The Slade Plating Department

Ralph Porter, production manager of the Slade Company, was concerned about reports of dishonesty among some employees in the Plating Department. From reliable sources, he learned that a few of them were punching the time cards of a number of their co-workers who were leaving early. Porter had only recently joined the Slade organization. From conversations with the previous production manager and other fellow managers, he judged that they were pleased, in general, with the overall performance of the Plating Department.

The Slade Company was a small but prosperous manufacturer of metal products designed for industrial application. Its manufacturing plant, located in central Michigan, employed 500 workers who were engaged in producing a large variety of clamps, inserts, knobs, and similar items. Orders for these products were usually large and came in on a recurrent basis. The volume of orders fluctuated in response to business conditions in the primary industries that the company served. At the time of this case, sales volume had been high for over a year. The bases on which the Slade Company secured orders, in rank of importance, were quality, delivery, and reasonable price.

The organization of manufacturing operations at the Slade plant is shown in Exhibit 1. The departments listed there, from left to right, are approximately in the order in which material flowed through the plant. The die making and set-up operations required the greatest degree of skill, which was supplied by highly paid, long-service craftspeople. The finishing departments, divided operationally and geographically between plating and painting, attracted less highly trained but relatively skilled workers, some of whom had been employed by the company for many years. The remaining operations required largely unskilled labor and contained positions characterized by relatively low pay and high turnover of personnel.

The plating room covered the entire top floor of the plant. Exhibit 2 shows the floor plan, the disposition of workers, and the flow of work throughout this department. Thirty-eight people worked in the department, plating or oxidizing the metal parts or preparing parts for the application of paint at another location in the plant. The department’s work occurred in response to orders communicated by production schedules that were revised daily. Schedule revisions, caused by last-minute order increases or rush requests from customers, resulted in short-term volume fluctuations—particularly in the plating, painting, and shipping departments. Exhibit 3 outlines the activities of the various jobs, their interrelationships, and the type of work in which each specialized. Exhibit 4 rates the various types of jobs in terms of technical skill, physical effort, discomfort, and training time associated with their performance.
The activities that took place in the plating room were of three main types:

1. Acid dipping, where parts were etched by being placed in baskets that were manually immersed and agitated in an acid solution.

2. Barrel tumbling, where parts were roughened or smoothed by being loaded into machine-powered revolving drums containing abrasive, caustic, or corrosive solutions.

3. Plating, either manual, where parts were loaded on racks and were immersed by hand through the plating sequence; or automatic, where racks or baskets were manually loaded with parts that were then carried by a conveyor system through the plating sequence.

Within these main divisions of work, there were a number of variables, such as cycle times, chemical formulas, abrasive mixtures, and so forth, that distinguished particular jobs as categorized in Exhibit 3.

The work of the plating room was received in batch lots averaging 1,000 pieces each. The clerk moved each batch, which was accompanied by a routing slip, to its first operation. This routing slip indicated the operations to be performed and also when each major operation on the batch was scheduled to be completed, so that the finished product could be shipped on time. From the accumulation of orders presented, each worker organized his or her own work schedule so as to make optimal use of equipment, materials, and time. Upon completion of an order, each worker moved the lot to its next work position or to the finished material location near the freight elevator.

The plating room was under the direction of its supervisor, Otto Schell, who worked a regular 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. day, five days a week. The supervisor spent a good deal of working time attending to maintenance and repair of equipment, procuring supplies, handling late schedule changes, and seeing to it that people were at their proper work locations.

Working conditions in the plating room varied considerably. That part of the department containing the tumbling barrels and the plating machines was constantly awash, alternately with cold water, steaming acid, or a caustic soda. Workers in this part of the room wore knee boots, long rubber aprons, and high-gauntlet rubber gloves. This uniform, consistent with the general atmosphere of the wet part of the room, was hot in the summer and cold in winter. In contrast, the remainder of the room was dry, relatively odorless, and provided reasonably stable temperature and humidity conditions for those who worked there.

