

How to Manage Dysfunctional Workplace Situations and Issues Within Legal Parameters

Howard W. Bell, Jr.

President

Bell & Trice Enterprises, Inc.

February 19, 2002

INTRODUCTION

In discussing how to manage dysfunctional workplace situations and issues within legal parameters, there are two different but very complementary approaches – Risk Management and Productivity Management.

The Risk Management approach is a reasonable and prudent method for navigating the often treacherous waters created by dysfunctional behavior in the workplace. This approach enables one to identify possible risks created by a dysfunctional workplace and eliminate or at least minimize them. Given its focus, this approach seeks to ensure that the policies, procedures, and practices of an organization:

1. Discourage dysfunctional behavior.
2. Encourage internal and informal forms of dispute resolution whenever possible and practical.
3. Identify and minimize the risk to which the institution might be subject if a lawsuit were brought against it for alleged dysfunctional behavior on the part of one or more employees and/or managers.

Given the above, both managers and attorneys using a Risk Management approach to managing a dysfunctional workplace should examine: 1) the policies and procedures in place to discourage acts like sexual harassment, racial discrimination, and retaliation against whistleblowing claims, 2) the policies, procedures, and practices for informing and educating managers and workers of

what is and is not acceptable behavior in the workplace, and 3) the official and unofficial methods used for handling and resolving complaints.

The Productivity Management approach is also a reasonable and prudent method for navigating the often treacherous waters created by dysfunctional behavior in the workplace. This approach, however, is focused on creating a functional organization. Given this focus, the Productivity Management approach seeks to create an environment that:

1. Promotes effective communication.
2. Enables individuals to strive and excel within an environment of mutual interdependence.
3. Promotes activities designed to build trust and promote a productive work environment.

While the Risk and Productivity Management approaches to managing dysfunctional workplaces may appear to be very different, they are, in many ways, merely different sides of the same coin. In both approaches it is critical that one understand the forms of dysfunctional behavior that are likely to arise. Both approaches also: 1) rely on identifying and penalizing dysfunctional behaviors; 2) incorporate a program of communicating what are and are not acceptable behaviors to managers and employees; 3) respect the rights of the accused and the accuser; and 4) rely on the old maxim that “you get what you inspect not what you expect.”

Having stated the above, please note that the primary focus of this paper is on Productivity Management.

PRODUCTIVE WORKPLACES

While there are a variety of approaches for developing functional workplaces, all of them seek to create a dynamic and positive work environment built on trust, respect, and a clear understanding by all members of the work force of the purpose, vision, and core values of the organization. In a Productivity Management approach one often begins by reviewing the basic principles upon which a productive workplace is built and the root causes of dysfunction within the workplace.

Armed with this information one seeks to implement policies, procedures, and enforcement mechanisms to reward productive behaviors and penalize dysfunctional ones.

A review of the book Make It So, by Wess Roberts and Bill Ross¹ as well as personal experience with a wide range of organizations leads to the conclusion that for a functional workplace to exist management must:

1. Ensure that each member of the workplace: 1) knows and understands the mission, vision and core values of the organization; 2) is encouraged to identify specific goals and objectives for accomplishing the mission and vision and reinforcing the core values; 3) is helped to see the ramifications of their actions and inaction; and 4) is encouraged to focus their efforts on those tasks most likely to achieve their goals and objectives.
2. Encourage each member of the workforce to take initiative in meeting the challenges that often arise in the performance of his/her work. To accomplish this management must create an environment in which people are not afraid to take modest risks that occasionally do not work. This requires both administrators and workers to forgive and forget the honest errors of others and to help those who have committed an error to rebound from their mistakes.
3. Value competency in both theory and in practice. To make this principle a reality administrators must be willing to invest sizable amounts of time and money to provide workers with the many forms of training required for them to: 1) know what is expected of them; 2) perform their duties effectively; and 3) remain current with the latest advances in their field.
4. Encourage and nurture effective communication skills. This requires encouraging people to listen as well as speak. It demands that people be taught that identical words used by different people can sometimes have very different meanings. It also requires teaching people that different words used by different people can sometimes describe the same concept. Developing effective communication skills within a workplace can be a very important element in resolving conflicts and crisis situations. However, effective

¹ Make It So, Wess Roberts, Ph.D. and Bill Ross, Pocket Books, 1995.

communications does not require that people always agree with each other, only that they learn to understand and tolerate their differences.

