

15 Signs Your Workplace is Dysfunctional

Albert J. Bernstein PhD, author "Am I the Only Sane One Working Here? 101 Solutions for Surviving Office Insanity"

Does your job drive you crazy? Do you sometimes wonder if you are the only sane person in working there? Is your workplace dysfunctional, or is it you? Here's how to find out"

Based on more than 30 years of experience as psychologist and business consultant, I've put together a checklist of fifteen diagnostic signs of a psychologically dysfunctional business. Is it the job, or is it you?

Sign No. 1: Conspicuously posted vision or value statements are filled with vague but important-sounding words like "excellence" and "quality."

These words are seldom defined and the concepts they allude to are never measured.

Sign No. 2: Bringing up a problem is considered more as evidence of a personality defect rather than as an actual observation of reality.

In a dysfunctional company, what it looks like is not only more important than what it is, it is what it is. If you don't believe that, you are the problem. A surprising amount of information is classified. Dysfunctional companies have more state secrets than the CIA. Anything that might embarrass the boss turns out to be a national security issue.

Sign No. 3: If by chance there are problems, the usual solution is a motivational seminar.

Attitude is everything, especially in places where facts are embarrassing or inconvenient. In a dysfunctional family, there's an elephant -- usually a drunken abusive parent -- in the parlour, but no one ever mentions him. To appear sane, you have to pretend that the elephant is invisible, and that drives you crazy. Businesses are full of invisible elephants, too. Usually they are things that might cause difficulties for people with enough clout to prevent their discussion. The emperor may be naked, but if you have a good attitude, you won't mention it.

Sign No. 4: Double messages are delivered with a straight face.

Quality and quantity are both job one. You can do it both cheaper and better, just don't ask how. If you're motivated enough you should know already.

Sign No. 5: History is regularly edited to make executive decisions more correct, and correct decisions more executive than they actually were.

Those huge salaries require some justification.

Sign No. 6: People are discouraged from putting things in writing.

What is written, especially financial records, is purposely confusing. You can never tell when you might need a little deniability.

Sign No. 7: Directions are ambiguous and often vaguely threatening.

Before you respond to a vague threat, remember this: Virtually every corporate scandal begins with someone saying, "Do it; I don't care how." That person is seldom the one who gets indicted.

Sign No. 8: Internal competition is encouraged and rewarded.

The word "teamwork" may be batted around like a softball at a company picnic, but in a dysfunctional company the star players are the only ones who get recognition and big bucks.

Sign No. 9: Decisions are made at the highest level possible.

Regardless of what it is, you have to check with your boss before doing it. She also has to check with her boss.

Sign No. 10: Delegating means telling somebody to do something, not giving them the power to do it.

According to Webster's Dictionary, you delegate authority, not tasks. In dysfunctional companies you may have responsibility, but the authority lives in the office upstairs.

Sign No. 11: Management approaches from the latest best-seller are regularly misunderstood to mean what we're doing already is right on the mark.

"Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," "Good to Great" and "Who Moved My Cheese?" all seem to boil down to, "quit griping and do more with less."

Sign No. 12: Resources are tightly controlled.

Your department may need upgraded software, but there's been a spending freeze since 2006. Cost control is entry-level management, but in a dysfunctional company anything more sophisticated is considered too touchy-feely. Whatever you propose, the first question you will be asked is if it can be done cheaper.

Sign No. 13: You are expected to feel lucky to have a job and know you could lose it if you don't toe the line.

Dysfunctional companies maintain control using the threat of punishment. Most will maintain that they also use positive rewards ... like your paycheck. A few people are actually fired, but most of those who go are driven to quit.

Sign No. 14: Rules are enforced based on who you are rather than what you do.

In a dysfunctional company, there are clearly insiders and outsiders and everyone knows who belongs in each group. Accountability has different meanings depending on which group you're in.

Sign No. 15: The company fails the Dilbert Test.

Dysfunctional organizations have no sense of humour. People who post unflattering cartoons risk joining the ranks of the **disappeared**. When an organization loses the ability to laugh at itself, it is headed for big trouble. If you'd get in trouble for printing this article and posting it on the bulletin board at work, maybe it's time to look for another job before this one drives you crazy.