The men and women employed in the plating room are listed in Exhibit 5. This exhibit provides certain personal data on each department member, including a productivity skill rating (based on subjective and objective appraisals of potential performance), as reported by the members of the department.

Pay in the department was low for the central Michigan area. Employees typically started at a few dollars over minimum wage, with small increases given over time based on seniority and skill. However, working hours for the plating room were long. To keep employee training and benefit costs down, the company practice was to increase overtime rather than hire new employees. The typical Monday-through-Friday workweek in the department was 60 hours (except for the rack assembly area, which worked a standard 40-hour week). The first 40 hours were paid for on a straight-time rate basis while the next 20 hours were paid on a time-and-one-half basis. All weekend work was paid on a double-time rate basis.

As Exhibit 5 indicates, Philip Kirk, a worker in aisle 2, provided the data for this case. After he had been a member of the department for several months, Kirk noted that certain members of the
department tended to seek each other out during free time on and off the job. He then observed that these informal associations were enduring, built upon common activities and shared ideas about what was and what was not legitimate behavior in the department. His description of the pattern of these associations are diagrammed in Exhibit 6.

The Sarto group, named after Tony Sarto who was its most respected member and the arbiter between the other members, was the largest group in the department. Except for Louis Patrici, Alice Bartolo, and Frank Bonzani (who relieved each other during break periods), the group invariably ate lunch together on the fire escape near aisle 1. On those Saturdays and Sundays when overtime work was required, the Sarto group operated as a team, regardless of weekday work assignments, to get overtime work completed as quickly as possible. (Few department members not affiliated with either the Sarto or the Clark groups worked on weekends.) Off the job, Sarto group members often joined in parties or weekend trips, with Sarto’s summer house being a frequent rendezvous.

Sarto’s group was the most cohesive one in the department in terms of its organized punch-in and punch-out system. Since the group’s members were regularly scheduled to work from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. weekdays, and since all supervisors left at 5:00 p.m., it was possible almost every day to finish a day’s work by 5:30 p.m. and leave the plant. Moreover, if one of the group’s members stayed until 7 o’clock, he or she could punch the time cards of a number of others and help gain them free time without pay loss. (This system operated on weekends also, at which time supervisors were only present for short periods, if at all.) In Sarto’s group the duty of staying late rotated, so that no one did so more than once a week. In addition, the group would punch in a member if he or she was unavoidably delayed. Such a practice never occurred without prior notice from the person who expected to be late, however, and never if the tardiness was expected to go beyond 8:00 a.m., the start of the day for the supervisor.

Sarto explained the logic behind the system to Kirk:

You know that our hourly pay rate is quite low, compared to other companies. What makes this the best place to work is the feeling of security you get. No one ever gets laid off in this department. With all the hours in the workweek, all the company ever has to do is shorten the workweek when orders fall off. We have to tighten our belts, but we can all get along. When things are going well, as they are now, the company is only interested in getting out the work. It doesn’t help to get it out faster than it’s really needed—so we go home a little early whenever we can. Of course, some people abuse this sort of thing—like Herman—but others work even harder, and it averages out.

Whenever an extra order has to be pushed through, naturally I work until 7:00 p.m. So do a lot of others. I believe that if I stay until my work is caught up and my equipment is in good shape, that’s all the company wants of me. They leave us alone and expect us to produce—and we do.

When Kirk asked Sarto if he would not rather work shorter hours at higher pay in a union shop (Slade employees were not organized), he just laughed and said: “It wouldn’t come close to an even trade.”