5. Work to build and maintain an atmosphere of trust that focuses on what each member of the organization has in common. This trust must be built on a base of honest dealings in all matters no matter how small or large the prize being sought. Administrators must also help people understand what may keep them apart and help them control their own irrationality so that minor incidents do not become the catalyst for major disputes.
6. Encourage an environment of interdependence. This environment of interdependence should encourage each member of the workforce to understand that cooperative, collaborative, and corroborative efforts are much more likely to lead to success than the isolated actions of a single individual.

TYPES OF DYSFUNCTIONAL WORKPLACES

While many dysfunctional workplaces are the product of inane, unenlightened, or callous bosses, as are often portrayed in the Dilbert cartoons, dysfunctional workplaces actually come in many forms. Some workplaces become dysfunctional when a worker is allowed to bully his/her co-workers or boss. Other workplaces become dysfunctional when two or more departments or groups engage in ongoing conflicts. Still other workplaces become dysfunctional because of a repressive or discriminatory environment or an environment in which the customer is treated like a nuisance.

Regardless of the specific cause of a dysfunctional workplace, the net result is a loss of productivity as people spend large amounts of energy devising ways to cover their “derriere” while worrying about how they will be treated. The overall losses in organizational productivity are visible often in the form of an increase in tardiness, absenteeism, and employee turnover.

While there are many forms of dysfunctional workplaces, they can be viewed as existing along a continuum from Individual Based dysfunctional workplaces to Group Conflict Based dysfunctional workplaces that affect an entire organization.

Individual Based dysfunctional workplaces arise when a worker is allowed to bully his/her co-workers, undermine productivity through passive aggressive behavior, or negatively affect his or her workplace through other forms of negative individual behavior. Correcting Individual Based dysfunctional workplaces, while challenging, is generally much easier than correcting the problems created by Group Conflict Based dysfunctional workplaces. The strategies set forth in this paper to cope with Individual Based dysfunctional workplaces concentrates on identifying and modifying individual behavior.

Group Conflict Based dysfunctional workplaces arise when two or more departments or groups begin to treat each other as the enemy instead of focusing their competitive behavior on external competitors. In Group Based dysfunctional workplaces, “we-they” attitudes encourage divisive strategies and promote ongoing conflicts. If Group Conflicts are allowed to continue long enough, they can eventually permeate the entire organization. The strategy set forth in this paper for coping with these situations involves identifying the reasons for the conflicts and developing win-win solutions that all groups can accept as meeting their needs. It also involves a four-phase process for re-focusing and changing the organization.

Individual Based Dysfunction

A distinguishing characteristic of Individual Based dysfunctional workplaces is that the work environment is disrupted by the actions of a single individual. In its most benign form, Individual Based dysfunctional workplaces will experience a loss in workplace productivity. In its most virulent form, an Individual Based dysfunctional workplace can lead to one or more employees losing their lives due to an individual “going postal”. While the specific form of dysfunctional behaviors will vary from individual to individual and with a given individual over time, this paper examines three types of individuals who can cause dysfunction in the workplace.

1. Bullies,
2. Passive Aggressive Individuals, and
3. Poison Droppers.

It should be noted that one may often encounter an individual who exhibits more than one of the above forms of disruptive behaviors. For example, both bullies and passive aggressive individuals may utilize poison dropping as one of the techniques in their arsenal of dysfunctional behaviors. In addition, individuals who bully those they perceive to be weaker than themselves may sometimes adopt a passive aggressive strategy with those they perceive as being stronger than themselves.

Bullies

Almost everyone has seen or had an encounter with a bully. One of the more popular images of a bully is the child who picks on other children in elementary school on the playground. Unfortunately people do not stop being bullies just because they get older. In fact as many bullies grow older, they become more sophisticated in their bullying strategies by using psychological as well as physical forms of abuse. While the stereotypic elementary school bully is a boy, bullies in the workplace come in both sexes. Persons who are bullies will abuse anyone they perceive to be weaker than themselves -- to include co-workers, subordinates, clients, and even bosses. Usually a bully will cease engaging in his/her abusive behavior if someone who is perceived as stronger enters the area where the abusive behavior is occurring. However, as soon as the stronger individual is no longer in the area the bully is likely to resume his/her abusive behavior. Hence, bullies often engage in what may appear to be duplicitous behavior since they do not want their behavior exposed to individuals whom they perceive are stronger than themselves.

Passive Aggressive Individuals

As with bullies, most people have at least heard of an individual who engages in passive aggressive behavior. Unlike bullies, who make a point of intimidating and/or abusing anyone they perceive as being weaker than themselves, a passive aggressive individual will avoid direct confrontations with his/her co-workers or boss. In general, passive aggressive behavior is a strategy used by people who want to avoid complying with the requirements of those they perceive as being stronger than themselves. An illustration of passive aggressive behavior, with

a direct effect on productivity in the workplace, is the individual who does not wish to perform certain work assignments. The passive aggressive individual perfects the art of either not completing certain work assignments or “slow walking” through them. When confronted with their non-performance, passive aggressive individuals invariably seem sincerely sorry. They almost always have a reason for their non-performance that begins with someone or something else being at fault. Often when confronted with their non-performance, they will agree to a new deadline date. This agreement is often predicated on a fairly long list of conditions that must be met in order for them to complete their task.

