10 Signs of a Dysfunctional Workplace

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 # 1.) Nothing can get done without the boss's approval.

- The Owner has developed a "micro-management" style of leadership. While he/she may not want to be bothered with "some" decisions…
- On others they will second guess those hired to make the decision which, in turn, stymies future growth and undermines the professional(s) that should have been accountable for the decision.
- Organization will experience high turnover in key manager roles b/c they don't feel empowered or respected by the Owner(s).

 # 2.) To get things done, you have to hide them from the boss.

- With a micromanager at the top of the organization, the staff will often hide certain things that go on for fear that their decision will be overridden, or because they need to have something done immediately and know that by involving the Owner that it will slow things down and prevent a quick decision.
- The organization begins to take on traits of "the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing."
- Open and honest communication is not practiced or modeled, thus, dysfunctional behaviors will entrench themselves into the culture.

 # 3.) Who is the boss?

- While an Owner may not agree with the decision made by a managers, if they don't support it completely (while, at the same time coaching the manager and providing feedback in a confidential manner) then they're creating an environment of "tail wagging the dog" – especially as it relates to employee issues.
- If the employees are rewarded for complaining about their manager and going directly to the Owner who then over-ride the manager's actions, the employees will feel empowered and probably not accountable for their own behaviors/conduct.
- Just like a kid that doesn't like Mom's decision so he/she goes to Dad for a different decision, Mom (the Manager) and Dad (the Owner) need to speak with one voice and one opinion; otherwise, the tail will wag the dog and you'll end up with an extremely dysfunctional work environment.

 # 4.) Meetings and protocols.

- All too many managers aren't skilled when it comes to preparing, planning and facilitating meetings.
- They don't take the time to plan an agenda and send it out to the participants 24 – 48 hours in advance to ensure that everyone is adequately prepared to

discuss specific topics – particularly if research or preparation might be necessary to resolve or bring closure to the something.
- The facilitator (or boss) is late to the meeting, thus, giving everyone license to be late themselves.
- The boss does not keep the time commitment to the length of the meeting (if the meeting is suppose to be one-hour, conclude it at that time) and take any unresolved matters off line or with only those needed.
- Participants should NOT be allowed to use electronic devices (i.e. PDA's, cell phone, send text messages); otherwise, they're not engaged in the meeting nor are they participating in the discussion of topics.

 # 5.) Overuse of technology.
- Companies, particularly those with younger workers, are frequently concerned with the feedback they obtain from their staff that the organization is poor at communicating; the employee's feel that management doesn't keep them informed and, when they do, it's interpreted erroneously and, thus, negatively impacting productivity and retention.
- Due to the demands of their work, as well as their proficiency and ease with technology, the employees are so accustom to texting and e-mailing that they seemingly avoid in-person interactions. Even with the most casual of topics such as where they're going for lunch, the employee's will e-mail someone who sits five feet away rather than walk three steps to communicate in-person.
- Technology is great when used effectively; however, when it becomes the main method in which information is passed along, you're taking the human element out of it; e-mailing is one-way communication and does not allow for body language or a "clarification" if something is not understood correctly. Without the ability to see the person you're talking with and given the opportunity to ask questions and seek understanding you're going to find that your organization suffers from ineffective communication.
- Without promoting and fostering "real-time" in-person exchanges, it's virtually impossible to build a team, or rather improve your "team building" and relationships among co-worker's and within departments.

 # 6.) Lack of Trust and Authenticity.
- Many years ago I went to work for a Fortune 500 company. Within a short time I picked up on a "vibe" that things were not as they seemed.
- There was little to no "open and honest" communication; people shared information as if they were involved in some sort of chess game attempting to solicit information you might have without having to disclose any of the information that they might be privy to.
- You never knew who you could trust and who was going to "use" information about you that you may have disclosed in confidence; and, from an HR perspective, this culture was filled with the aroma of paranoia, distrust, insincerity and a down right fear of taking risks.

- While the organization touted intangible values such as ingenuity, creativity, problem solving, taking risk and going the extra mile, the truth was very different; instead, when someone broke with the status quo and attempted to "fix" things that were broken, ineffective, costly to the company and/or antiquated they were viewed as an outsider or attention getter.
- Modeling leadership and taking initiative – particularly when it resulted in successful results, worked against you. You were viewed as trying to "show-up" your superiors.
- There was the occasional tenured employee, however, who learned the right coping (albeit dysfunctional) skills to succeed within this organization; and, while they admired the "newbie" who was "shaking things up", they would also discretely let you know that you wouldn't be around for long because of your instinct to take initiative and "change" the status-quo.

