

Anatomy of dysfunctional working relationships

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The absence of conflict is not harmony. It is dysfunction known as passive aggressive behavior. Overtime, this behavior manifests itself in interpersonal quarreling, ineffective decision making, and suboptimal performance for the entire organization. This dynamic is particularly prevalent in today's fast-paced business environment where conflict is not just unavoidable, but necessary in order to unleash innovation and improve decision making capabilities. Accordingly, it is important for leaders to understand how relationships become dysfunctional, recognize the symptoms of trouble and, most importantly, be ready to intervene with corrective action.

The risks to an organization

The *American Heritage College Dictionary* defines dysfunction as "abnormal or impaired." Other descriptive terms include damaged, flawed, futile, ineffective, frustrating, fruitless and useless to perform or achieve more success. In other words, dysfunction is the polar opposite of what all leaders strive to instill in their employees. Intuitively, we all know that dysfunctional working relationships are unproductive and, long-term, will prevent both individuals and teams from reaching new heights of effective performance. Still, dysfunctional working relationships are more common than not. Not surprisingly, most people have experienced the negative consequences of this behavior at one point or another.

Like the ripple effect of a pebble dropped in a calm pool of water, the impact of an on-going dysfunctional working relationship quickly extends beyond the individuals involved and wreaks havoc on organizational performance. In fact, dysfunctional relationships contribute to a number of organizational risks such as the erosion of trust, poor morale, lackluster decision making, inadequate buy-in on key decisions, absence of shared responsibility, increased implementation problems, and a number of other serious operational issues.

Typically, it starts with disagreement. In most organizations, however, disagreements are unavoidable given the diverse backgrounds of players who work in a complex environment that includes unrelenting change, the management of a high volume of complex work and the juggling of frequent changes in leadership direction. Yet, differences of perspective and constructive dissent can contribute positively to an innovative, healthy problem solving and decision-making process. The challenge arises when disagreements over both solutions and decisions are allowed to manifest in the form of interpersonal conflict that spirals into a dysfunctional working relationships that impede effective collaboration.

Root causes of dysfunctional relationships

Conflict avoidance is a major contributor to dysfunctional relationships. This is particularly true when an individual feels uncomfortable raising an issue, is intimidated by someone with greater authority, suspects another team member of having a personal agenda or simply

does not want to sound argumentative. What begins as a misunderstanding quickly evolves from problem-avoidance into relationship-avoidance. Then, the dysfunctional relationship spirals into dysfunctional decision making, characterized by superficial cordiality and a focus on process rather than the quality of outcomes. People work around one another, rather than with one another, and real issues fail to get resolved in an optimal fashion.

Pile on the pressure to work smarter and develop more innovative solutions, with growing concern over corporate downsizing in this sluggish economy, and the environment is ripe for dysfunctional relationships to spread throughout the organization. Other sources of dysfunction stem from:

- Competing priorities, limited resources and differences in decision making approaches.
- Shifting expectations from leadership that are not well communicated.
- Inadequate role definition and mixed messages being provided to different team members who each think they have the lead on a collaborative effort.
- Assumptions and reliance on second-hand information rather than the facts.
- Leaders who model dysfunctional behavior.
- Leaders who encourage a silo mentality by needing to control the flow of information and failing to communicate across silo boundaries.
- Unequal power positions whereby the Boss wants it done (today) and team members feel powerless to raise legitimate concerns about competing priorities.
- Lack of active listening and over reliance on defensive reasoning that overshadows more thoughtful and disciplined decision options.

Organizational culture and leadership style differences can also be contributing factors to relationship dysfunction. In some cases, the organizational culture values winning and competition (even internally) more than teamwork, which can lead to trouble. On the other hand, some cultures are focused so heavily on teamwork and the spirit of collegiality that people do not feel empowered to dissent. In this scenario, personal relationships are preserved at the expense of a healthy debate about the issues, which could potentially resolve conflict and generate the best solution. For example, when one director was asked why he did not raise an alternative option during a key meeting, he indicated that his colleagues were clearly opposed to his idea and that bringing the idea up again would only create tension, which would creep into their relationships in other meetings.

