

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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10 Signs Your Workplace is Unhealthy

When was the last time your company underwent a comprehensive annual review? Has the focus of your workplace been diffused by the need to survive at all costs?



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A steady growth of disgruntled partners and a quieting of associates can be symptoms of your company's ill health. Are special favors, broken rules and political internal dealings becoming too common a practice?

The beginnings of an organization include the institutionalization of that company's culture. A healthy organization is aware that the culture holds the key for reaching its goals by aligning the company's philosophy with its practice style. The more explicit and conscious the culture is, the healthier the company can become, as long as there is a constant oversight of the culture's health.

How many of the following qualities can be identified within your company's culture, and to what extent?

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SYMPTOMS OF AN UNHEALTHY ORGANIZATION

The existence and strength of any of these qualities in your organization determine the health of your work culture. Even one quality can lead to a deterioration of the healthy state that leaders and all members of the organization seek.

1. CLOSED-SYSTEM THINKING

In closed-system thinking, there is a tendency to regard the organization as sufficiently independent to allow most of its problems to be analyzed internally without reference to its external environment. This approach creates an unreal perception of the organization by ignoring the influences imposed by the environment. Additionally, there is a sense of fear about exposing its internal operations to external review.

2. STRONG SELF-FOCUS/TUNNEL VISION

An unhealthy organization operates to attain very few primary goals, but with an intense drive for achievement. When increasing billable hours and generating revenue surpass all other

organizational goals, employees become commodities and feel treated as such. Isolation, divisional conflict and individual disagreements begin to emerge without direct cause.

3. RIGID, IDENTIFIABLE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Organizational cultures are built in two distinct phases. The first phase is defined by the establishment of leadership philosophies. The second phase is built on the application of the espoused philosophies. In an unhealthy culture, rules, expectations and behaviors (informal culture) can be misaligned with the leadership (formal culture) philosophies, causing frustration, anger and resentment. However, the cultural norms — which inform employees of proper behaviors — are based upon these contradictions, resulting in expectations that are unwritten, but enforced passionately.

4. CRISIS ORIENTATION

Organizations that spend more than 50 percent of their aggregate time attempting to solve emergent issues are considered dysfunctional. Growth-oriented organizations that integrate research and development into their normal planning processes will invest attention, time, support and action toward achieving goals. Healthy organizations keep an eye to the external environment for clues about future directions. Unhealthy organizations tend to focus heavily on nongrowth issues, limiting their expansion through short-sighted behavior.

5. DISHONESTY

Dishonesty emerges in dysfunctional organizations at the first instance of compromising the principles designed to guide members toward the achievement of collective organizational goals. Organizational divergences from an honest alliance with the core values become the norm when compliance with those values goes unchecked. Policies are not applied judiciously, and truth-telling goes.

6. ILLOGICAL, IRRATIONAL, OPERATIONAL LOGIC

Illogical, irrational logic is based in fear and responds through defensiveness. The longer irrational, illogical patterns are allowed to continue, the more “normal” they become, increasing their impact on those being guided by those thoughts and subsequent actions.

7. SUPPRESSED CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

Dysfunctional organizations don't need thinkers, dreamers or big-picture ideas. The normal day is operated in a crisis (or near crisis) mode, so there is generally a strict protocol for how issues are resolved and problems solved. There is comfort in measurable outcomes that can only be achieved in this environment by doing what has been done before, regardless of the circumstance. Policies, regulations and rules define all work processes.

8. DENIAL/AVOIDANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Difficulty arises when the organization seeks help, but is really unwilling to hear negative truths. For example, an objective third party assesses the environment and reports back a truth, but that truth is flatly denied or received with defensive rationalizations. If an organization is to improve, its leaders must be open to what has evolved over time and has resulted in diminished organizational health. Defending the rightness of the current environment, even in the face of decay, is the hallmark of a deeply dysfunctional culture and represents the unwillingness to question all aspects of the organization's operations.

9. FEAR OF LOSS OF POWER

Controlling personalities typically do not have a positive influence at the workplace. Their actions and communication can lead to employee discord. For example, if employees feel like they are constantly being treated condescendingly and that their opinions are not being heard or acknowledged, they might start to feel resentful and detached, resulting in lower morale, lower productivity and higher turnover. If the leaders of your company exhibit this behavior, the culture becomes defined as controlling.

10. GRADUAL LOSS OF ETHICS

Any behavior that is sustained over long periods becomes normative. If the implied values of the company include unethical practices, one can expect the whole of the company to follow suit. It happens so insidiously that it goes unnoticed from inside the company, but the practices adopted will soon display the deterioration of ethics within the workplace to the world. Frames of reference will change among all members of the company, and to everyone's surprise, a reputation reflective of the ethical breakdown will form.

Identifying dysfunction is the first step toward rebuilding. It's important to recognize that unhealthy law organizations are in trouble internally and need to find a way to heal and recover. Dysfunction can kill an organization just as addictions can kill individuals. Healing the workplace is a process, not a project or end goal. Learning to become an adaptive culture is critical to ongoing growth and success, as well as to retaining excellent employees.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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