

Key Components of a Dangerously Dysfunctional Work Environment

Don't let these 12 characteristics go on in your workplace.

By Mark Gorkin

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Key components of a dangerously dysfunctional work environment:

1. **From TLC to TNC.** Don't support a work environment that's driven by "time, numbers and crises," and not by "tender loving care." Beware a philosophy that extols customers as kings while treating employees as peasants; it's a formula for revolt, inertia or sabotage.
2. **Rapid and Unpredictable Change.** This can happen during either a downsizing or expansionary mode. There is unstable leadership, and a workforce that's adjusting to new personnel or loss of wisdom. Rules and procedures don't appear to be operational; "the book" has lost some critical pages. There's chronic uncertainty from lack of timely information or from communication not perceived as genuine or accurate.
3. **Destructive Communication Style.** This includes excessively aggressive, condescending, explosive or passive aggressive styles of communication, and excessive work-floor razzing or scapegoating. Managers talk over employees, and nobody truly listens. This is characterized by either defensive counterattacking or robotic groupthink.
4. **Authoritarian Leadership.** There's a rigid, militaristic mind-set of "superiors vs. subordinates." Typical slogans include: "You don't get paid to think," or "My way or the highway." Leaders blow up if they're challenged, and break up any participatory decision-making or team-building efforts.
5. **Defensive Attitude.** There's a dismissive attitude and atmosphere regarding feedback, and little interest in evaluation of people and policies. Only numbers count. It isn't safe to give feedback; people are quick to feel disrespected or rejected. Yelling, intimidation or avoidance are the preferred ways of dealing with conflict.
6. **Double Standard.** There are different policies and procedures, bias in application, for management and employees, blue collar or white collar, racial or sexual discrimination. There's a "work floor vs. tower" dichotomy. This double standard also manifests as management gets substantial training or support for dealing with change processes and employees get minimal orientation and ongoing support.
7. **Unresolved Grievances.** There are no mechanisms or only adversarial ones—"us vs. them"—to settle grievances. Or dysfunctional individuals are protected or ignored because of contractual provisions, red tape, an old boy network or union cover and so on.
8. **Emotionally Troubled Personnel.** Management isn't actively assisting, in a timely manner, troubled employees to get needed help. It isn't professionally engaging the troubled employee (or supervisor), which can create a tumor for the work team—characterized by scapegoating, loss of respect for leader, apathy and lowered morale.
9. **Repetitive, Boring Work.** This isn't just assembly-line syndrome. Your niche of success becomes the ditch of excess and stagnation. There's a lack of opportunity for

job rotation, or not enough new blood coming into the system. (Also, see "Hazardous Setting.")

10. **Faulty Equipment/Deficient Training.** This means equipment or procedures (or lack of) that don't allow people to work effectively or efficiently. Then, workers are criticized for not being productive. Also, rapidly inundating people with new equipment and operational standards while not providing sufficient time and resources for successful startup.
11. **Hazardous Setting.** This includes disruptive ambient work conditions—temperature, air quality, repetitive motion issues, overcrowded space, problematic noise levels, excessive overtime, nocturnal schedule and interrupted sleep, etc. Personnel shortage causes a lack of backup, which results in potentially dangerous work expectations and conditions.
12. **Culture of Violence.** This environment has a culture or past history of individual and/or violence and abuse. There are violent or explosive role models, alcohol and drug abuse, and employees with lingering Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

[Mark Gorkin](#) writes and speaks about stress management at work.

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