

DEALING WITH WORKPLACE DYSFUNCTIONS: A TEACHING ACTIVITY WORKSHOP

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ABSTRACT

Anyone who has ever worked in a formal organization has likely experienced some form of workplace dysfunction at one time or another, and at times to a startling degree. Not only do workplace dysfunctions frustrate and demoralize people on the “receiving end” – often those in subordinate positions – they undermine an organization’s morale, productivity, and future development. In extreme cases, they may jeopardize the survival of an organization, or one of its major units. This workshop will describe and demonstrate a teaching activity that: (1) identifies and highlights several common workplace dysfunctions, and (2) coaches students in developing strategies for dealing or coping with various dysfunctions. The purpose of the workshop is to familiarize instructors of business courses with a framework for describing workplace dysfunctions, and to provide them with tools to implement a student activity on workplace dysfunctions, in a business course.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Dysfunction in the workplace has long been a topic of much interest in business and management literature and for good reason. At an organization level, dysfunctions can waste huge amounts of time and energy as people – managers, employees, sometimes whole departments – struggle to cope with dysfunctional behaviors and systems (Greenberg, 2010). At an individual level, dysfunctions drain morale, lower individual productivity, and can drive away valuable personnel (McAvoy & Murtagh, 2003; Walton, 2007).

The bottom line is, of course, the bottom line: dysfunctions cost an organization money and resources. As such, most of the literature on workplace dysfunction is of a prescriptive nature, aimed at helping people in organizations develop ways to overcome or eradicate various dysfunctions. The popular press, in particular, is filled with books and articles on workplace dysfunction and advice about how to deal with such (Cooney, 2004; Jones, 1999; Kusy & Holloway, 2009; Lundin & Lundin, 1999; Thompson, 1997). In his daily comic strip “Dilbert”, Scott Adams has built a career, and a dedicated readership, by highlighting and lampooning all manner of workplace dysfunctions and stereotypical workplace characters who model various dysfunctional behaviors.

The research perspective on workplace dysfunction has tended toward a more narrow focus, generally aiming towards specific dysfunctions, such as “employee conflict”, “favoritism”, “hostile work environment”, or “workplace bullying”, examining in some cases their causes and at other times their effect on outcomes (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Langan & Cooper, 2009; McAvoy & Murtagh, 2003; Walton, 2007). Less prescriptive in nature than popular press literature, for obvious reasons having to do with the extreme variety and types of workplace dysfunctions, research on workplace dysfunction has

more to do with understanding the nature of certain dysfunctions and their causes, than prescriptive solutions.

CONCEPT DEFINITION

The term “workplace dysfunction”, like many organizational features or manifestations, is in some ways better described than defined, given the general nature of definitions. That said, Merriam-Webster defines a dysfunction, from a social point of view, to be “abnormal or unhealthy interpersonal behavior or interaction within a group”. The term “unhealthy”, in particular, is useful in suggesting some kind of yardstick on which certain dynamics or practices, in an organization, may be deemed to be dysfunctional. Following up on this suggestion, the best determinants of whether some practice or interaction in an organization is dysfunctional can be said to be visible outcomes of the actual day-to-day system or operation, as measured by: (1) work results and productivity, (2) organizational growth: innovation and change, (3) employee morale, satisfaction, and desire to remain a participant, (4) employee growth and development, (5) employee health and safety. To the extent that any of these five outcomes are negatively impacted in an organization or unit thereof, then the practice, procedure, interaction or system requirement creating the negative impact is a prime candidate for workplace dysfunction.

On this basis then, a descriptive approach can be used to consider both categories, or types, of organizational dysfunctions and specific types of dysfunction within categories. (note: It is at the “specific type” level that main-stream management books and articles generally deal with the topic of workplace dysfunctions and what to do about them). Almost all workplace dysfunctions fall into one, or more, of the following five categories: (1) structural, (2) political, (3) managerial, (4) interpersonal, and (5) personal.

