

Yay! :-) It's time to go to work



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If you woke up this morning with a smile and couldn't wait to get to work, then you can probably stop reading this article. If not, the next 750 words might help you improve how you feel about work, your ability to think creatively and your overall productivity.

Bold claim? Bear with me whilst we look at some of the symptoms of dysfunction in the normal workplace (as opposed to those relating to change or commercial distress), consider typical causes and then bring focus to how employees at any pay-grade can improve the situation. If you're wondering why you should bother, then consider that this affects your job security, chances for promotion or salary increase and how happy you feel outside work.

Symptoms of normal dysfunction

Those individuals with sight of management information will have a variety of ways of telling that the business is working sub-optimally, but there are three types of symptom which will be obvious to employees at any level: environmental, emotional and cultural.

Environmental symptoms relate to how the office environment presents. If there is a perennial problem of litter in the car park, adjacent grass or garden areas are unkempt, or common areas are looking tired, then this negatively impacts on how employees feel, as well as how visitors & passers-by view the organisation. Over time people normalise their surroundings and stop noticing dirty kitchens, bathrooms and/or toilets, but these still dramatically affect staff morale and productivity.

Emotional symptoms relate to how you feel at work and can be thought of as the absence of positivity or the presence of negativity. The absent smile, a lack of belonging or camaraderie, or the sense that your input is not valued; frequently asking yourself why you are working here, angst between individuals or departments, or an amorphous worry that someone will



discover your failings. These all sap the energy that you are able to bring to your work, or derive from it. More fundamental symptoms occur where pressure frequently morphs into stress, which over time can lead to burnout or other health complaints. Critically, behaviour is driven by how we feel (which in turn is driven by our cognitions), so how individuals are feeling can have a tangible effect on an organisation.

Cultural symptoms relate to the 'way that we do stuff around here' and show up in a variety of ways. At a simple level these include low levels of 'recognition for work well done', infrequent discretionary effort (people helping others by working beyond their stated role) and lack of opportunity to learn or develop. More complex symptoms include managers avoiding difficult conversations (thus allowing issues to fester), high absence or staff turnover rates, and high error rates through poor attention or decision-making.

Root causes

Each organisation is a unique entity so its dysfunction will have built up for a variety of reasons around its heritage and otherwise successful business model. These range from choices around its products or services and customer segments, to the inimitable ways that it produces and delivers one to the other. However, each organisation is also simply a collection of individuals, so the real causes (and the solutions) are likely to have their roots in the relationships that manifest between people. On this basis there is an elegant simplicity to the problem that exists: high barriers to communication and low levels of trust. Address these issues and the organisation is better placed to solve all manner of strategic challenges.

What can you do, today?

It is important to realise that, no matter your role, you can affect low level organisational change... and that even small changes will have a positive impact on how you feel. Start by noting down the obvious symptoms, how these make you feel and what changes you would like to see. This will help to clarify the challenge and act as a reference against which to measure progress.

The likelihood is that other people around you will have similar feelings, but they too will have normalised them. Draw your team-mates into conversation and share how these symptoms make you feel. Involve them in figuring out how the challenges might be resolved, either through direct application of effort (blitzing litter, smiling more, thanking colleagues for input) or through influence on others (involving management to re-task cleaners, strengthen understanding between departments or address issues which have festered).

The process of sharing your feelings demonstrates trust, whilst involving others in solving challenges starts to build camaraderie through lowered barriers to communication... both are iterative. Small movements in one area will positively affect other areas.

Building and maintaining relationships of any kind takes constant hard work, but you'll be surprised how quickly you will be smiling when you wake up.

Have a great day!