E-book for Jason Swain with Symbio Business Consulting – Forward & Chapter 1

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Forward: The Guiding Star



Let’s start with a story. Imagine being in a group of people lost deep in the wilderness at night. Everyone wants the same thing. Everyone wants to get out of the woods and reach safety or reach home. But we have no idea which direction home is, or where the nearest town is. Possibly, people are going to start going in their own directions. You may feel like we need to go down to this valley. And I think we have to follow the stream. Someone else thinks we need to go over that hill.

Now someone in the group takes some of our limited supplies, like apples, blankets, water, and other people, and starts heading in the direction he thinks is best. Others yell at him and shout, “What the hell are you doing? You know, you’re going in the wrong direction!” So the group begins to erode and fall apart.

And so it goes in our organizations. We all want the same things: to see the survival and success of our organization. Instead, we end up planning in different directions and fighting over limited resources. So relationships become eroded, and there’s no trust. This is what a dysfunctional organization often feels like.

But here’s a better scenario for the first story. Imagine we’ve become lost in the woods, like before. And this time we know exactly which direction the nearest town is. And we could find that star in the sky that appears to be right above that town. That becomes a point of reference. Suddenly, we all can point to that star, trace our finger down and pick a point on the horizon. And now, every step we take on the ground, and every suggestion someone makes, everything we do, lines up with pursuing that star. Whether we are climbing that first hill, helping each other across a stream, or scrambling down a ravine, we always keep an eye out for that star - to make sure we’re going in the right direction. And the star is not a destination. It’s just a point of reference.

This story, of course, has a happy ending! We will reach our destination as long as we refer to this guiding star to help us get there.

So what is the “guiding star” in our organizations? Read on to find out more!

Chapter # 1

The Problem: How Dysfunctional Behaviors Can Destroy Your Organization

*“If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time.”*

Patrick Lencioni

From: *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*

What Is A Dysfunctional Organization?

The word *dysfunctional* contains the prefix dys-  from the Greek meaning “bad,” “abnormal,” “difficult,” or “impaired.”

Author Angela Montgomery, Ph.D. and co-founder of *Intelligent Management,* has a concise definition of a dysfunctional organization below:

**An organization is dysfunctional when it works in ways that are not consistent with the goals it’s supposed to pursue**.

There can be many causes and reasons why this happens, whenever people work together as a group. You’ll understand this better as you study this chapter further.



The First Signs of a Dysfunctional Group

When I first walk into a place of business, what are the first signs I see that something’s not quite right?

People don’t look happy, they don’t seem engaged, and they don’t look energetic. They’re not friendly, authentic, or welcoming.

Alternatively, it’s overly friendly. It’s artificial. I see people are pretending to be happy.

I honestly feel like you can judge an organization by the way employees treat you. That’s because the ways they learn to treat you are the ways others, like peers and supervisors, have treated them.

Be Wary of These Toxic Behaviors in Your Organization

Patrick Lencioni, a well-known guru in Business Management, wrote a famous piece called *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Think of these as a pyramid, going from the bottom to the top. Here’s a summary of these listed below:

1. **Absence of Trust** is the foundation of all dysfunctions. The root of this is the inability and unwillingness of employees to be vulnerable and open to each other.

2. **Fear of Conflict.** Conflict is difficult for many people to confront. But it’s not a bad thing! If regulated, it’s usually more productive than you can imagine. Artificial harmony does nobody any good. So, it’s okay to dare to disagree.

3. **Lack of Commitment.** This can stem from the Fear of Conflict mentioned above. Healthy conflict usually results in commitment. An absence of conflict and discussion, in other words, could mean a lack of commitment to the final decision.

4. **Avoidance of Accountability.** You need to be fully committed to something to be accountable for the results. The opposite is taking full responsibility.

5. **Inattention to Results.** Healthy teamwork leads to better results. If everyone works only for himself or herself, the group results will never materialize.

Other dysfunctional behaviors I often see in the workplace include:

* Not being vulnerable,
* Not admitting mistakes,
* Not asking for help
* Not being open to other’s feedback, ideas, or suggestions.

How might these behaviors show up in your organization? Here are three scenarios I’ve experienced all too often:

1. We’re in a team meeting. And as your boss, I make a decision and say, “We’re going to do this.” And you *know,* but you’re not saying the following: “That's not what that customer wants," or "That's not the right move," or "Here's a better way." But you're afraid to challenge me because your experience with me is "I'll bite your head off!" and you'll be in trouble. So you don't say anything. If we move forward with the boss’ decision, we could fail as it wasn’t the best idea.

