

Whacked-Out Workplaces: How Dysfunctional is Yours?

By Roxanne Emmerich

Remember the last time you walked into a dysfunctional room? The room itself was probably fine—I'm not talking about feng shui here. It's the people IN a room who can make the walls themselves want to fold up and run.

It might have been a family gathering. Someone *else's* family, of course—yours is the very picture of functionality, I'm sure. But the moment you walked in you could feel that creepy sensation that every person in sight was harboring fantasies about everyone else.

Not "Desperate Housewives"-type fantasies. More like "CSI."

The same thing can happen to businesses. We've all been there. You walk into a bank, restaurant, or store and suddenly feel that vague sensation that all is not well. It drips from the ceilings and sits in puddles on the floor. The employees are lost in thought, unable to decide whether they'd rather be somewhere else or stay and kill each other. And you're the lucky one bathing in all the poison they can ladle up.

Yeesh.

I hope you've experienced the other side, too. You walk in the door and are gobsmacked by a sense of well-being. This isn't just a place where people work, it's a place that **WORKS**. **The employees want to be there and they want YOU to be there.** You feel your brow relax, and the corners of your mouth head ever-so-slightly north. You don't wanna leave.

So which of these do YOU work in?

The downsides of dysfunction

Before we get to that possibly painful question, let's have a look at some of the reasons for taking dysfunction by the horns:

- 1. Everybody knows it's there.** Think the dysfunction in your organization is your little secret? Guess again. Dysfunction is lousy at playing hide and seek. No matter what closet you try to hide it in, its big ugly feet will stick out. Heck, you can find it by *smell*. So don't waste time thinking you can spritz the problem with Chanel No. 5.
- 2. It wastes, slaughters, DECIMATES time and energy.** Managers know how much time is spent dealing with dysfunctional employees. And functional employees know how much energy is drained by those who are busy nursing their issues, directing and starring in their personal dramas, and generally driving those around them crazy.
- 3. It hurts the bottom line.** Need something concrete? Dysfunction costs you enormous wads of money. It undercuts efficiency and productivity, drives customers away

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screaming, and increases sick days and general work avoidance by stressing out the employees who have to work with it. Gallup estimates that typical organization has \$3,400 of lost productivity for every \$10,000 of payroll due to “disengaged employees”—one of the primary symptoms of dysfunction.

- 4. It makes your people miserable.** If all of the above isn't enough, have a heart. Nothing takes the joy out of living like a job you hate. And nothing makes a job more hate-worthy than a deeply dysfunctional workplace.

Recognizing the Beast

So now you're wondering if that six-headed, chain-smoking, flatulent monster that's been "hiding" in the supply closet is the Beast we're talking about here. Some symptoms to look for:

- The manager who keeps silent about an initiative during decision making, only to sabotage or ignore it later
- People working at odds with each other with no synergies or abilities or even DESIRE to bring down their separate silos
- People saying one thing and meaning another
- People giving "Yessir!" lip service to new ideas, only to undercut them in private
- Defensiveness at reasonable suggestions
- Saying you'll do something and then not doing it
- Getting angry or crying when asked to change a behavior
- Attraction to chaos
- Deflection of feedback or blame
- People pretending like they "never got the memo"
- Refusal to deal with conflict directly
- Hearing through filters (You say: “I need you to commit to having that project finished on time.” She hears: “You never do anything right, I don’t like you”)
- Gossip and backstabbing

When you think of a dysfunctional organization, you might picture a lot of screaming and yelling. But take a close look at this list. There's very little that has to do with raised voices, and the only mention of "conflict" is the failure to deal with it directly.

You will have conflicts in the workplace. The key is to address it in a healthy and productive way. Yelling at someone isn't the *best* way to communicate displeasure, but it's a heck of a lot better than whispering behind that person's back.

If I had to nominate just one of thing from the list above as the most destructive symptom of the dysfunctional workplace, there's no contest. It's GOSSIP.

"Is there something you'd like to share with the class?"

A workplace full of whispered gossip is excruciating. It is destructive to the soul of your workplace and the souls of your people. They never feel safe, always wondering who is talking behind their backs.

Jack has a problem with Tom. No big deal. When you work with people, you will have problems. So what does Jack do? He tells Lynne, and Jess, and Steve, and Jim, and Sandy. Everyone, that is, but Tom.

Congratulations, everybody! Now we have total chaos.

It gets even better. Jack quickly realizes he can't trust Lynne, Jess, Steve, Jim, or Sandy. They are the kind of people who welcome gossip, you see, and people who accept gossip tend to be equal-opportunity mudslingers. Soon enough, they'll be welcoming gossip about Jack.

They in turn figure it's just a matter of time before Jack will be gossiping about each of them. And they're right. And Tom surely knows at some level that something is going on and has a sense he can't trust any of them.

Okay everybody, on the count of three—*be happy and productive!*

When people gossip about others, you may as well have them bring baseball bats and beat each other. At least that will heal. If a happy and functional workplace is your goal, there are few more productive places to put your energy than the absolute elimination of gossip.

But how?

Step one is to recognize that gossip is an attempt at communication—dysfunctional and cancerous, yes, but communication nonetheless. You can't eliminate the behavior without providing something to replace it—namely a good and healthy way of communicating.

All Jack had to do was to go to Tom and say, “Dude, when you are late with that analysis, I end up on my knees to my boss because then *my* report is late. Please promise me you'll get that to me on time from now on.” Reasonable. Direct. Easy.

If Jack came to you with gossip, simply say, “Gee, it sounds like you need to talk to Tom directly so you can work this out.” Lather, rinse, repeat until the person wakes up!

Once you establish a zero-tolerance policy for talking behind another person's back, give your people permission to address conflict head-on, out loud, courageously and honestly. Create a trusting and open environment and watch the dysfunction ebb away.

Build a shared vision

Now you've recognized the symptoms and diagnosed the disease. Time for the cure.

Most of these dysfunctions amount to employees shooting their energy at each other because there's nothing else to aim for. What's needed is a single, shared vision.

Everyone wants to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Everyone wants to feel productive and be happy. Give your people a clear and positive picture of where you want to go as a group and most of them will jump at the chance to be a part of it. When people align around a vision of great service, pettiness and dysfunctional behaviors fall away, and people become who they need to be to make it happen.

Will there still be those who stubbornly hold on to their dysfunctions? I guarantee it. And for the sake of the rest, it's your job to gently but firmly encourage those folks to find and follow their bliss elsewhere.

Are you ready to do what it takes to end the dysfunctions and create a can-do culture in your workplace?

SIDEBAR

Three steps to deep-sixing the dysfunctional workplace

- 1. Recognize the problem and commit to the fix.** Don't skip the commitment. Just knowing that your people are mired in a dysfunctional environment isn't enough. You've got to commit to changing it, no matter how impossible that may seem.
- 2. Announce a zero-tolerance policy for gossip and backstabbing.** Make it clear that giving *or receiving* gossip is not acceptable. At the same time, give an explicit invitation to disagree openly and honestly, even heatedly.
- 3. Build a shared vision.** Work hard to define a positive shared vision of a future that benefits each and every employee—then work twice as hard at getting there together.

Roxanne Emmerich is renowned for her ability to transform “ho-hum” workplaces into massive results-oriented “bring-it-on” environments. To discover how you can ignite the passion of your employees, catapult performance to new levels, and boost the morale of your company subscribe to the [Thank God It's Monday™](http://www.ThankGoditsMonday.com) e-zine at www.ThankGoditsMonday.com.