The members of Sarto’s group were explicit about what constituted a fair day’s work. Customarily, they cited Herman Schell, Kirk’s work partner and the supervisor’s brother, as a man who consistently produced below level. Kirk received an informal orientation from Herman during his first days on the job. As Herman put it:

I’ve worked at this job for a good many years, and I expect to stay here a good many more. You’re just starting out, and you don’t know which end is up yet. We spend a lot of time in here, and no matter how hard we work, the pile of work
never goes down. There’s always more to take its place. And I think you’ve found out by now that this isn’t light work. You can wear yourself out fast if you’re not smart. Look at Pearson up in aisle 4. There’s a kid who’s just going to burn himself out. He won’t last long. If he thinks he’s going to get somewhere working like that, he’s nuts. They’ll give him all the work he can take. He makes it tough on everybody else and on himself too.

Kirk reported further on his observations of the department:

As nearly as I could tell, two things seemed to determine whether or not Sarto’s group or any others came in for weekend work on Saturday or Sunday. It seemed usually to be caused by rush orders that were received late in the week, although I suspect it was sometimes caused by the fact that people spent insufficient time on the job during the previous week.

Tony and his group couldn’t understand Herman. While Herman arrived late, Tony was always half an hour early. If there was a push to get out an extra amount of work, almost everyone but Herman would work that much harder. Herman never worked overtime on weekends, while Tony’s group and the people in the manual tanks almost always did. When the first exploratory time study of the department was made, no one on the aisle slowed down except Herman, with the possible exception, to a lesser degree, of Charlie Malone. I did hear that the people in the dry end of the room slowed down so much you could hardly see them move, but we had little to do with them, anyway. While the people I knew best seemed to find a rather full life in their work, Herman never really got involved. No wonder they couldn’t understand each other.

There was quite a different feeling about Bob Pearson. Without the slightest doubt, Bob worked harder than anyone else in the room. Because of the tremendous variety of work produced, it was hard to make output comparisons, but I’m sure I wouldn’t be far wrong in saying that Bob put out twice as much as Herman and 50% more than almost anyone else in the aisles. No one but Herman and a few old-timers at the dry end ever criticized Bob for his efforts. Tony and his group seemed to feel a distant affection for Bob, but the only contact they or anyone else had with him consisted of brief greetings.

To the people in Tony’s group, the most severe penalty that could be inflicted was exclusion. This they did to both Pearson and Herman. Pearson, however, was tolerated; Herman was not. Evidently, Herman felt his exclusion keenly, though he answered it with derision and aggression. Herman kept up a steady stream of stories concerning his attempts to gain acceptance outside the company. He wrote country western music that was always rejected by producers. He attempted to join several social and athletic clubs, mostly without success. His favorite pastime was fishing. He told me that fishermen were friendly, and he enjoyed meeting new people whenever he went fishing. But he was particularly quick to explain that he preferred to keep his distance from the people in the department.

Tony’s group emphasized more than just quantity in judging a person’s work. The group stressed high standards of both quality and inventiveness. A confidence had grown among them that they could master and even improve upon any known finishing technique. Tony himself symbolized this skill. Before him, Tony’s father had operated aisle 1 and had trained Tony to take his place. Tony, in turn, was training his cousin Pete. When a new finishing problem arose from a change in customer specifications, the supervisor, the department technician, the plant process engineer or any of the people directly involved would come to Tony for
help, and Tony would give it willingly. For example, when a part with a special plastic embossing was designed, Tony was the only one who could discover how to treat the metal without damaging the plastic. To a lesser degree, the other members of the group were also innovative about solving the problems that arose in their own sections.

Herman, for his part, talked incessantly about his feats in design and finish creations. As far as I could tell during the year I worked in the department, the objects of these stories were obsolete or of minor importance. What’s more, I never saw any department member seek Herman’s help.

Willingness to be of help was a trait Sarto’s group prized. The most valued help of all was of a personal kind, though work help was also important. The members of Sarto’s group were constantly lending and borrowing money, cars, clothing, and tools among themselves and less frequently, with other members of the department. Their daily lunch bag procedure typified the “common property” feeling among them. Everyone's lunch was opened and added to a common pile from which each member of the group chose his or her meal.

