

Workplaces from Hell

by

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Protect yourself from hellish workplace stress with confident composure.

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All of your co-workers are fools. You must learn to pity and tolerate them. (Dilbert)

Dilbert's comic advice can help lighten a stressful work situation. However, when you work in a dysfunctional place, it is tough to laugh it off. Let's look at examples of dirty workplace politics, how to dial down personal stresses, and how to dial up *confident composure* to experience your work potential.

Dirty Workplace Politics from Top to Bottom

When top management sets a tyrannical tone, this ripples through the organization. Every day you see betrayals, deceptions, and manipulations. Stress saturates the setting. People cover their derrieres. With the manager's eye-wink approval, sub-groups add to this mad medley. This is a workplace from hell. Here are three examples from my files.

A Case of Pathological Management

Joe worked at a government facility. When lunching with friends, security handed him an envelope. He read the letter. Management charged him with staple abuse. Joe allegedly stapled a two-page document with five staples. The facility attorney prosecuted Joe. The personnel director heard the case. Joe called a witness. The witness admitted stapling the two documents with five staples: "It is I sir," she said. "I am the staple abuser." Nevertheless, the personnel director found Joe guilty of staple abuse. He recommended a five-day suspension without pay. The facility director approved and wrote this to Joe: "You received a fair and impartial hearing." Later, an arbitrator overturned the ruling and rebuked the director. Joe retrieved his lost pay. Eventually the facility director had his comeuppance. He faced charges of perpetrating a pattern of lies and deceptions and a failure to perform at the high level of efficiency and effectiveness expected of a senior manager. He resigned. Putting on his Mickey Mouse watch, he went to work as a school guidance counselor.

A Case of Immaturity and Incompetence

Lance ran a non-profit organization. He was ineffective. Karen was the assistant administrator. To sidetrack others from reviewing his work, Lance blamed Karen for fund-raising failures and morale problems. In a phantasmagorical scene, he fabricated email messages under Karen's name. The messages denigrated the organization. Two *trusted staff* supported the deception. Each wrote to Lance and claimed to have received the email from Karen. Using his staff's complaints, Lance charged Karen with publicly disparaging the organization. Her emotional denials made Karen sound unstable, thus supporting Lance's case. He opined that he needed to replace her with a competent assistant.

The trustees got an unmarked envelope with email messages attached to an anonymous note saying that Karen was wrecking the organization. The trustees asked me to investigate. The organization soon got a new executive director.

A Case of Troublesome Co-Workers

Competent high-integrity executives are worth their weight in gold. But even in the best of organizations you can find political shenanigans that distract from productivity and diminish morale. Contributors to this chilling practices include: (1) *mind parasites* who steal ideas and credit themselves; (2) *steamrollers* who run roughshod

over others; (3) *fawning syncopates* who suck up to get the easier assignments; (4) *backstabbers* who gain advantages by covert misrepresentations; (5) *dilatory workers* who dump their work on others; (6) *limelighters* who push for attention; (7) *bystanders* who "go along to get along" and refuse to take ethical stands. (These descriptive categories are for convenience. An individual's full range of motivations and behaviors are too complex to squeeze into one category. But some behaviors will stand out.)

Getting the upper hand over people playing the above dirty political games is a subject for a book. Until the book is written, your best place to start managing stress begins with you.

Protect Yourself

Each day when you awaken and go to work it feels like you are moving toward a dark horizon before entering a storm. When the workday ends, the clouds follow you home.

You feel burdened with stress. Yet you like the benefits and pay. You have no new job opportunity now. So you decide to stay another day.

In Sartre's *No Exit*, "Hell is other people." The characters in this play have twisted relationships. When they judge themselves based on how others relate to them, they find Hell. Sartre notes that freedom from this prison takes executing responsible choices. However, it's easier to dither and procrastinate.

Are you stuck in workplace hell? In the theater of your mind, you are the playwright. You can revise scripts that distress you, and feel in charge of yourself. You can avoid procrastination by acting *as if* you were in control of yourself.

If you choose to face your distresses, start with finding and defusing your distressing thoughts first. By changing this thinking you can broaden your perspective and better see your opportunities. Let's start with defusing a major form of distressing thinking, and then how to develop your positive thinking resources.

A toxic workplace is bad enough. A secondary problem is tormenting yourself over what you don't like. When automatic, this thought habit is often worse than the original problem. I call this double trouble. For example, you work under a tyrannical boss. That's an understandable strain. Believing that you are doomed to feel stressed, well, that's a doubly troubling depressing thought. Feeling depressed over feeling depressed, helpless over feeling helpless, and anguished over anguish are other forms of double trouble.

Here are two thoughts on double troubles:

1. you know you are not helpless when you can change your mental script from helpless thinking to figuring out how to cope;
2. you can work in a dysfunctional work setting and judge the setting accurately without judging yourself negatively. For more information on double troubles, see chapter three in:

http://www.amazon.com/Cognitive-Behavioral-Workbook-Anxiety-Step-/dp/1572245727/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1302094812&sr=1-1

Prioritize these three cognitive-emotive competencies to command yourself in stressful work settings:

1. *Change perspective*. Can you exercise your positive resources without dwelling on what others are doing? Can you think about your thinking and change perspective? Can you find a better place to work? Based on your answers to these questions, what are you prepared to do?

2. *Acquire enlightened acceptance*. Some realities are relatively constant while others are in flux. A tendency to double-trouble yourself is a changeable constant. In developing *enlightened acceptance* you change from a pessimistic to a realistic optimism perspective. You realize that you are not responsible for your human tendency to double trouble yourself. You are responsible for self-correcting. You are not responsible for others' destabilizing ways. You are responsible for protecting yourself.

3. *Put yourself on a path of confident composure*. Play the role of a person with *confident composure*. This starts with the idea that only you can directly command you. Here are three self-commanding steps: (1) strip away self-defeating thinking; (2) practice your reasoning resources; (3) *will* yourself to persist. Your psychological resources are now fully available to meet challenges and handle conflicts. (*Protect Yourself from Anger* expands on the concept of *confident composure*. I'll post this blog on April 15, 2011.)

Want to escape a workplace from hell? Find psychological and practical strategies for getting a new job here:

http://www.amazon.com/Fearless-Job-Hunting-Psychological-Strategies/dp/1572248343/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1302095024&sr=1-1

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