

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: FUNCTIONAL DYSFUNCTION

We could spend all day talking about functional dysfunction in organizations. I know you have seen it—ragged tempers, leaders who take credit for other people’s work, leaders who don’t do their jobs for one reason or another. Bad behavior is all too often accepted in senior personnel because it is easier than dealing with the consequences of holding someone accountable.

Ignoring bad behavior will seem especially easiest when other people fill in the gaps, for example, making excuses for bad behavior or doing work that wasn’t getting done. It is not uncommon for direct reports to form a coalition around an ineffective leader. They figure out what mood the leader is in, adjust themselves to whatever comes their way, and then they talk about their boss amongst themselves, or even with their boss’s peers if they can find a sympathetic ear. Everyone wonders why this person still has a job. Why won’t the “higher ups” do something about it? Why won’t they hold the person accountable? This is on everyone’s minds even if nobody talks about it. And it takes its toll in many ways.

It may seem like living with dysfunction is more convenient than dealing with it, but that is an illusion. Dysfunction can be a brewing cauldron of deep and diabolical unforeseen, unheard and unseen consequences. Overlooking corporate dysfunction is like ignoring a minor toothache. It won’t get better on its own and it will get worse if ignored. Companies pay a price for functional dysfunctionality. Like the toothache, it is a ticking timebomb. Our leadership effectiveness tip this month is to not disregard the ticking timebomb.

Here are 6 aspects of your company that are negatively affected by allowing functional dysfunction:

1. **Retention.** Turnover among your best people. Great people may put up with this for a while. However, at some point, they will likely lose energy and enthusiasm for their jobs and start looking for a new place to work.
2. **Reputation.** Leaders who don’t step up lose credibility. People talk, and word gets around, even if it’s whispered. Dysfunction means not functioning normally. This is visible to the workforce and to customers, too.
3. **Motivation.** You can expect a lack of desire to improve on the part of those who are peers or direct reports of the dysfunctional leader. *Why should I change if that leader does not have to change?*
4. **Morale.** Allowing dysfunction in leadership is contrary to a psychologically safe culture. People dancing around dysfunction often react with behaviors such as sarcasm or they act out due to the pain of dealing with dysfunction.
5. **Customer service.** You can expect lower customer service scores. There is a huge correlation between satisfied employees and satisfied customers.
6. **Safety.** Increased safety concerns may depend on your line of business. But in any situation where safety is at stake, this is where functional dysfunction is most dangerous. Numbers 1 through 5 above have to do with bottom line and quality of life. Safety is where the rubber hits the road. If a leader’s incompetence jeopardizes safety, it can never be tolerated.

Great leaders know how important it is to take care of small stuff, and not ignore hard stuff in real time so that problems do not get worse. Great employees expect this from their leadership.

Is it possible any of your teams exist in the puddle of functional dysfunction? Are you aware of any diminished credibility any of your leaders experience with their teams or peers? What steps can you take to eliminate it?