Poison Droppers

While most people have encountered poison droppers or have heard of people who exhibit the behavior of poison droppers, this label is not as commonly used as the bully and passive aggressive labels. Poison droppers are individuals who habitually interject or “drop”, negative and/or divisive comments throughout an organization in a way that “poisons” the atmosphere of the work environment. This poisoning of the work environment sows seeds of distrust and saps the energy, creates conflicts, and slows the progress of the organization. Unlike bullies who will often hide their abusive behavior from those they perceive are stronger than themselves, or passive aggressive persons who almost always avoid direct conflict, poison droppers will “drop” their little poison pellets in public as well as in private settings.

Spotting a poison dropper can be difficult since the concerns that they raise are often, on their face, legitimate and/or may be seen as prudent cautions that should be taken seriously by other individuals and/or the organization. In addition, poison droppers can raise legitimate issues that an organization ignores only at its peril. What distinguishes a poison dropper from a legitimately concerned person is the frequency and pervasiveness of their doubt sowing, conflict creating, and energy sapping behavior. Poison droppers are therefore individuals whose comments regularly and consistently interrupt, impede, or derail progress towards a goal, sap the energy of co-workers, or sow the seeds of dissent, distrust, and/or strife amongst co-workers.

Group Conflict Based Dysfunction

Group Conflict Based dysfunctional workplaces arise when two or more groups within an organization move from healthy competition to a level of conflict, which causes the groups to view each other as the enemy instead of the organization's competitors. While Group Conflicts in a college or university often involve two or more departments or colleges engaging in adversarial behavior, they can cut across a wide variety of group lines. Hence, Group Conflict might take many forms, such as men versus women, one racial group versus another racial group, administrators versus faculty, or exempt versus non-exempt employees. In short, Group Conflict Based dysfunctional workplaces are any workplaces where two or more identifiable groups exist and treat each other as adversaries.

John D. Arnold in his book When the Sparks Fly identifies six types of group or organizational conflict:²

1. External (conflicts related to competition, the marketplace, regulation, or an adversarial takeover);
2. Management Process and Style (conflicts stemming from leadership style, the decision-making process, or organizational structure);
3. Strategic Direction (conflicts over the company's mission/direction, objectives, and strategies);
4. Operational (conflicts related to issues such as "quality versus schedule" or "design-to-production transition");
5. Interdepartmental (conflicts that occur when divisions compete with themselves rather than with other companies); or
6. Value System (conflicts over business philosophy).

John D. Arnold also identifies the following five stages in the development of an organizational conflict:³

² Arnold, John D., When Sparks Fly, McGraw-Hill, Inc. copyright 1993, pages 55 and 56.

³ Ibid., pages 14 – 16.

1. Individuals seek support for their cause
2. Polarization and conflict become more visible over time
3. Conflict touches every aspect of the organization
4. Emotions and hostilities increase
5. Conflicts threaten the life of the organization.

During Stage 1, individuals seek support for their “cause”. As they elicit support they form “we-they” boundaries that allow them to view anyone who is not sympathetic to their cause as being classified as the “enemy.”⁴

By Stage 2, both the polarization and the conflict become more visible as time passes. As the polarization and conflict are allowed to grow, each faction reinforces its position causing it to become more entrenched.⁵ During Stages 1 and 2, when the conflict is still at a relatively low level, a hushed or deathly quiet atmosphere may arise and rumors will often begin to run rampant.

As the conflict grows it reaches Stage 3, at which point the conflict touches every aspect of the organization, from the boardroom to the boiler room. In this regard the organizational conflict is like a virus that gradually invades the whole organization and weakens its structure.⁶ As the conflict grows memos may become riddled with excessive justifications and inordinate amounts of time may be spent with CYA (Cover Your Ass) activities. In addition, backstabbing may become the first line of defense when either accountability or responsibility is called into question. Finally, meetings may drag on because no one can agree or is willing to make a decision and commitment for fear of being blamed for any perceived or actual mistake.

By Stage 4, due to the passage of time and the heightened emotions and hostilities now being focused on the conflict, core data becomes distorted. Hence, by this point in the conflict it

⁴ Ibid., page 14.

⁵ Ibid., page 15.

