



Innovation Management

Toxic Workplace Factors that Quash
Innovation and How to Tackle Them with
Evidence-based Practices

CQ Dossier | Evidence-based Innovation Management

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CQ Net is the evidence-based management (EBM) team learning platform. Learn strategies & interventions that have been supported by scientific research. This CQ Dossier is part of the Evidence-Based Management Learning Team "How to utilize individual differences to boost your employees' and organization's capacity for innovation?"

Executive summary

A well-developed, well-run organization helps its employees to thrive. Under supportive, skilled management, individuals feel secure, trust that their organization values them, and feel liberated to raise concerns and propose new solutions to existing problems. A warm, relaxed, but stimulating professional climate tends to encourage innovative thinking as a result.

However, numerous organizations feature policies, structures, or cultural aspects that isolate creative people and discourage them from sharing their greatest insights. Even if an organization's success hinges on employees' ability to deliver insightful new ideas, aspects of how the organization may be actively stifling the development and sharing of novel approaches. Just as research has documented the factors that promote creativity in the workplace, a large body of scientific work has demonstrated that certain organizational features are "creativity killers" that an astute manager should do everything in their power to address. In particular, if your workplace features rigid hierarchies, a fixation on short-term deadlines, or hostility, serious changes should be made to transform your organization into a creatively nourishing place.

Rigid hierarchies and highly structured organizations tend to undermine innovation

If your organization is highly structured, with a great deal of separation between lower-level employees and upper-level management, a lot of creativity is likely going unshared (Teece, 1996). When divisions based on status are firm and sizeable, lower-level employees are less likely to speak up to air concerns or propose new solutions to problems. Collaboration between departments and between status levels is also less common because it is so difficult from individuals on different "rungs" to connect with one another (Wan, Williamson, & Yin, 2015).

In many organizational settings, the perspective and knowledge base of a lower-level employee is wholly different from that of a higher-level employee. Hence, someone

lower in status may be able to frame a professional problem in a way that someone higher in the hierarchy would never consider. However, if an organization treats its lower-level workers as dispensable or lacking in value, these creative insights may never get shared (Vuori & Huy, 2016). If they are shared, they may be disregarded by individuals with more status in the organization.

Status signals such as dress codes, office styles and different benefits reinforce hierarchies

Furthermore, in a highly structured organization, upper-level managers may be threatened by the innovation potential of those beneath them. Highly structured workplaces are typically filled with “status signals”, to further alienate those above from those below – including different dress codes, different office styles, and different benefits, to name a few (Ashkenas et al, 2015). In this structured environment, those with status may fear being overtaken by those who lack status – and maintaining the hierarchy may become more important than producing and promoting ideas that benefit the company. For all these reasons, rigid hierarchical structures can be toxic for a forward-looking organization.

Reducing hierarchy

As a manager seeking to promote innovation, you can work to remove barriers between employees higher and lower in the hierarchy. Provide your organization with social and professional opportunities where all employees are treated as equals; give lower-status employees greater responsibilities, and more power, whenever possible (Naranjo-Valencia et al, 2016). Remove organizational signifiers of status, such as different uniforms or name tags, and reorganize floors or office layouts so that people of different backgrounds and status levels can interact with one another more freely. It may take a while for employees of different status levels to interact in a collaborative, productive manner, but by taking these steps you can facilitate that shift.

Pressure to deliver short-term results is considered as creativity killer

Generally, research shows workplace stress to be a “creativity killer”. If an individual is anxious about their workplace performance, or preoccupied with short-term deadlines, they are unlikely to engage in the abstract, complex thinking required to generate a truly mold-breaking approach (Tongchaiprasit & Ariyabuddhiphongs, 2016). Frequent short-term [goals](#) can distract employees from an organization’s “big picture” – individuals may come to prioritize quick fixes and traditional ways of doing business, rather than looking ahead to the future and generating novel, challenging methods. Frequent time-intensive stress can also reduce creativity by eroding mental functioning; few people are capable of being innovative when they are sleep-deprived and exhausted (Oreg & Berson, 2015).

Reducing short term pressure

Research has clearly demonstrated that a fast-pace, short-term-results oriented way of doing business is toxic for creativity. Unfortunately, a high-stress, high-speed approach remains endemic to many industries and organizations. As a manager, you can work to combat this by reframing goals in a more abstract, long-term way. Rather than evaluating employees by examining how quickly they can complete a task, encourage them to think carefully about their processes (Ozkaya et al, 2015). Reward abstract thinkers who introduce novel questions or propose different means of doing business (Ceci & Kumar, 2016). When possible, collaborate with an organization’s leadership to set forward-thinking goals, and place emphasis on effort and process rather than immediate outcomes.

Workplace hostility can lead to low creativity, poor communication and a lack of collaboration

In the field of romantic relationship psychology, one of the main predictors of divorce is contempt. A married couple may experience a great deal of conflict, or may differ with one another on extremely important life issues, but so long as both parties respect and

listen to one another, it remains possible for the relationship to thrive (Creasey, 2002). Similarly, an organization can remain vibrant and creative in the face of conflict and disagreement; it is only when hostility is shown that deep problems may arise (Sanders, Wisse, & Van Yperen, 2015).

A hostile or contemptuous workplace is one in which ideas are mocked, dismissed, or ignored intentionally (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007). Managers may exhibit low respect for their employees; employees may compete in a toxic way with one another, and take steps to undercut one another's progress. Organizational policies may reflect a lack of interest in employees' wellbeing, or may be designed to deliver productivity or save money, but not to leave anyone feeling satisfied. All of these elements of workplace hostility can lead to low creativity, poor communication, and a lack of collaboration.

Reducing hostility

Emotional skills are necessary to prevent or reduce hostility in a workplace (Cortina & Magley, 2009). An effective manager must be able to understand employees' emotional reactions to frustrating events, and must be willing to validate hurt feelings, admit fault, and communicate openly when needed. Strong listening skills must also be developed on all levels of the team. By making your organization a more openly communicative, supportive place, you can reduce hostile interactions and hurt feelings. [Psychological Safety](#) is a concept that can be used as guideline on how to create a safe and supportive work environment. However, as long as an organization's policies reflect hostility or disinterest in workers' wellbeing, a pressing threat to creativity will remain.

Key take-aways

- Innovation is discouraged when an organization is rigidly hierarchical, focused on short-term, deadlines, or filled with hostility
- To reduce hierarchy, restructure your organization and reduce power imbalances, so that employees of all levels can collaborate and communicate
- To reduce a short-term goal focus, evaluate employees' in terms of their effort and adaptability, not their minute-by-minute success
- To reduce workplace hostility, treat employees with kindness and respect, and practice active listening and emotional processing skills

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