

Your Role in Our Dysfunctional World

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Wouldn't it be great if everything you counted on in life worked as it should? Does it bother you when you want to use your computer and you can't link with the internet? When somebody makes a promise and fails to follow through, does that irritate you?

I remember when I first heard the words "dysfunctional family." I wondered why I had never heard about "functional families." Do you know anyone who comes from a fully functional family?

We live in a dysfunctional world. Oh, sure, there are principles (like gravity and other laws of physics and chemistry) that predictably govern many events. But when you throw in the foibles of human beings, things begin to go awry. If people are involved, the outcomes are rarely predictable.

I'm sure some professor has studied the causes of dysfunction in our world. If that kind of research exists, I don't have access to it. But I did sit down earlier this week and pondered the causes of organizational dysfunction. I'd be very open to any reader contacting me and adding to this list.

People are selfish; we do whatever will help us achieve what we want. We're also jealous. When others obtain an objective that they want, we often want it, too. (By the way, when I say "people" in this article, I admit that I'm part of that population!)

People are driven by their emotions a lot more than they are by logic. Do you doubt this? Just pay attention to conversations and listen to how often the word "feel" appears in the dialogue.

Even if people think logically, one person's logic doesn't necessarily match up with someone else's logic. We presume others think the same as we do, but there are lots of ways to perceive situations!

We all have some degree of insecurity. Several weeks ago, I wrote an article entitled "I'm Just Not Good Enough." (Look for it on my website in the "Article Archives.") Ever-present obstacles loom large, causing us to lose hope, confidence, and commitment.

Speaking of obstacles, many temptations work to distract us, destroying our focus. And we are quite skilled at placing blame on those distractions as reasons for our failure to meet our commitments.

Have I provided enough reasons to explain why so many times individuals fall short of your expectations? Interestingly, when others fail, you judge their limitations based on the negative effect that their behaviors have. When you happen to mess up, however, you evaluate your intentions instead. Feeling your motives were honorable is usually enough to justify your belief that others should give you the benefit of the doubt. (See "Fundamental Attribution Error" on my website.)

Is that a double standard? You bet it is. Is it intentional? Of course not. Do you really do that? Yes, you really judge others more harshly than you judge yourself. If you don't believe it, ask someone close to you to provide some examples.

All the above is provided to get your attention. I don't claim that this information is exhaustive. I just want to point out that many times, circumstances are not going to resolve as you had anticipated.

So, what can you do to minimize dysfunction in your organization? Well, despite the hopeless picture I've painted to this point, there are leaders like you out there every day extracting amazing results from their teams.

First, you need strong contributors. If you've made some hiring mistakes, those individuals who have proven repeatedly that they are not reliable should be invited to pursue their careers elsewhere.

The rest of the willing and able members of your team need a compelling vision to keep their inspiration at a high level. You'll have to repeatedly communicate that vision because every team member is living in the grueling reality of right now. Our imaginations fade with the repetitive setbacks described above. Distractions from that desirable future state are interjecting themselves all the time.

Also, you need to spend time with each individual seeking to learn what's important to that person in life. We all have the freedom to align our energies with other organizations. You need to understand, and perhaps help that person understand, why he or she chooses to expend time working with you.

Then, as much as possible, you'll want to align the work that needs to be done with the individuals who love doing that kind of work. The more people can do what they seem designed to do, the more effective your organization will be.

As the work progresses, you should keep people informed. Any surprises can be extremely demoralizing. That's hard for many leaders, because we subliminally think that if we understand current events, everyone does. But that's not so. You must at times be a news commentator. (See "Leaders as News-Casters" on my website.)

One more thing. Be prepared for setbacks. No one likes to see them occur, but they happen. Why? Because we live in a dysfunctional world!

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