⁶ Ibid., page 15.

becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify – much less focus on – the original (and often smaller) issue that gave rise to the conflict.⁷

Finally, by Stage 5, the conflict becomes life threatening to the organization as it begins to contaminate the organization's relationships with its customers and vendors.⁸ At this point the organization has no unifying, common vision or sense of its mission, direction, or strategy. This leads to conflicting statements about where the organization stands, and reinforces the “we-they” boundaries. At this point a “Warlord” mentality can take hold throughout the organization where the heads of each group deploy their “forces” to battle competing groups. This lack of a unifying vision, mission or strategy combined with a warlord mentality of various managers tends to corrupt the compensation programs to reward “loyal” behavior instead of meritorious behavior. Such corruption in the compensation system reinforces the individual “win-lose” mindset instead of a “united we stand” mentality.⁹ In this latter mode the conflict can become so severe that the organization can be destroyed as the enemy becomes the other group and not external competitors.

In Group Conflict Based dysfunctional work environments, especially those allowed to reach Stages Three and above, a significant part of the problem is that the management of the organization is unable, or unwilling, to establish a positive environment. The net result is that organizational communications, trust, customer service, and accomplishments are undermined by management practices.

The corruption of the rewards system, mentioned above, often arises when compensation is based on favoritism or political connections and not merit. In these situations, the management may be overly concerned with exercising its power over the workforce. In these instances bullying behaviors may arise that would be seen as creating an Individual Based dysfunctional workplace if a single employee were practicing the bullying behaviors. Such behavior undermines the entire organization if the bullying behavior starts at the top of the organization and forms the operative management philosophy. However, the rewards system can also be

⁷ Ibid., page 15.

⁸ Ibid., pages 15 and 16.

corrupted if management is overly concerned with being liked or friends with the workforce. In these situations a rewards system based on favoritism or avoiding conflict and not merit might take hold in the organization. Alternatively management may lack the skills or resolve to discipline non-performing workers for fear of hurting feelings or disrupting someone's life.

In each of the above cases and countless others, management, by either its action or inaction, creates an environment in which a core value of the organizational rewards system is to favor those who are friendliest with the organization's management rather than most productive. This type of environment tends to promote distrust, divisiveness, low productivity, and a loss of the best and brightest talent.

While the discussion of Group Based Conflicts to this point has concentrated on either the conflicts of two or more organizational groups or the corruption of the rewards system, another form of Group Conflict Based dysfunctional work environment is based on stereotypes about people of a given sex, race, religion, or ethnicity. Because these views may originate in the larger society and may create similar dysfunctional environments in a number of organizations, they can be extremely hard to identify and correct. Exacerbating the situation is the fact that:

1. The group being harassed or discriminated against may have little or no power to fight back.
2. The members of the group may be isolated throughout the organization and hence may:
 - a) suffer the harassment or discrimination without knowing that others are suffering from similar mistreatment; and/or
 - b) be unable to mount a defense of themselves as a group.
3. The group being harassed or discriminated against may have resigned itself to the harassing or discriminatory behavior.

Organizations suffering from this form of dysfunction often waste significant pools of talent by blocking the advancement, or refusing to recognize the talents or achievements of individuals or groups of individuals within an organization. Organizations suffering from this form of dysfunction may also tolerate or even encourage behaviors that harass others due to their sex,

⁹ When Sparks Fly, John D. Arnold, McGraw-Hill, Inc., copyright 1993, pages 3 - 5.

race, or other distinguishing characteristics. Sometimes the assumptions that drive this behavior are so ingrained in the culture of the organization and/or the society surrounding it that the offending practices are invisible to the perpetrators and may not be clear to the victims.

For example, organizations that view women as only able to fill certain “support” roles may never consider a woman for a leadership role even though an unbiased observer would clearly see her leadership ability. This same organization might allow or even encourage sexually harassing behaviors.

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH DYSFUNCTIONAL WORKPLACES

The benefits of a functional work environment are increases in productivity as trust and cooperative behaviors lead to relaxed environments buoyed with humor that can unleash innovative efforts. These positive environments can reduce organizational costs caused by tardiness and absenteeism. Positive work environments can also reduce organizational costs by reducing employee turnover and enabling the organization to keep and attract bright and hard working talent. Finally, positive work environments tend to unleash the creative potential of the workforce by encouraging teamwork. Hence, a central goal of Productivity Management is to create and maintain a positive work environment.

While most of the strategies offered by this paper for dealing with dysfunctional workplaces concentrate on strategies for changing the organizational environment, a brief examination is made of the options available to individuals caught within a dysfunctional work environment.

