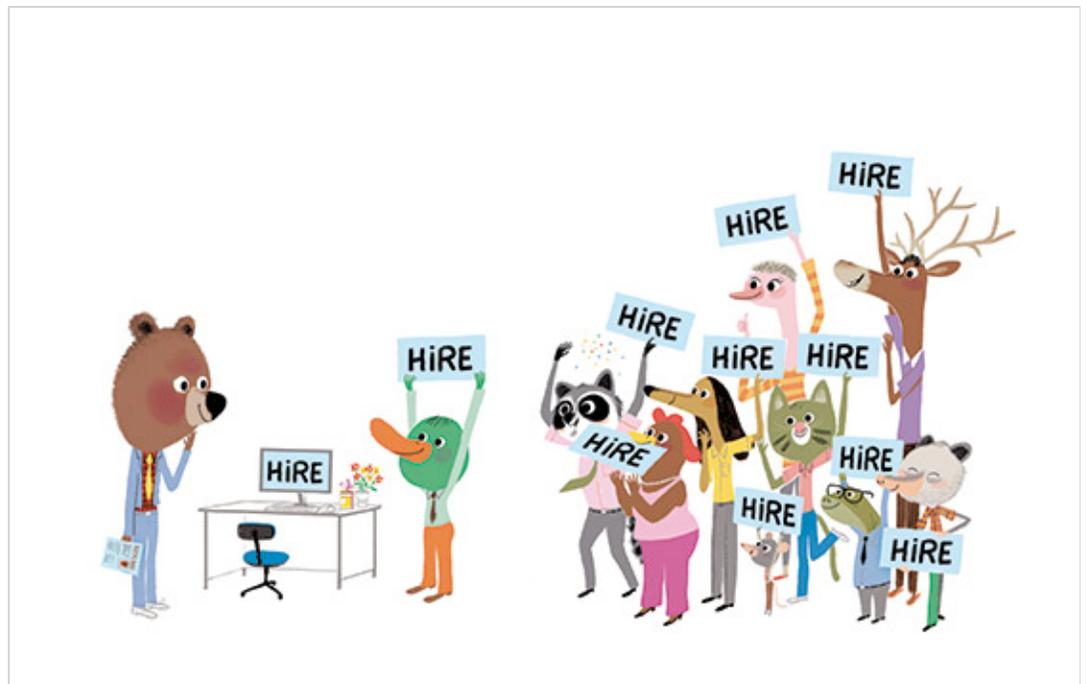


Illustration by Marc Boutavant

The headquarters of Menlo Innovations occupy the basement level of an office complex in downtown Ann Arbor, not far from the main campus of the University of Michigan. The space is airy and bright and capacious, as befits a successful software company, but unlike the standard-issue corporate hive, there are no cubicles at Menlo, and very few walls, and only a couple of doors, one of which leads to a closet full of sensitive legal documents and another that opens into a conference room—a concession to clients unaccustomed to (or unwilling to fully participate in the spirit of) what is known around here as “the Menlo Way.”

At ten in the morning on a recent Wednesday, the 50-odd employees of Menlo, most of whom are young and appealingly tousled and predisposed toward navy or forest-green hoodies, rose from their desks and formed a large circle in the middle of the room. Menlo developers practice something called “pair programming”—a technique whereby two coders work simultaneously on a single machine, with one actually manning the keyboard and the other backseat driving from an adjacent chair. The groupings typically remain intact for a few days or a week, at which point they are scuttled and reassigned, the hope being that the constant mutation in team structure will help encourage creativity and prevent frustration.

Since there are no bosses at Menlo (at least not in the traditional sense) and no middle managers (ditto), all that reassigning and fluctuation falls to the team as a whole, a process that requires a lot of air-traffic control. Every morning, the entire staff circles up to discuss strategy.

On the day I attended, the meeting moved with martial efficiency. Two by two, the pairs stepped forward and, with each employee gripping one of the horns of a fat-lady-sings-style helmet, the unofficial symbol of Menlo Innovations, they laid out their plan for the eight hours ahead. The bulk of the speakers were developers and designers (or “high-tech anthropologists,” a term Menlo has registered with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office), but there were also quality-assurance and support staffers on hand, and the conversation ran from the jocular to the mundane to the technical:

“We’re going to be calling this project ‘Gobstopper,’ because ‘Jawbreaker’ just sounded a little too hard-core.”

“Right now, I’m doing some organizing of the storage closet.”

“Every day, I’m reminded of how much human suffering in the world is related to technology. I’m talking about the new Gmail design.”

“I’m Andrea, and I’m working on client invoices.”

There was some clapping and some backslapping, of the kind you might observe at a particularly boisterous rec-league indoor soccer game, then all the employees were filing back to their desks, past a poster of Frank Zappa and a bust of Thomas Edison, the patron saint of Menlo and the guy whose famed laboratory, in Menlo Park, New Jersey, inspired this Michigan company’s name. Later, one of the quality advocates at Menlo, Joe Rock (real name), explained that the a.m. meeting helps keep morale on the team high and, more important, encourages a feeling of camaraderie—a sense that every one of the staffers is working together toward a common goal. Hence the circle, which, in a nod to King Arthur’s court, ensures that no one gets a seat at the head of the table.

As I soon discovered, basically everything at Menlo Innovations is so open and transparent and *flat*

that the average office worker, upon entering the Menlo den, might be forgiven for feeling a little suspicious, intrigued, cynical, and jealous all at once.

Consider, for instance, the fact that hiring at Menlo is handled by committee, with each applicant spending a little bit of time with a group of employees, until a consensus can be reached. That same collective decision-making happens during promotions, layoffs, and flat-out firings.

Consider next the charts in the corner of the office, which display the names and titles of the Menlo employees and also their corresponding pay grades. When I first saw them, I was standing in the midst of a scrum of Menlonians, and I suggested—thus belying my own, frankly square work experience—that it might be a little unnerving to have your salary exposed to your colleagues. And the guy standing to my right actually scoffed. “No,” he said. “It’s the opposite. It’s liberating.”

It’s a relatively safe assumption that most of us have, at one point in our lives, worked for a boss. There is comfort in the arrangement: Someone tells us what to do, and we do it. If we do it well—and “it” here could be anything from writing software to assembling a car—we may get a more spacious cube or more money, and if we do it poorly, we can expect to be let go. Above us, in an ever-narrowing spire, are the shift supervisors and floor managers and vice-presidents, each of whom is subject to his or her own unique hierarchical pressures, and above them is the CEO or president or otherwise-titled grand Pooh-Bah who dictates the rules that the rest of us must follow.

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