

Whacked-Out Workplaces: How Dysfunctional is Yours?

By Roxanne Emmerich

We've all been there. You walk into a bank, restaurant or store and suddenly feel it, 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?

Recognizing the Beast

So 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:

- People say one thing and mean another
- People give lip service to new ideas, only to undercut them in private
- Defensiveness
- Saying you'll do something and then not doing it
- A taste for chaos
- Deflection of feedback and blame
- People pretending they "missed the memo on that one"
- Refusal to deal with conflict
- 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, which gets us into the excruciating, crazy-making world of the passive-aggressive.

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.

A workplace full of whispered gossip is as painful and maddening as a buzzing mosquito at bedtime. It is destructive to the soul of your workplace and the souls of your people who never feel safe, always wondering who is talking behind their backs.

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—seriously screwed up communication, sure, 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 yourself and those around you 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 of you, 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?

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 MondayTM e-zine at www.ThankGoditsMonday.com.