In terms of leadership style, fundamental style preferences can result in dysfunctional working relationships. For example, one individual may be more confrontational and intimidating, while a colleague is more contemplative and slower to reach conclusions in order to arrive at a compromise position and build group consensus. Or, one manager thinks he is in charge of a project and relies on a more directive style than his counterpart uses. In this situation, the style of the more directive manager controls not only the development of the initiative strategy, but each and every task. The other manager, who is equally responsible but highly collaborative, sees the project as a shared responsibility and wants the entire team to be involved in crafting the strategy and the implementation rollout. These common scenarios can easily spiral into confrontations that inhibit productive interaction between individuals, effective problem solving, timely resolution of issues and duplication of effort. For example, if each manager is providing team members different instructions with no shared understanding of role boundaries and how the decision making process will unfold, time and other resources are squandered while team members become more and more frustrated.

The early symptoms

Like a disease, if symptoms are identified early, the damage can be contained, minimized and allow healthy decision making to resume. That is why it is critical for all leaders to be on

alert and capable of recognizing the symptoms of dysfunctional relationships before the issues erupt into both strategy and operational problems.

One key symptom of trouble is avoidance behavior. While avoidance can take on many forms, a common form is the inappropriate use of email. Most companies rely on email for information sharing, but it is not effective for problem solving or collaborating on complex issues. Email is simply a short-hand communication tool. It lacks context and does not allow recipients to read non-verbal behavior or tone which are both necessary to fully understanding the nuances of a response. Collaborative problem solving can only occur in an environment of trust, which requires regular face-to-face dialogue. Individuals need face time to bond, form relationships and set role boundaries before they can work together on a project and be effective. Email cannot replace this person-to-person trust-building process. It can only serve as a tool for sharing intelligence and follow-up actions, such as fine-tuning an implementation strategy, once the common understanding of a decision is established face-to-face.

Used inappropriately, email perpetuates misunderstandings such as mixed messages or overreaction to the perceived tone of an email. These misunderstandings encourage debate and defensive reasoning rather than dialog and contribute to entrenched positions. An exchange of a series of emails is not a replacement for a one-hour in-depth conversation. More troubling, some individuals insist on using “reply to all” in an attempt to cover their tracks with the boss. But, it is counterproductive and only contributes to mistrust and the wretched excess of emails business people face everyday.

Other forms of avoidance behavior include cancelled meetings, not inviting a player with whom you expect to be locked in conflict, not copying or being copied on key communication, phone calls that are left unreturned or a colleague who repeatedly interrupts meetings claiming that another person exaggerates problems. Over time, this negative behavior will result in destructive dynamics including:

- *Leaders lose credibility.* When leaders allow direct reports to take sides and engage in counterproductive behavior, they no longer regard their leaders as role models.
- *Colleagues circumvent you.* They pitch ideas and alternatives to your decision or point of view to a mutual boss.
- *Teams disengage and externalize blame.* When projects fail, the finger pointing begins.
- *Team members make faulty assumptions.* They may question another person's motivation and are unwilling to reframe issues within this context.
- *Individuals develop low morale and attrition escalates.* This occurs most often when people do not feel appreciated or empowered to grow in their roles. Often they choose to transfer, turn down assignments or leave rather than deal with the dysfunction.
- *Team members lack buy-in.* As a result, they are unlikely to assume accountability and/or responsibility for a project's success.
- *Individuals work in silos.* When colleagues do not work across boundaries and avoid working with certain individuals in cross functional working groups, relationships deteriorate.
- *Sound decision making suffers.* Decisions emerge that lack sufficient evidence of critical thought, creativity or innovation.

It is also common for leaders who are conflict averse to stall the decision making process. These leaders will wrap up every meeting by saying, “I need to give this more thought,” or “We should all give this more thought.” But, the issue gets tabled, and a decision is never discussed or rendered. This form of “don't rock the boat” avoidance behavior results in problems that surface as team members evaluate whether to move forward with a watered down version of a decision that offends no one, or push for more clarity. If a decision is made, problems often surface during the implementation phase because key issues were never properly vetted and they remain unresolved through implementation. This happens not

because someone on the team did not anticipate the issue, but because the issue was swept under the proverbial carpet in a fit of avoidance behavior.