2. You make a mistake, and you're afraid to admit it, so you try to hide it. Rather than say, "Hey guys, I screwed up. Let's fix this so we can get back on track." Instead, you stay silent, and the mistake snowballs into even more significant problems.

3. Or, you're not very good at something, and you need help. But you're afraid to admit this, as you think others will think less of you for asking for help. So the project suffers as a result.

The consequences of these behaviors could include the following:

* tasks get executed in a fantasy land rather than reality
* Good ideas go by the wayside
* Mistakes get made
* Productivity goes down the drain
* Your team members don't learn and grow…all because they're afraid.

How Top Management Can Contribute to a Lousy Company Culture

Culture can be defined as *how people agree to think and act*.

So, for example, I lived in Japan for a couple of years. People think and act differently in Japan than in the United States for sure!

As for company culture, management and employees think and act differently in a financial institution than in a marketing firm.

Leaders set the culture in an organization in two ways. One is in the way that they behave. The other is how they allow others to act.

So you can have a leader who behaves in a very kind, caring, supportive way. But they allow some employees to behave in ways that create distrust and fear. Maybe these "bad apples" consistently miss deadlines, or do shoddy quality work, or treat customers rudely.

Problems begin when the leader doesn't confront and address this untrustworthy behavior coming from these employees.

Others will observe these dysfunctional behaviors between managers and employees. They'll start to think: "I guess that's what we're supposed to believe is the correct way to think and act around here. So it's okay to behave like that."

**The good news is leaders can change the culture and make it anything they want.**

I've often asked leaders: What kind of culture and environment would you like to see and be a part of every day at work? Do you want yet another place in your life filled with dishonesty, fear, and an absence of trust? Or would you like to have a place you get to go to every day - where you're surrounded by people you trust, who are honest with you, who care for you, and who you get to nurture?

It's entirely up to the leadership team.

If you want to experience the latter scenario, here's what you need to do:

**Discover your organization's shared values and core purpose**. (In the following two chapters, we'll go over in detail what this means and how it works.) Then, you must ensure that your decisions and actions are always consistent with those values and core purpose - and ensure that others do the same.

What leaders must fundamentally understand is that people will believe your actions over your words. Your *behavior* will ultimately determine how other people think and how they begin to act.

Employees Can Contribute To The Dysfunction Too

Suppose an organization has outstanding leadership. They're all about holding people accountable. As an employee, I am either perpetuating that culture or harming it. I can choose to behave or not to act in those ways.

So do I share my company's values or not? If I genuinely don't share these values, that's okay. I'm not wrong if I don't resonate with their culture. It's not right or wrong, or good or bad. It's just that this is who these people are. It’s their tribe. If I don't belong, I shouldn't be here, and I should self-select out.

Leadership teams often ask me this after we've discovered their shared values: "I can think of a few employees who don't have these values. What do we do with them?"

My advice is: you don't just immediately fire them. You make these shared values very clear and give them every available opportunity to behave and work in these ways. Encourage them and invite them to behave in ways that match your shared values. But if eventually, they prove to you that they either can't, or they won't – then you have to let them go. Because if they stay there, they will *destroy* your organization's culture.

You *can* have a successful organization if the leadership team has bought into the group's shared values and core purpose - because they will weed out those employees who aren't buying in and aren't going to.

Dysfunction Within Can Affect Your Relationships Outside Your Group Too

Your company culture - how people think and act within your organization – is crucial to your organization’s health. What’s equally as important is how your people interact with the external world.

I’m talking about how your group treats customers, suppliers, vendors, and the broader community.

So just like with employees, if a customer or vendor is pleased with their experience with your company, they'll trust you and remain loyal, and they'll want you to succeed. They'll stick around even when it doesn't make rational sense, such as when they could get better prices, better rates, or more convenient locations from another company.

Alternatively, if your customer or vendor is not happy with their experience, they will feel like they’ve been lied to or deceived. So the dysfunctions within your organization can cause your outside relationships to suffer. And they may begin to buy from or sell to one of your competitors!

What are your Organizational Dysfunctions Costing You?

Gallup estimates that lost productivity due to absence, illness, and work problems costs U.S. businesses over $350 billion a year.

A study done by CCP Global found that U.S. employees spend 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict, equating to approximately $359 billion in paid hours in 2008.

In this study, the researchers discovered that 27 percent of employees had witnessed conflict morph into a personal attack. And 25 percent say that the avoidance of conflict resulted in sickness or absence from work.