Structural or system dysfunctions are design-based and stem from established policies, procedures, and structures. Examples include such things as confused lines of authority (e.g. reporting to more than one boss), excessive bureaucracy or red tape, a unit reporting to a wrong department head, a poorly designed reward system (e.g. a quantity based measurement-reward system than ignores quality), or something as simple as work-overload on one person’s position.

Political dysfunctions generally derive from an overly political organizational culture. They consist of behaviors and decisions that are both political in nature, that is are self-serving to the individual making the decision, and have a negative impact on one or more of the outcomes. An example of a political dysfunction is an employee acting in a way so as to please his or her boss even though the person knows the action is wasteful or otherwise unhelpful to the unit or organization. Or, a boss rewarding favored subordinates on bases other than organizational criteria like performance and cooperation.

Managerial dysfunctions, perhaps the most commonly discussed in popular literature, are ones caused by the bad boss or leader. Common managerial dysfunctions include such things as playing favorites, deliberately pitting employees against each other, punishing the messenger or bearer of bad news, using poor leadership or the wrong style of leadership for the situation, demeaning employees, assigning responsibility with no corresponding authority, and taking credit for subordinate accomplishments, to name but a few.

Interpersonal dysfunctions, commonly cited in literature, consist primarily of some sort of persistent conflict, or excessive competition, between individuals, and/or group of individuals. Interpersonal dysfunctions occur when the dynamics between individuals or groups of individuals have a negative effect on one or more of the organizational outcomes, particularly long-term, negative effects. An example of an interpersonal dysfunction would be power struggle for turf and resources between two unit managers, or simple daily sniping and insults traded between two workers in an office who happen to dislike each other. Interpersonal dysfunctions, as opposed to personal ones discussed below, follow the

maxim, “it takes two to tango”. More often than not, if one of the parties involved can be removed or transferred, the dysfunction will go away.

Finally personal dysfunctions pertain to one particular individual, a dysfunctional worker in some sense of the word. Examples of dysfunctional employees would be the incompetent worker, the busybody, the gossip, the sloth, the shirker, the bully, the know-it-all, or simply the “nutcase”. In most cases, the particular dysfunction impacts both organizational outcomes, like productivity, as well as co-worker morale and satisfaction. What distinguishes a personal dysfunction from an interpersonal one is the one-sided nature of a personal dysfunction: it impacts other people and can lead to conflict, but the source or cause of that conflict is primarily one person (or one small group).

DIAGNOSIS AND INTERVENTION

Accurate classification of a dysfunction is useful primarily for purposes of diagnosis and intervention or correction. From a classification standpoint, it may be that a particular dysfunction will fit into more than one category. For example, a personal dysfunction – a shirking employee – could also be perceived or classified as an interpersonal dysfunction – conflict with the employee picking up the slack. However in diagnosing most dysfunctions, there typically can be found a root cause that will help someone – a manager or consultant – to both identify the nature of the dysfunction (and its “victim”), and describe a method for confronting the problem. For example, suppose two members of a department work competitively in a situation that calls for cooperation and sharing of information, and by doing so their actions lead to mistakes, such as delays in processing information and faulty decisions being made at the next level. A diagnostician would want to find out what drives their competitive behavior. Is it something personal, dislike and conflict between the two, jealousies or resentments build up over time, perhaps some insult or discount perceived by one from the other? Or, is it a reward process, either system driven or one encouraged by the department manager, that rewards a specific type of behavior and is assessed individually rather than jointly (perhaps the criteria on which a raise, promotion, or other benefit is determined)? Assuming that change is desired by someone in charge, then the likelihood of an intervention being successful would be greatly enhanced by an accurate diagnosis of the cause.