Curative treatment

The best treatment leaders can offer to minimize dysfunctional relationships in their sphere of influence is to role model healthy conflict behavior. Communicate the importance and necessity of conflict and disagreements in terms of generating creative and innovative solutions to problems. By role modeling constructive dissent, leaders establish the groundwork for creating a culture where everyone understands their responsibility for contributing ideas and generating solutions that are in the best interest of the organization. Some organizations start with the establishment of clear “rules of engagement.” For example, teams must agree that they will engage in lively debate, argue their position and look at all the alternatives. But, once the final decision is made, everyone supports it and speaks with one voice throughout the organization. Enlightened project leaders take the time to develop a matrix of shared responsibilities so that each team member understands what role they play during the collaborative effort.

Sound decisions require a leader to foster an environment that encourages dissenting views and amplifies important concerns. In their article, “Developing peripheral vision”, Ronald and Shaw (2008) write about leaders who ignore the nuances of communication and the results, which increase the likelihood of failure. They recommend developing greater peripheral vision. The term “peripheral vision” refers to the ability of effective leaders to read ambiguous, but critical, signals from their peers or associates. Leaders often assume that others are willing to take an unpopular stance for the good of the enterprise even when discouraged or at risk of personal consequence. Many, however, are more inclined to remain silent or send only subtle messages when they believe their ideas are threatening to those in power. For that reason, it is important for leaders to develop an ability to recognize a range of subtle or contradictory messages and understand which are worthy of attention and follow-up. This skill is among the hardest to master for hard-charging leaders and one of the most important for leaders who are faced with tough decisions. To help leaders through this difficult challenge, Ronald and Shaw offer the following suggestions:

- Know your team and recognize deviations from normal behavior, which are often warning signs that something is amiss.
- Pay attention to behavioral flags and subtle clues like silence, non-answers, omissions, and the use of strong language.
- Create openings for contrarians by encouraging views that differ from the prevailing opinions.
- Reinforce a three-strike rule that allows associates with opposing views three opportunities to present new data and persuade more senior leadership in favor of change.

When another senior leader, colleague or subordinate makes a decision with which others disagree, it is important not to engage in verbal bludgeoning after the fact through email or with others in casual conversation. Instead, ask for clarification at the time the decision is made. Seek face-to-face engagement, and ask probing questions to clarify intent and gain deeper understanding. Similarly, if someone makes a statement that creates discomfort, clarify what message was really intended versus jumping to conclusions or avoiding this individual in the future. No matter how tempting, do not make assumptions based on second hand feedback. Instead, go to the source, and get the facts even if it causes discomfort. Find out if what was heard is an accurate representation of what was actually said. Use lead-in phrases such as “tell me more about that”, “help me understand”, “I’d like to hear more about your perspective” or “please share with me the details of your decision.”

Top executives and their leadership teams also need to encourage others to speak truth to power. Unfortunately, the fear or reluctance to do this deprives executives of vital information and the innovative ideas they need to make sound strategic choices. For that reason, it is

important for organizations, from the top down, to encourage a culture of candor where all employees feel comfortable speaking truth to power. Other tips to cure an organization of dysfunctional working relationships are as follows:

1. Be sure to clearly define roles at the outset of a project to minimize the likelihood of destructive conflict:
 - Who is responsible for the decision making process?
 - Is it one person, two people or a team of people?
 - Who are the subject experts that must be consulted in the decision making process?
 - Who needs to be influenced regarding buy-in?
 - Who, if anyone, has veto authority?
2. Offer coaching to help key executives and managers to develop more effective, active listening skills and the ability to model good, healthy conflict behavior.
3. Assume the best intent, rather than the worst, of colleagues while probing for clarification on issues.
4. Do not engage in the blame game. Finger-pointing will always erode trust and damage relationships.
5. In the heat of conflict, train team members to step back and refocus on what is in the best interest of the organization as a whole, without any consideration for personal agenda.

A culture of candor

Executives and their management teams who build a culture of candor and encourage others to engage in healthy debate and constructive dissent are more likely to avoid dysfunctional relationships and discover a competitive edge in the marketplace. By constructively challenging one another, people develop a deeper understanding of the issues, create more innovative solutions to problems and increase decision making effectiveness. Ultimately, the goal of every organization should be to embrace, not avoid, healthy constructive dissent, and reap the rewards of innovative thinking.

Reference

Ronald, M.H. and Shaw, R.B. (2008), "Developing peripheral vision", *Executive Forum, Leader to Leader*, Spring.

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