On the other hand, Herman refused to help others in any way. He never left his aisle to aid those near him who were in the middle of a rush of work or a machine failure, though this was customary throughout most of the department. I can distinctly recall the picture of Herman leaning on the hot and cold water faucets that were located directly above each tumbling barrel. He would stand gazing into the tumbling pieces for hours. To the passing, casual visitor, he looked busy; and as he told me, that’s just what he wanted. He, of course, expected me to act this same way, and it was this enforced boredom that I found virtually intolerable.

More than this, Herman took no responsibility for breaking in his assigned helpers as they first entered the department or thereafter. He had had four helpers in the space of little more than a year. Each had asked for a transfer to another department, publicly citing the work as cause, and privately blaming Herman. Tony was the one who taught me the ropes when I first entered the department.

The people who congregated around Harry Clark tended to talk like and imitate the behavior of the Sarto group, although they never approached the degree of inventive skill or the amount of helping activities that Tony’s group did. They sought outside social contact with the Sarto group, and several times a year the two groups went out on the town together. Clark’s group did maintain a high level of performance in the volume of work it turned out.

The remainder of the people in the department stayed pretty much to themselves or associated in pairs or threesomes. None of these people were as inventive, as helpful, or as productive as Sarto’s or Clark’s groups, but most of them gave verbal support to the same values as those groups held.

The distinction between the two organized groups and the rest of the department was clearest in the punching-out routine. The women in rack assembly were not involved. Malone and Lacey, Partridge and Swan, and Martin, LaForte, and Mensch arranged within their small groups for punch outs, or they remained beyond 5:00 p.m. and slept or read when they finished their work. Perkins and Pierce went home when the supervisor did. Herman Schell, Susi, and Maher had no punch-out organization to rely on. Susi and Maher invariably stayed in the department until 7:00 p.m. Herman was reported to have established an arrangement with Partridge whereby the latter punched Herman out for a fee. Such a practice was unthinkable
from the point of view of Sarto’s group. Evidently, it did not occur often because Herman usually went to sleep behind piles of work when his brother left, or particularly during the fishing season, punched himself out early. He constantly railed against the dishonesty of other people in the department, yet urged me to punch him out on several “emergency occasions.”

Just before I left the Slade Company to return to school after 14 months on the job, I had a casual conversation with Mr. Porter, the production manager, and he asked me how I had enjoyed my experience with the organization. During the conversation, I learned that he knew of the punch-out system in the Plating Department. What’s more, he told me, he was wondering if he ought to “blow the lid off the whole mess.”
Exhibit 1 Manufacturing Organization

President

Production Manager Ralph Porter

Receiving & Shipping Dept. Supervisor
- 35 Workers
  - In-Process Storage Asst. Supervisor
    - 18 Workers
  - Material Handling Asst. Supervisor
    - 32 Workers
  - Scheduling Asst. Supervisor
    - 10 Clerks 6 Expeditors

Production Control Supervisor
- 27 Workers
- 35 Toolmakers
- 30 Setup Workers

Maintenance Dept. Supervisor

Tool & Die Dept. Supervisor
- 35 Toolmakers
- 30 Setup Workers

Stamping Depts. Supervisor
- 8 Sections
- 8 Assistants Supervisors
- 200 Workers

Plating Dept. Supervisor Otto Schell
- 38 Workers
- 28 Workers

Paint Dept. Supervisor

Exhibit 2  Plating Room Layout

Symbols:

- Tumbling Barrel
- Stock Ready for Finishing
- Raw Materials (Acid, etc.)
- Flow of work
Exhibit 3 Outline of Work Flow, Plating Room

**Aisle 1:** Worked closely with Aisle 3 in preparation of parts by barrel tumbling and acid dipping for high-quality plating in Tanks 4 and 5. Also did a considerable quantity of highly specialized, high-quality acid-etching work not requiring further processing.