Accurate diagnosis, however, is only one stage in resolving a workplace dysfunction, and likely the easiest of the three stages (diagnosis, intervention, relapse prevention). Intervention, the second stage, is most often an “inside job” of one sort or another, meaning except in extreme cases, most workplace dysfunctions either are dealt with internally or they persist. First, it should be noted that when faced with a dysfunction of one sort or another, the person or person’s so faced have three broad options from which to choose, classically referred to as: exit, voice, and acceptance (or loyalty) (Hirshman, 1970). That is they can seek to get away from the situation, they can try to address and change it, or they can simply cope with or accept it. Since the purpose of this workshop involves action and change, the “exit” and “acceptance” options are simply noted here as options, although at times exercising a threat to “exit” may be used as a pressure influence tactic under the “voice” option.

Under the “voice” option then, intervention strategies and tactics are many and varied. As there are many kinds of dysfunctions in an organization, it is not possible to give very much general advice about how to effectively deal with a specific one other than to say that some manner of “assertive confrontation” will be necessary. The particular course of action chosen depends primarily on the specific nature of the dysfunction and the relative position of the person implementing the strategy vis-a-vis the person or persons upon whom influence is to be exercised. The specifics of the situation dictate much of what must be attempted. That said, however, a person(s) attempting to address a particular dysfunction is either looking upwards (in the hierarchy), horizontally, or downwards in terms of direction of influence. Options for influence, in all cases, include but are not limited to: rational persuasion, emotional/inspirational appeal, negotiation and exchange, legitimate request, social proof, personal appeal, pressure tactics, coalition tactics, and ingratiation tactics

Upwards influence involves dealing with dysfunctions at a managerial level or a system level, and therefore is applicable to three categories of dysfunction: structural, political, and managerial. Under circumstances of upwards influence, people are operating from a low power/authority position and therefore, have limited influence options or tactics, mainly limited to: rational persuasion, inspirational appeal, social proof, and ingratiation. In general terms, the influencer must attempt to get the “influencee” to realize that a change is in their own best interest and/or that of the organization, unit, or department. If they are unable to do that, through various means of persuasion and influence, then the chances are that the particular dysfunction will persist. In rare cases, a coalition tactic may work if one has connections to someone else in a better position to exert influence. An example of this might be an appeal to a higher authority, a peer of the manager, or an influential outsider. However, such an approach generally does not come without risk. The person one is trying to influence may simply ignore the request, or may even retaliate in some manner, if the ploy to use a third party is seen as illegitimate.

Compared to upwards influence, horizontal or lateral influence allows for a wider set of influence tactics for someone trying to quell or change some dysfunctional behavior (that is, exercise a “voice” option). In addition to the set discussed above, a person facing a dysfunctional behavior from a co-worker or group of co-workers has the potential to exercise almost any type of influence tactic, with the exception of a legitimate, or authority based, request. They can attempt to reason with the person, make a personal appeal, or negotiate some kind of trade or deal. They can even apply pressure, for example in the form of social threats like exclusion or silent treatment, to someone resisting a rational appeal. Failing at direct influence, a person also has an option to appeal to a higher authority – one’s boss or supervisor – though this approach also carries risk and should be viewed as a last resort. If undertaken, a person should be able to explain or document that they have painstakingly tried, in vain, all other approaches that they can think of. Even then, the maxim that bosses expect subordinates to bring them solutions and not problems should be kept in mind. A person appealing to their boss about some dysfunction should do so with one or more realistic, fair solutions to the issue at the ready. This approach applies to someone appealing structural dysfunctions, as well as interpersonal and personal ones.

Downward influence on a dysfunction allows for the widest variety of influence options, but also calls for astute investigation and understanding of the nature and dynamics of the dysfunction prior to decision and influence being engaged. The relative power position, and greater number of options, can tempt an influencer into a hasty or ill-advised action, for example a threat of sanction or firing if a particular behavior does not change (a pressure tactic) when some other form of influence might prove more effective on the first go around. The primary skill when exercising downward influence in attempting to resolve a dysfunction is to select an optimal approach at first, keeping other options in reserve in the event that the initial, milder approach does not prove effective in addressing the dysfunction.