 # 7.) Favoritism.

- Within any startup operation, each partner or investor generally hires the first 50 – 100 employees based on a pre-existing personal and/or professional relationship. While this strategy can help them build early successes and ensure loyalty, it *<u>always</u>* creates perceptions of favoritism, nepotism, unfair labor practices and an "us and them" paradigm down the road. Examples include:
- Compensation – When family members and/or friends (who may not even be qualified for the role) are hired and there's no compensation philosophy or plan whatsoever salaries are going to be all over the map.
- Eventually, someone will have sit down with a spreadsheet and realize that employees with the same job title and job responsibilities are earning thousands of dollars more or less than their co-worker's depending on how hired them and what personal or familial relationship might exist.
- There's no such thing as "confidentiality" when low level employee's have access to salary information. It will not take long for an Administrative Assistant to learn of the striking inequities around salaries.
- Family owned businesses are particularly prone to these "inequities" with family members driving cars owned by the company or receiving "extra" bonus awards that their co-workers aren't.
- While the Accountant's find ways to make these types of arrangements legal, the perceptions of "unfair labor practices" and an "us and them" dynamic will foster an extremely unhealthy and dysfunctional culture long-term.
- Title inflation is another common phenomenon when an organization is tight for money and the incumbent is the cousin, neighbor or Uncle of one of the partners
- In a misguided attempt to make the employee feel valued and part of the team they might be given the title of "Director"; however, in any other company in the open labor market that person would not be qualified to hold that particular job.
- This "Director" could actually be a non-exempt staff member with no supervisory responsibilities; however, at some point, the employee is going

to demand more money (based on the mistaken belief that they're a director) and someone is going to have to sit the employee down and correct the situation.

- I've got a client right now with this scenario and it's the resulting employee relations issue is costing them unnecessary time, a loss of productivity and feelings of distrust.
- Dating in the workplace is another big problem within these types of organizations; therefore, in addition to good policies and sexual harassment prevention methods such as training, anyone in a manager or leader role should NEVER date in the workplace. Even if they think and believe that it's not an issue, it will permanently undermine their reputation both with the senior leaders and the employee's that think it just doesn't show good judgment or professionalism.
- Never get into situations where you're forced into a corner of "do what I say, not what I do.." Lead by example!

 # 8.) What matters is not what gets done.

- Everything is about "appearances" rather than substance. Recognition and reward is based on how many hours you are seen "working." Don't be impressed by the person who arrives early and leaves late just for show. Reward productivity, not hours.
- Employees will often not take their accrued vacations. As a result, the company will often carry hundreds – if not thousands - of unused PTO on their books at the end of the year.
- Staff is "afraid" to use this time for fear of being perceived as lazy or inattentiveness to the needs of business.

 # 9.) The Blame Game.

- Generally, this type of culture develops because you have an Owner or leader of the organization with a volatile nature and/or unpredictable temper… he/she might yell or scream and has a tendency to find fault with any/all problems that may occur.
- Those that are on the receiving end of this boss' intolerance for mistakes could be permanently labeled as incompetent and will never be considered for a promotion – or they could be fired altogether.
- Still others leaders might create some kind of "wall of shame" that serves as a constant reminder what will happen if mistakes are made.
- These types of environments rarely - if ever - recognize a job well done or reward good performance; however, everyone in the company knows when a mistake has been occurred.
- Rather than work as a team to resolve obstacles or problems that develop, the staff members spend their time and effort avoiding responsibility for what happened by pointing fingers and finding fault with those that "they think" acted in error rather than use the situation as a "learning" experience for everyone on the team.

- The time, energy and effort that's wasted on people taking cover and finding fault costs the company dearly in lost productivity, customer problems/retention and contributes to an "angst" within the organization that could rise to the definition of "hostile work environment."
- Mistakes should be rare and infrequent; people should still be held accountable for performance deficits. However, when a mistake does occur, rather than point fingers the team should come together and formulate a strategy for resolving the problem that's good for the business, the customers and the employee's involved.
- It's important that the team come together and work "as a team."

 # 10.) Training and is viewed as a cost or expense rather than an investment.

- Even at the less than $1500 per year for training an employee, it is still a cost. For some companies, especially those with traditionally high turnover, it can be a major expense.
- If the companies profit per employee is less than $1500, it might be difficult to convince the stakeholders that training is justified. The rationale of many traditional leaders is that teaching today's workers is/was the responsibility of the school system, and it is the worker's responsibility to learn how to do a job so they can get hired.
- If management takes the view that our schools provide adequate training to make students labor-ready you are living in a dream world. Yes, some job seekers make the effort to learn on their own the skills needed for a new job, but most get that training on the job.
- Not surprisingly, all the reasons not to train new employees (except cost itself) are actually reasons to do that training.
- If an organizations profit per employee is less than $1500 per year, your company will have major problems competing – particularly as the labor market goes through monumental changes in the coming years with the retirement of the baby boomers.
- Companies MUST start training all employees, not just the new employees, right away.

If turnover is greater than 10% annually, training new employees will make them more productive. They will feel better about themselves and the job. They will stick around longer.