Individual Strategies for Coping with Dysfunctional Workplaces

For an individual in a non-management position or in a lower level management position there are essentially four approaches for coping with dysfunctional workplace situations and issues.

The approaches are:

1. Stay and seek to change the situation

2. Leave the organization
3. Stay and suffer in silence
4. Stay and try to “best” the system.

The first approach is the most positive, most difficult, and possibly the most risky approach. It is positive because the person pursuing this approach has made a commitment to try to help the organization and him/her self succeed. It is the most difficult approach because the organization may misinterpret or even resent the efforts of someone without the “authority” to cause change trying to implement change. It is risky because individuals and/or groups within the organization may actually view the individual seeking change as an enemy. In these situations co-workers may actively work to undermine the individual. One strategy for trying to promote change can involve filing a lawsuit against the organization if the dysfunctional behaviors involve harassment or some form of discrimination. Other strategies can involve identifying like-minded individuals within the organization and working with them to create a coalition of people working to effect change.

Leaving the organization is also a positive strategy, can also be difficult, and entails some risk. The operative philosophy for an individual pursuing this strategy is to remember the sage advice in Kenny Rogers’ song the “Gambler.” The advice in the song is to a man who is down on his luck. In this song, the man is told, “You’ve got to know when to hold them, know when to fold them, know when to walk away, know when to run.” This quote is very relevant because for many people it is easier to endure discomfort in a current work environment than to engage in the effort required to locate a new position or to face the possibility of rejection by a potential new employer. The risks associated with this approach exist on at least two levels. One level is the possibility that in spite of significant efforts the job search may not be successful. The other level of risk is the possibility, however remote, that the existing employer will learn of the search and make the person’s life more difficult or even fire him/her. If the first strategy of changing a dysfunctional environment into a functional environment is not possible then the second strategy—leaving the organization—should be pursued before the work environment becomes more difficult or the person seeking change is terminated—often at a time that seems to be the worst possible moment in his/her life or career.

Staying and suffering in silence is a non-positive strategy that is very difficult to sustain and is very risky. It is a non-positive strategy because it forces a person to live with a painful situation that can undermine his or her sense of worth. It is difficult because the pain, suffering, and attacks on one's sense of self-worth can lead to an aversion to the work that must be accomplished. This can make it very hard to be upbeat and productive. In addition, staying and suffering is risky because as an aversion to the work increases, productivity suffers causing a decline in the quality and quantity of one's work product. This causes the person's performance to decline. As a person's performance declines, the probability of him/her receiving a negative evaluation increases, as does his/her probability of being terminated.

Staying and trying to "best" the system is a very negative strategy, is extremely difficult, and is extremely risky. It is highly negative because most of the strategies for "besting" the system are themselves forms of dysfunctional behavior. It is difficult because to "best" the system requires a lot of energy and cunning to attain a goal that is not geared towards improving the organization's productivity or contributing to a long term feeling of positive self worth. It is extremely risky because success may cause the employee to become exactly the type of person that he or she dislikes, and failure will have caused the employee to compromise his/her values with nothing to show for it.

Management Strategies for Coping with Dysfunctional Workplaces

Establishing a functional work environment begins with explicitly defining what behavior is acceptable within the workplace. In establishing a functional work environment there are four critical concepts that need to be embraced:

1. There are no ends only means.
2. Trust is the foundation upon which a functional work environment is built.
3. Fairness does not always require identical treatment.
4. Courage and persistence are required to create and maintain a functional workplace.

By stating there are no ends only means, you rule out the mindset that accepts any action as justified as long as it produces a given end. You also embrace the concept that today's ends will become tomorrow's means for accomplishing some other "end". Given this reality you must be very careful in working with an organization to examine both the intended and unintended consequences of your actions.

The concept that trust is the foundation upon which a functional work environment is built is crucial to any expectation of success. People, who trust their co-workers and bosses will share information, agree to work in teams, and focus their efforts on positive behaviors instead of CYA behaviors. Establishing and maintaining trust requires honesty in all forms of communications, adherence to agreements without changing them unilaterally (even though you may have the power to do so), and viewing verbal agreements as being as binding as written ones.

The concept that fairness does not always require identical treatment may seem strange unless you consider how you would treat someone in a wheelchair versus someone who is able to walk. Treating these two individuals differently in order to reasonably accommodate their differences is ok as long as they and other members of the organization view the differing treatment as reasonable and fair.

The concept that courage and persistence are required to create and maintain a functional workplace is critical because change occurs only with effort and risk. All too often persons desiring to change an organization believe or hope that a figurative magic pill exists that can be administered to make everything better. Unfortunately, changing an organization requires identifying and overcoming barriers to change. Overcoming these barriers can take tremendous amounts of energy and time. Therefore, change agents must have the patience and persistence to expend the energy and time needed to effect change and the courage to face and overcome the barriers to change.