**Aisle 2:** Tumbled items of regular quality and design in preparation for painting. Less frequently, did oxidation dipping work of regular quality, but sometimes of special design, not requiring further processing.

**Aisle 3:** Worked closely with Aisle 1 on high-quality tumbling work for Tanks 4 and 5.

**Aisles 4 & 5:** Produced regular tumbling work for Tank 1.

**Aisle 6:** Did high-quality tumbling work for special products plated in Tanks 2 and 3.

**Tank 1:** Worked on standard, automated plating of regular quality not further processed in plating room, and regular work further processed in Tank 5.

**Tanks 2 & 3:** Produced special, high-quality plating work not requiring further processing.

**Tank 4:** Did special, high-quality plating work further plated in Tank 5.

**Tank 5:** Automated production of high- and regular-quality, special- and regular-design plated parts sent directly to shipping.

**Rack Assembly:** Placed parts to be plated in Tank 5 on racks.

**Rack Repair:** Performed routine replacement and repair of racks used in Tank 5.

**Polishing:** Processed, by manual or semi-manual methods, odd-lot special orders that were sent directly to shipping. Also, sorted and reclaimed parts rejected by inspectors in the shipping department.

**Degreasing:** Took incoming raw stock, processed it through caustic solution, and placed clean stock in storage ready for processing elsewhere in the plating room.

*High or regular quality:* The quality of finishes could broadly be distinguished by the thickness of plate and/or care in preparation. *Regular or special work:* The complexity of work depended on the routine or special character of design and finish specifications.

Exhibit 4 Skill Indices by Job Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Technical Skill Required</th>
<th>Physical Effort Required</th>
<th>Degree of Discomfort Involved</th>
<th>Degree of Training Required*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aisle 1</td>
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<td>Tanks 2 to 4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aisle 2 to 6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tank 5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tank 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degreasing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Polishing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rack assembly and repair</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Note: Rated on scales of 1 (the least) to 10 (the greatest) in each category.

*The amount of experience required to assume complete responsibility for the job.*
### Exhibit 5  
**Plating Room Personnel**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Company Seniority (yrs.)</th>
<th>Location Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Company Seniority (yrs.)</th>
<th>Department Seniority (yrs.)</th>
<th>Education (yrs.)</th>
<th>Familial Relationships</th>
<th>Productivity Skill Rating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aisle 1</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Pete Facelli, cousin</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pete Facelli</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Louis Patrici, uncle</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joe Iambi</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Tony Sarto, uncle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aisle 2</td>
<td>Herman Schell</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Otto Schell, brother</td>
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<td>Philip Kirk</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>SA^b</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sal Maletta</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Father in tool &amp; die dept.</td>
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<td>John Lacey</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Brother in paint dept.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tank 1</td>
<td>Henry LaForte</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Tanks 2 &amp; 3</td>
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<td>S</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<td>Frank Bonzani</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>9M, 1S</td>
<td>10 (av.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>8 (av.)</td>
<td>6 with husbands in Co.</td>
<td>7 (av.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rack Maintenance</td>
<td>Will Partridge</td>
<td>57</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>62</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Russ Perkins</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Otto Schell</td>
<td>56</td>
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<td>35</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Herman Schell, brother</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Bill Pierce</td>
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<td>M</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Frank Rutlage</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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^aOn a potential scale of 1 (bottom) to 10 (top), as evaluated by the workers in the department.

^bKirk was the source of data for this case, and as such, he was in a biased position to report accurately perceptions about himself.
Exhibit 6  Informal Groupings in the Plating Room

The boxes indicate those individuals who clearly demonstrated leadership behavior (most closely personified the values shared by their groups, were most often sought for help and arbitration, and so forth).

While the two- and three-person groupings had little informal contact outside their own boundaries, the five-man Clark group did seek to join the largest group in social affairs outside the plant; these were relatively infrequent.

Though not an active member of any group, Bob Pearson was regarded with affection by the two large groups.