

Member's Quarterly

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Feature

Team Dysfunction: Where Do We Go from Here?

Intervention tools that work



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Strained team relations can have an enormous negative impact on any organization. Dysfunctional teams often lead to absenteeism, conflict, WSIB and benefits claims, turnover, low morale and reduced productivity. However, team dysfunction is difficult to resolve because it involves complex human relationships and psychology. Here are some of the common contributors that we see in our work:

- **Confirmation bias:** our natural tendency to focus on evidence that supports our existing beliefs, while ignoring or discounting evidence to the contrary. For example, an employee who believes that their colleague is malicious or untrustworthy will interpret all of the colleague's behaviour — even positive behaviours — in that light. This bias tends to entrench people in conflict.
- **Normalization:** when negative behaviours become entrenched, they can start to feel "normal," making it difficult for team members to even realize they have a problem. For instance, we often hear employees in toxic environments vigorously defend their need to "vent", when in fact, ongoing negativity is making the problems worse.
- **Self-protection:** employees often try to protect themselves from a hostile environment in ways that hinder resolution. For example, an employee may try to avoid a hostile coworker, but the lack of communication only deepens their conflict. Similarly, an employee who fears an overbearing manager may protect themselves by blaming colleagues for mistakes. In both examples, the employee's reaction is understandable but unhelpful.

In the face of these difficult dynamics, there are no simple solutions. Management must develop a tool-kit of possible interventions and deploy the right tools at the right times.

The first step is to diagnose the source of the problem. Consider combining a written survey with focus group sessions or individual interviews to delve deeper into areas of concern. Where time and resources permit, we prefer a cultural audit in which the facilitator meets individually with each member of the team. The facilitator asks open-ended questions and can then ask follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding of the concerns. We recommend that employees be required to attend the review meeting but not be required to say anything to the facilitator. This way, employees won't be perceived as "ratting out" their coworkers — if questioned by their peers, they can simply say that they attended because they had to.

Once you have diagnosed the problem, you will need to tailor an individual solution. Often this will require a combination of different interventions, with regular follow-up to ensure that the interventions are working and to change course if they are not.

Any intervention must start by building psychological safety and trust. In our experience, generalized team-building activities are not sufficient. Team members must be shown that management is taking their specific concerns seriously. The cultural audit itself can be a good trust-building exercise if employees feel heard and understood in the meetings. Personality profiles (e.g., Myers-Briggs or True Colours) can help employees see their colleagues in a more positive light by demonstrating that the conflict may be motivated by personality differences rather than malice. Designing a fair and transparent conflict resolution process also helps. If employees trust the process, they will gain trust for management and each other.

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Once a degree of trust has been established, numerous interventions are possible, depending on the problem. Here are some examples of possible intervention tools:

- redirecting the energy of employees who complain and gossip toward positive solutions, for example by placing them on the committee charged with addressing the problem
- bystander intervention training for the full team. It can be difficult for a bully to operate without peer support.
- mediation or a facilitated conversation (but only if it is a case of mutual conflict — harassment should not be resolved through mediation)
- positive workplace training with an emphasis on steps every employee can take to create a more positive workplace. We prefer this approach over standard anti-harassment training which too often focuses on what not to do and can create resentment.
- training employees on how to have difficult conversations
- providing one-on-one coaching for those who are contributing to a toxic team
- addressing any structural issues that may be contributing to the conflict such as a lack of role clarity
- changing the composition of teams
- ensuring that managers and supervisors consistently hold team members accountable. We recommend, more generally, that people management and conflict management skills should be made part of managers' performance reviews and bonus criteria; and
- creating a team charter where the team sets standards for their own behaviour.

Resolving dysfunctional team dynamics is a challenge, but the rewards are great. We hope that these tools and strategies will assist you in diagnosing issues, addressing conflict and moving forward.

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