Approaches for Handling Individual Based Dysfunctional Situations

Regardless of whether the Individually Based Dysfunctional work environment is the result of Bullies, Passive Aggressive individuals, or Poison Droppers, your organization should use its policies and procedures, disciplinary system, and compensation system to handle the individuals causing the dysfunctional behavior.

Policies should articulate your organizational rules that are tied to its vision, mission, core values, and goals. Policies should be supported by institutional procedures that are consistent, equitable, and honest and are perceived as such. An employee handbook should describe clearly and simply what employee conduct is expected and what is not allowed. Equally important, your organization must support its supervisors and managers in effectively confronting inappropriate and unacceptable behavior. Because some individuals, like bullies, are often successful in intimating their bosses and co-workers, clear policies and personal support are needed to short-circuit behavior before it can escalate.¹⁰

For example, to deal with some of the activities of bullies, your organization's policies should clearly state that any form or manner of threatening remark or gesture in the workplace is unacceptable. The policies should also make it clear that anyone who engages in such behavior will face disciplinary action, including possible termination from his/her job. To make this policy effective, however, your management must make it clear that there will be no tolerance for any threats of violence or intimidation by anyone at any level within the organization. The organization must also offer its managers training in how to handle the bullying behavior of subordinates.

To assist managers in dealing with passive aggressive individuals and poison droppers, your policies should discuss the need for people to function in team environments and accomplish goals in a timely and quality manner. To handle bullies, passive aggressive individuals, and poison droppers, your organization's policies should clearly state how job evaluations are to be handled. In addition, your management should be trained in how to conduct productive job

¹⁰ Ibid., page 95.

evaluations. For example, as part of the job evaluation process, managers and employees should be required to establish goals to be accomplished at the start of each year (or other evaluation period) and should be required to evaluate their staff based upon those goals. In addition, your managers should be trained on the liabilities and problems associated with unwarranted positive evaluations that can come back to “haunt” you when you decide it is time to fire someone but are confronted with an unbroken history of glowing evaluations in the personnel file.

In handling grievances you should repeatedly ask yourself whether the disciplinary action is a punishment or an attempt to correct action and change behavior? This is a fundamental question. The answer makes all the difference in the world. Punishment is punitive, provocative, and evocative of negative behavior. Taking corrective action offers the possibility that your institution’s actions will be supportive, reality-based, and positive. It allows a disciplinary action to become a learning opportunity and can create an atmosphere of trust. Trust creates a positive environment for learning. Honest exchanges and sharing develop mutual understanding, rather than adversarial showdowns and standoffs. Both parties win in functional relationships--rather than having a winner and a loser. Unless both sides in the work environment feel successful, there is a failure or loss for both the organization and the employee. Hence, creating “win-win” solutions should be the goal of each disciplinary action even though the goal may not always be achieved.

It is important that employees, especially those who are being disciplined or terminated, have a constructive mechanism to vent their frustrations and anger. Face-to-face communication between supervisors and those they supervise is essential. Moreover, your organization needs to give employees the opportunity to submit grievances in response to any disciplinary, punitive, or potentially terminal action by the organization. Creating a grievance procedure can allow an employee to vent his/her anger by completing a grievance form. By the time an angry employee finishes writing a grievance, his/her anger may well have dissipated. At the least, the employee will have had an opportunity to create a rationale for his/her reaction and perceptions. This allows the employee to reflect on his/her own thinking and gives the manager or human resources professional the opportunity to better understand the employee’s subjective experience and his/her thinking about the problem. For these reasons, your organization should ask for

written responses to a grievance, but never as a substitute for discussing the situation with the individual in person.¹¹

Group Conflict Based Solutions

Before you can correct the dysfunctions created by a Group Conflict Based dysfunctional work environment, you must first understand what is the cause of the dysfunction. One approach for determining the cause or causes for dysfunction in organizations is the Arnold Conflict Resolution Process.¹² This process involves ten steps that are grouped into two phases. The two phases are Diagnosis and Issue Resolution. The ten steps are as follow:

1. Specify the conflict —in terms of the Identity, Location, and Time.
2. Describe – what is outside the conflict (i.e., not the Identity, Location, Time).
3. Identify distinctions about the conflict.
4. Test these distinctions for cause.
5. Identify the values of the parties and your own values.
6. Adopt a winning, opportunistic philosophy.
7. Develop criteria – achieve/preserve/avoid.
8. Prioritize – into “absolute” and “highly desirable” criteria.
9. Generate possible resolutions.
10. Evaluate and choose the best resolution – test alternatives against criteria.

