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Apprentice, reality TV with something to show for it

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Reality shows like *The Bachelor* may provide more in the way of prurient titillation than useful dating tips, but it's *The Apprentice* that seems to be taking hold around the water cooler.

The business show on NBC, which pits smart young attractive go-getters against each other to win the respect of real estate tycoon Donald Trump, has become the latest way to pick up what to do and, perhaps more importantly, what not to do around the office.

As the contestants — who are all vying for a \$250,000 "dream job" as president of one of Trump's companies for a year — fumble and flop as they manage restaurants, sell art and design advertising campaigns, we're watching at home to see if we've got what it takes.

"It's good educational TV," said Karyl Innis, CEO of the Innis Co., a Dallas-based career coaching and outplacement company.

And it's required watching at some Fortune 500 companies, according to Deborah Himsel, author of the book *Leadership Sopranos Style* and vice president of organization effectiveness for Avon Products.

While most of the boneheaded moves we make at work don't end up with Donald Trump — or any boss, for that matter — stabbing the air with his fingers and saying "You're fired!" they can be career limiting.

In fact, it's not much of a surprise who ends up getting dumped each week, Innis said. "It's a reality show that finally makes sense," Innis said.

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Of course, in most workplaces, not everyone is as beautiful and glamorous as the players on the show. And hopefully there's not as much back-stabbing and lying going on, either.

The show calls on two teams to compete to see who can earn the most on a business venture by thinking outside the box and pushing the envelope. But many times, the smart players have a fatal flaw: They can't get along with others, they can't focus or they don't listen.

Think of these flaws as the things you should have learned in kindergarten. Innis has trademarked the phrase, "Smart, but ... " to describe that close relationship between simultaneous intelligence and stupidity.

David, the first contestant to get fired, during a lemonade selling exercise, was brilliant, Innis said. But he couldn't connect with anyone else. And he never seemed to catch on even after he got fired, Innis said. He was still saying in the taxi after he was dismissed that he could take solace that he was the smartest.

Omarosa was well-educated and liked to present herself as the "smartest puppy in the pen," Innis said. But she alienated her partners. Bowie's sin was that he was smart but nice. He didn't do anything to distinguish himself, Innis said, and found himself fired after his team lost the contest to boost sales at a Planet Hollywood restaurant.

So how can you learn from those mistakes?

It's important to understand yourself, Himsel said. Know what derails you and how your behavior affects others.

Heidi, who was fired after a less-than-stellar effort to make money with pedicabs, was emotional and volatile. But she didn't pick up on how that frustration damaged the confidence of her team members.

Employees like Heidi can get away with emotional outbursts at the junior level, Himsel said. But it would hinder her from getting promoted to levels where getting along is more important.

Another way to find out about your effect on others is to ask them, Himsel said. People will tell you, especially those close to you.

In an era of "situational ethics," and when "Enron" is the shorthand for corporate greed, it's probably not unusual that the apprentices get a little close to the ethical line when there's a big prize at stake.

It's interesting to see how easy it is to get close to ethical boundaries, Innis said, recalling a show in which the women enticed customers to buy drinks using sex appeal

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to raise restaurant revenues. That's clearly not a good strategy for a business and can backfire, she said.

Maria Korn, vice president and senior consultant with Lee Hecht Harrison in Houston, said she was surprised by all the back-stabbing and lying going on to emerge on top and look favorable to Trump. It's like they'll do virtually anything to get ahead, which, unfortunately, sometimes works in the real world, she said.

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