At this point, then, a specific dysfunction can be assessed according to: (1) the type or category of dysfunction, (2) the direction of influence required to address it, and (3) the appropriate options for influence tactics. Once assessed, the best approach will need to be designed or shaped depending upon not only this classification but also the specific nature of the dysfunction and the characteristics of the person or persons involved in creating it. A person attempting to intervene to correct a dysfunction should also take into account such things as setting, timing, and style when addressing the person or persons responsible for the dysfunction. While some form of assertiveness is almost always necessary to be effective, the level of assertiveness will depend on the specific nature of the dysfunction, personal characteristics, setting and timing.

RELAPSE PREVENTION

The third stage, or set of skills, in dealing with workplace dysfunctions involves locking in the change – the new behaviors – along with prevention of relapse to prior behavior. Nowhere does the maxim “old

habits die hard” more aptly apply as in a workplace setting, where dysfunctional behaviors tend to be not only ingrained to begin with, but often provide a certain intrinsic satisfaction, and/or extrinsic reward to the person(s) who engage in them. When confronted or addressed in some way pertaining to a dysfunction, most such people first react with some form of defensiveness or denial. Such is to be expected, and explains why it takes persistence and skill, generally, to get someone to acknowledge a certain practice or behavior, agree to try to change or modify it, follow through on the agreement, and then maintain the change. Anyone attempting to effect a change needs to realize that such an agreement is just a first step. The second step involves observed changes in behaviors or processes; and the third step involves maintaining or sustaining these changes, these new behaviors.

The actual implementation of a change is often best left up to the “transgressor”; it can usually be monitored simply through observation of new behavior and a feeling of improvement. In some cases, initial agreement may simply be a stalling tactic, in which case implementation is not observed, and relapse or continuation of prior behavior is almost a certainty. One tactic for dealing with this is to assume that the offer or agreement to change is genuine, and simply remind the person, in a gentle way, of their agreement if a change is not being noticed. If this approach fails, then a second confrontation is likely necessary – one in which the “offender” is reminded of the prior meeting, the reasons behind it, and the apparent lack of progress in making a change.

Once actual implementation of a change is observed, then various reinforcement techniques may be used to help sustain the change and avoid relapse. At times, a person or group may need a simple reminder, if observed slipping back into old habits. Positive feedback, or other “rewards” or inducements pertaining to new behaviors, is often an even better reinforcement mechanism, especially when practiced prior to relapses. As time progresses, a follow up meeting is often a good idea: one in which the both the positives of change are noted as well as areas or aspects of prior behaviors that could be improved. It should be noted, or acknowledged, that change often occurs in increments, and therefore persons expecting a 100% improvement, or “180 degree” turnaround, might do well to modify their expectations. It may be that they get a portion of what they asked for in terms of change, in which case they might be wise to accept that degree of change for the time being, do what they can to lock it in, and in so doing avoid the risk of losing the entire battle by pushing for too much all at once.

One positive dynamic of change, that persons can look forward to if not always count on, is that an improvement in atmosphere in an office or workplace is generally noted and welcomed by more than just the immediate persons affected by a particular dysfunction. Thus a change for the better tends to brighten everyone’s day, in effect establishing a new norm and expectation for the culture and atmosphere of the workplace, as pertains to the issue that has been addressed. Under normal circumstances then, meaning a generally healthy and civil atmosphere, the likelihood of regression to a less pleasant atmosphere may be reduced simply by a cultural “first law of motion”: one that holds that once a positive change is put into effect (motion) in a workplace environment, that motion will tend to sustain itself unless or until some countervailing force is encountered. The job of people in a previously dysfunctional environment is to ensure that no countervailing force, in the form of regression to prior behaviors, is allowed to reassert itself.

WORKSHOP SCHEDULE

I. Introduction.

- a. Outline of workshop purpose and objectives.
- b. Workplace dysfunction: description and categories

II. Activity: Participants will enact a shorten version of a class activity intended to (1) enhance student awareness of specific dysfunctions in a workplace and (2) have them develop a strategy to deal with specific dysfunctions.

III. Wrap-up and Conclusion. Participants will be given a packet of workshop materials that will facilitate their using the activity in a management class.

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