Phase I: Diagnosis

Step 1: Specify the conflict by reconstructing the problem. This phase involves describing three dimensions of the conflict (Identity, Location, and Time) in specific and objective terms.

1. Identity: What is the nature of the conflict? In describing the conflict your narrative should be very specific.

¹¹ Ibid., page 87 and 88.

¹² Ibid., page 24.

2. Location: Where is the conflict occurring, or where did it occur? For example, is the conflict only at the headquarters operations or only in certain regions? For higher education institutions, you may ask whether the conflict is based on the administration or academic operations or is the conflict throughout the entire organization?
3. Time: Pin down the date and, if at all possible, the time when the conflict began. Beware of one pitfall: you might be building in an assumed cause if you associate the conflict with a particular event or condition. The event or condition may, in fact, have absolutely nothing to do with the conflict.

Step 2: Describe what is outside the conflict by determining "...what is not the identity, location, and time. This can help draw identity, time, and space boundaries; ... will help to definitively determine which are the core issues and to zero in on the most probable cause."¹³

Step 3: Identify the distinctions. This step involves comparing Steps 1 and 2, to determine what is unique about the conflict.¹⁴

Step 4: Test the distinctions for cause. Once you know what is unique about the conflict, you can begin testing one or more hypotheses about each of the differentiating factors or distinctions. In other words, how could each factor or distinction have caused the conflict?¹⁵

Step 5: Identify the values involved. Whether you are a participant in the conflict or an observer, it is important to identify your own values, expectations, attitudes, and so on. At best, failure to identify your values and attitudes may cause you to make erroneous assessments and judgments.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., page 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., page 28.

¹⁵ Ibid., page 29.

¹⁶ Ibid., page 30.

Phase II: Issue Resolution

Step 6: Adopt a winning, opportunistic philosophy. This step involves adopting a mindset that will enable you and your colleagues to see beyond what might appear to be mutually conflicting objectives.¹⁷

Step 7: Develop criteria. With a clear identification of the issues and a proper mindset, you can now determine what each party in the conflict wants to Achieve, Preserve, and Avoid. As you develop criteria based on what each party wants to achieve, preserve, and avoid, you can identify their requirements for a solution to the conflict. Each party's interests in what they wish to achieve, preserve, or avoid will affect the resolution of any problem or issue.¹⁸

Step 8: Assign priorities. Once you have determined what it is that everyone wants to achieve, preserve and avoid, you can set about assigning priorities to each requirement. This process will enable you to differentiate absolutely essential requirements from those that are important and desirable but not essential.¹⁹

Step 9: Generate possible resolutions. The process of generating possible solutions to organizational conflicts involves drawing on your knowledge of the parties affected by the conflict and their demands and desires, as reflected by the prioritized essential requirements. In fact, use the prioritized essential requirements to generate possible ways of resolving the conflict. The criteria are how you might go about "achieving, preserving, and avoiding"²⁰ desired and undesired behavior, respectively.

Step 10: Evaluate the proposed resolutions and choose the best resolution. Once you have developed potential resolutions to the conflict, the final step is to evaluate each one and select the ones most likely to end the conflict. You do this by testing each resolution against the criteria identified in Step 7 and prioritized in Step 8. "Shoot down" any of the resolutions that fail to

¹⁷ Ibid., page 32.

¹⁸ Ibid., page 32.

¹⁹ Ibid., page 33.

²⁰ Ibid., pages 33 and 34.

meet any of the criteria deemed absolutely essential. For those that pass the crucial test of meeting absolutely essential criteria, compare and evaluate them against one another in terms of those deemed desirable. In this way, you can determine which ones do the best overall job²¹ to reach the ultimate goal of creating a functional environment.

Four Phase Organizational Change Process

The above process is a tool to identify the causes and resolve the current conflicts required to move an organization from a dysfunctional state to a more positive work environment.

However, to institutionalize and maintain a positive work environment requires the implementation of a change management process. An effective approach to change management is a four-step organizational enhancement process. The four steps involved in this organizational enhancement process are:²²

1. Strategic Direction Setting
2. Assessment of Readiness
3. Implementation
4. Evaluation

Strategic Direction Setting

The Strategic Direction Setting phase involves establishing an organizational mission, vision, and core values. Ideally this should be done first at the overall organizational level and then for each sub unit within the organization. However, if your goal is to turn around a given unit within the organization, then the Strategic Direction Setting can begin at that level.

