

How to Turn the Dysfunctional Workplace into an Environment Where People Actually Want to Work

By Roxanne Emmerich | Monday, August 3rd, 2009

We've all been there. You walk into a bank, restaurant, or store and suddenly feel it, that vague sensation 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 gob smacked 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 want to leave.

So which of these environments do YOU work in?

Now, which of these environments do you think YOUR employees would rather work in?

Here Are 9 Symptoms of a Dysfunctional Workplace:

1. People say one thing, and mean another.
2. People give lip service to new ideas, only to undercut them in private.
3. Defensiveness.
4. Saying you'll do something and then not doing it.
5. Chaos.
6. Deflection of feedback and blame.
7. People pretending they "missed the memo on that one."
8. Refusal to deal with conflict.
9. 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. Little of it 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 much better than whispering behind that person's back. Doing so gets us into the excruciating, crazy-making world of the passive-aggressive.

If I had to nominate just one of the symptoms from the list above as the most destructive in 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 and always wonder 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 elimination of gossip.

How to End Gossip

Step one is to recognize 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 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, and, repeat until the person wakes up.

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

The Next Step: Build a Shared Vision

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

Most workplace 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 your team members a clear and positive picture of where you want to go as a group. 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 workplace 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 your employees, 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?

To discover how you can motivate employees, ignite their passion, and catapult performance to new levels, check out Roxanne Emmerich's new book—"Thank God It's Monday." For a free sneak preview, visit:
http://www.thankgoditsmonday.com/preview_the_book/