Experiencing conflict in your organization is probably inevitable and not necessarily a bad thing. But inside a dysfunctional environment where employees don’t deal well with conflict, it can lead to trouble!

Here’s a long list of the costs of perpetuating an inferior company culture:

* a lack of trust
* lack of loyalty
* lack of longevity – good people don’t stick around
* disengaged employees
* a culture of compliance versus a culture of accountability
* good ideas don't get heard
* groups create silos. Each department only thinks of itself. So you have a lack of alignment between the whole organization.
* people fight over limited resources
* people might actively sabotage each other or the organization
* people will probably take advantage of the system.
* losing repeat customers or vendors
* slowing or declining sales
* low productivity
* a weakening reputation for your brand due to negative comments on social media

**Do any of these organizational costs look familiar to you?**

Here’s an example of how just one of these costs could work:

If people feel like the company takes advantage of them instead of caring for them as employees, that's your culture. Your employees could be feeling: “That's how we think and act around here.” So that's how they'll probably start behaving and acting. So they might try to take advantage of the organization rather than taking care of it.

On the other hand, if they feel like: “This company takes care of me. Why would I seek to do it any harm? Why would I bite the hand that feeds me?” If they have this positive attitude, then you know you’re on the right track!

Your Organization’s Awareness of Your Problems

Are companies aware of their toxic culture issues? I’d say Yes, and no. Sadly, I think our lives are so filled with distrust, divisiveness, fear that we have come to believe that that's just the way life is. Your people might think that there's no other way, no alternative exists.

It’s sort of like asking a fish what water is.

So while people may be aware of how unhappy or unfulfilled they may be at work, they may be resigned to thinking: “That's just the way it is. And I don't know why it is that way or what to do about it.”

However, when I start talking about how things *could be* in their group and *why* their organization is the way it is - lightbulbs seem to go off, and people start to resonate with that.

When people *know* what to do and *want* to improve their situation, they will make the changes necessary to create a healthy company culture.

I like to help them discover why things are the way they are in their organization and what they can do to change it.

Has Your Company Tried To Fix Your Toxic Culture…And Failed?

I see this happen in organizations more than you might think!

A widespread scenario is for an individual to go off to some conference or training program. And then she comes back to her unhealthy company, with its sick culture, and she tries to share the ideas that she has learned. But the culture is so pervasive that this one person can't change the whole culture. So she comes back excited to bring the new ideas to the group. But she’s fighting a mass of current corporate culture that is just too strong and pervasive for one person or even a small group of people to resist.

Plus, no one else in the organization had the experience these people had, so it’s difficult for others to relate to it at all.

Or another reason it fails is that you have someone who's not at the senior level, trying to create change. And the leadership team above this person doesn’t buy in to support or reinforce the change. So the worthy cause will die because of lack of support.

The approach that I take is a whole system holistic approach. The Symbio Way involves everyone in the organization, from top management down to entry-level employees. There has to be buy-in from the top, but everyone's going to be a part of this cultural transformation!

Is There Any Hope For Dysfunctional Organizations?

Dysfunction can run so deep in a company or group that it’s hard to imagine how the group can survive.

Perhaps they have such fantastic products or competitive advantages that a lot can go wrong inside the organization, yet the company can still perform reasonably well.

But eventually, toxic company culture will catch up to the group and cause its demise.

Of course, I believe there is always hope for organizations with complex internal issues. I’ve helped dozens of groups to work together and create a healthy environment for their whole team.

By studying this Field Manual and going through all the processes and methods mentioned, you’re sure to turn things around for your company. You’ll experience how we include the *whole organization* in future chapters, so everyone is “paddling in the same direction” by the end of this process.

I’m going to end this section with a great analogy of a track team versus a basketball team. I might be a sprinter on a track team, and my buddy Joe is a shot putter. Someone else is a long-distance runner. So we go to the track meet, and I have no idea what you're doing. And it doesn't matter. I'm just running as fast as I can. And you're throwing as far as you can throw. We are all independent of each other. And we come together at the end of the meet, and we hope that we somehow beat the other team.

Whereas with the basketball team, we're all in the same game. We must *work together* if we’re going to succeed. And if we lose, we all lose. If we win, we all win.

So the question is, do you want your organization to be more like the track team - where everyone does the best job they can but separate from and oblivious to what others in the group are doing? Or more like the basketball team that has to work cohesively together to achieve the team’s goals?

It’s your choice from here! I would suggest being like the basketball team 😊.