

Unhealthy Organizations & Toxic Leaders

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Don't be surprised if, when you read this, it sounds like where you work. Wherever we speak about these issues, people immediately recognize the place where they work now or the place where they used to work. The lack of anything resembling a healthy organization in the human services field at this moment is so endemic that when someone comes up to us after a talk and asks "How do you know so precisely the place where I work?!", we respond, it's not where *you* work – it's where *everyone* works. Sure, misery

does love company, but it is also oddly empowering to know that the problems are not unique and that there are explanations that go beyond one's own individual situation that may provide some alternative means to change those situations.

Because a system is alive, it can become unhealthy just as our individual bodies can become ill. The illnesses that systems manifest can be acute and short-term, or chronic and long-term. Living systems can become self-destructive and suicidal and they can even die. Later we will look at the state of health of the mental health system. For now let's briefly review some ideas formulated over the last half century about the ways in which organizations can manifest dysfunction and disability.

As in the case with diagnoses of individual problems, more attention has been paid to defining what comprises an unhealthy organization than describing a healthy one. Some of the earliest explanations were psychodynamic in origins, from describing the organization as an environmental mother so that when an organization breaks down, the effects are not dissimilar to maternal breakdown: *"its containing function is destroyed. The safety provided by the external frame is replaced by a sense of danger, and primitive anxieties and defense mechanisms abound"* (p. 254) [55]. Erich Fromm described "socially patterned defects" wherein *"the individual shares a defect with so many others that he is not aware of it as a defect, and his security is not threatened by the experience of being different, of being an outcast"* (p. 15) [56].

Unhealthy organizations have a great deal in common and have been variously referred to as "the declining organization"[57], the "neurotic organization"[58], the "snakepit organization" [59], the "addictive organization" [60], or the "high fear organization" [61]. Whatever the term used, there is a general air of degradation and a sense that everything is always falling apart and one must be very careful to make sure that it does not fall on you. There is a general lack of energy, low motivation and low morale among the people in the organization. Organizational goals and standards are not generally

agreed upon by the employees, and frequently the stated goals are not consistent with what actually occurs, although this discrepancy is never directly confronted.

The atmosphere of routine boredom and unhappiness is interspersed with periods of crisis that create intense feelings and allow people to momentarily work together for the common good, but this commonality is rapidly eroded with the return to business-as-usual, until the next crisis occurs. This is not unlike what repetitively traumatized individuals experience when they become addicted to trauma as a result of chronic hyperarousal. There is a repetitive, reoccurring pattern of behavior and the general attitude of the staff is that “nothing really changes here”. Learning from the past does not appear to happen and there may be a loss of corporate memory for events that could be instructive, were they to be recalled. Change efforts are met with a passive resistance that tends to chase off competent leaders, leaving less confident and less competent leadership in its wake. There is a lack of transparency and an air of secrecy, even about events that could easily be aired publicly and openly. Ultimately, this is an environment that can lead to dishonesty and ethical deterioration.

Toxic Leaders

Such an unhealthy environment lends itself to the emergence of what have been described as “toxic leaders” [62]. Toxic leaders are subtly or overtly abusive, violating the basic standards of human respect, courtesy, and rights of the people who report to them. They tend to be power-hungry and appear to feed off of the use and abuse of the power they have. They play to people’s basest fears, stifle criticism and teach followers never to question their judgment or actions. They lie to meet their own ends and tend to subvert processes of the system that are intended to generate a more honest and open environment. They compete with rather than nurture other leaders, including potential successors and tend to use divide-and-conquer strategies to set people against each other.

In order to distract attention from their own misbehavior, toxic leaders will not hesitate to identify scapegoats and then direct followers’ aggression against the designated scapegoat rather than themselves. They frequently promote incompetence, corruption, and cronyism and exploit systems for personal gain [62]. We both have seen our share of toxic leaders in organizations. In for-profit companies, toxic leaders may eventually be extruded because of their detrimental effect on worker morale and ultimately on the bottom-line. Unfortunately, in the public and non-profit sector, toxic leaders can hide for a very long time because their impact is often less directly tied to inefficiencies or negative behavior on the part of workers. Instead, the worker becomes the problem. Additionally, the lack of ability to consistently judge outcomes based on worker or consumer satisfaction tends to create situations where it is less clear exactly what managers are accountable for. And command-and-control agendas within organizations support behavior that often leads to toxic behavior on the part of leaders.

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