The Mission statement is a statement of your organization's reason for being. The Vision statement is a statement of where your organization wants to be at a point in the future. The Core Values statement should provide a clear picture of the basic principle(s) that your

²¹ Ibid., page 34.

organization's staff will use in accomplishing the Mission and Vision statements. Each of these statements should be short, tightly focused prose. Ideally, each one should be short enough to fit on a business card.

In developing the mission, vision, and core values statements your organization should also identify an explicit set of key performance indicators that it can use to determine how well it is doing in attaining its strategic direction. As noted earlier in this paper, "you get what you inspect not what you expect." Explicit performance indicators tracked over time can enable you to measure progress, document successes and failures, and identify areas for additional improvement.

Assessment of Readiness

Once the Strategic Direction is identified your organization needs to assess the readiness of its employees and its customers to embrace the strategic direction. This assessment of readiness phase provides your organization's employees with an opportunity to learn what management is thinking and where management wants to take the organization. It also provides your organization's employees with an opportunity to express their willingness and readiness to buy into the strategic direction that has been set. Done properly, management should be willing to modify the elements of the strategic direction if it becomes clear that the vast majority of the workforce rejects it.

The discussions with the customers should center on verifying that the user community buys into the identified mission and vision statements of the organization. This is critical since if the user community rejects your organization's definition of its purpose and where it is going there will undoubtedly be problems as it seeks to pursue them.

²² "Alphabet Soup of Management Tools", by Howard W. Bell, Jr. and Nancy J. Hanseman, Business Officer magazine, v27, n7, January 1994, pages 36-40.

Another aspect of this phase is the determination of what processes, policies, procedures, systems, and organizational assumptions must be changed in order to implement the strategic direction.

Implementation

When seeking to implement change, you must keep in mind that during any change process there are three types of individuals. The three types of individuals are those who are: 1) creative, innovative and welcome and embrace change; 2) those who are resolute in their opposition to change and will never change; and 3) those who if led properly will eventually change. In general the percentage of individuals in each of these three groups in any organization are 10% – 15% for those who welcome change, 10% -- 15% for those who oppose change, and 70% -- 80% for those who can be led to change.

During this phase your organization needs to engage in a number of parallel activities built upon the above stated reality of who can be expected to support, oppose, and be led to change. Among the parallel activities are:

1. The identification and implementation of a series of key initial projects.
2. Incorporation of the mission, vision, and core values into your organization's performance management and compensation systems through the identification of clear performance goals in support of the mission, vision, and core values.
3. The creation of a series of rewards and recognitions to celebrate those individuals who are doing what your organization professes it wants them to achieve.
4. The identification of a fair, firm, and supportive disciplinary system to identify and work with those individuals who do not achieve their assigned tasks and goals.

In selecting the initial projects the organization should prioritize candidate projects on the following basis:

1. Which ones are most supportive of your organization's strategic direction.

In assessing how supportive each project is of your organization's strategic direction you should explicitly identify how each project can contribute to your organization fulfilling its mission and reinforcing its core values. You should also identify how each project can move your organization closer to attaining its vision.

2. The impact of each project on the perceived and technical issues and challenges.
To provide the appearance as well as the reality of forward motion, it is sometimes necessary to implement projects that will have an immediate impact on the perceptions of the user community and/or your organization's staff. This is true even when the impact of the project on underlying technical problems facing your organization may be minimal. Adopting this strategy can enable you to buy time to work on correcting technical problems that may take longer and be very difficult to solve.

3. The timeline for implementation.

Because people tend to remember failures forever but adopt a "what have you done for me lately" mentality about any successes that are more than six months old, the timeline for implementing projects should include, whenever possible, significant visible accomplishments at least once every six months.

4. The goals and objectives associated with the project.

Each project identified should have associated with it a set of key goals and objectives to be achieved within a given span of time. Each project should also identify an explicit set of key performance indicators of its success. This will enable you to know when you have succeeded and will provide you with measures that you can use to celebrate your successes.

Evaluation

The final phase of this four-phase process is the Evaluation phase. During this phase the organization should seek to determine how close it has come to achieving the strategic direction that it set at the beginning of this process. It should also evaluate how well each manager and employee has done in attaining their goals.

Based on these evaluations the organization should re-examine the appropriateness of the Strategic direction and the associated key performance indicators established earlier. It should also repeat the entire process not as a circle but as an upward spiral where each round of this four-phase process improves the organization.

CONCLUSION

While dysfunctional workplaces can arise for a variety of reasons, there are a number of basic approaches that can assist an organization to turn a dysfunctional environment into a positive, functional, and productive one. This paper has examined strategies available to both individuals and organizations for managing dysfunctional workplace situations and issues within legal parameters and modifying the performance and productivity of dysfunctional workplaces.