

Has Cynicism Infected Your Organization?

Harvard Business Review | Kandi Wiens | May 25, 2023



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Jason* began executive coaching with me just as his organization was coming out of a year-end crunch time, which had been exacerbated by the sudden departure of his team lead. Things had gotten “shockingly ugly” at work, he told me, with flaring tempers, power struggles, and meetings that devolved into name-calling and public character assassinations. Upper management didn’t intervene, choosing to put off “personnel issues” until after everyone hit their year-end goals. In addition to his increased workload, Jason had taken it upon himself to try to act as a peacekeeper between his stressed-out colleagues, only to find himself caught in the crossfire. Feeling hurt, angry, and unsupported, he began to distance himself from his coworkers and increasingly found himself dreading work. By the time he reached out to me for coaching, he was demoralized, disengaged, and burned out.

Jason’s story highlights one of the primary but least-understood aspects of burnout: workplace cynicism. Recently, I’ve witnessed an uptick in workers who are suffering from this disillusionment and a loss of trust in their organizations. Leaders need to be aware of the causes and effects of workplace cynicism and take steps to create anti-cynical cultures.

The Dangers of Workplace Cynicism

While Jason's situation was a perfect storm of acute stressors that put him on the fast track to burnout, most burnout develops as a result of prolonged, unmanaged workplace stress, and most employees' stories are far less dramatic. That doesn't mean, however, that their experiences are any less painful, or the consequences any less urgent. Cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal pain, insomnia, depressive symptoms, fatigue, impaired immune function, and headaches are among the many negative effects that have been linked to burnout, and burned-out workers are more likely to miss work, experience lower job satisfaction, and underperform.

Here's how some of my clients, conference attendees, and research participants have described their current experience of work:

- "I'm just phoning it in at this point. My plan is to ride it out until my wife gets a promotion, and then quit." —Jochen, product manager
- "What's the point in trying? I don't feel like anything I do is making any kind of meaningful difference." —Adriana, nonprofit caseworker
- "The work we do ultimately doesn't matter. We keep arresting bad guys, but the prosecutors aren't doing their job and they're just putting the bad guys back out on the street. It's totally demoralizing." —Tony, police sergeant
- "Parent/guardian expectations of teachers have reached impossible and unethical heights. It deflates my energy and motivation to do the things I used to love." —Malinda, eighth grade teacher

While there is no single, universally accepted definition of burnout, experts generally agree that it is a workplace syndrome characterized by three core attributes: 1) energy depletion or exhaustion, 2) a cynical or negative attitude toward one's job, and 3) reduced professional efficacy, or the feeling that you're no longer productive or able to perform at your best.

That second attribute, workplace cynicism, may be the least-understood aspect of burnout in part because of its complexity. In contrast to exhaustion and diminished efficacy, whose causes and effects are relatively straightforward, cynicism can be caused by a number of workplace factors, and it can be expressed in a broad range of emotional states and behaviors.

In the earliest studies on burnout, cynicism was referred to as "depersonalization": the state of being excessively disconnected from the people one serves. It's not just a feeling of distance, however, but of being so mentally and emotionally removed that the people around you begin to lose their individuality and humanity. Human service providers who see their clients as a faceless stream of cases or managers who view their staff as data points on a spreadsheet are examples of workers suffering from depersonalization.

More recent research has broadened the experience to include a negative or inappropriate attitude toward clients, customers, or your job; irritability at work; a loss of idealism; and withdrawal or detachment from your job. As cynicism sets in, it can look like demotivation, pessimism, giving up, disengagement, indifference, hopelessness, anger, numbness, underperformance, feeling stuck, or a loss of trust.

However it manifests, it's important to remember that workplace cynicism isn't due to some sort of character flaw or being a "glass-half-empty" person. It originates from the workplace environment, not the individual. Many experts, in fact, see workplace cynicism and

depersonalization as a form of defensive coping: Becoming distant and withdrawn is a self-protective measure that places a buffer between an employee and the emotional exhaustion and energy depletion their job is causing. Even relentless optimists' protective measures can be broken down when they're exposed to high degrees of stress, especially when that stress continues unabated.

Cynicism is dangerous to both individual and organizational health. It can quickly overtake our thoughts, resulting in overwhelming negativity, irritability, and pessimism. The things at work that once brought us energy and joy now seem lackluster or insurmountably difficult, and relationships can sour as we become withdrawn, distrustful, or even, as we saw with Jason and his coworkers, uncharacteristically combative. Studies have shown that employees in the grip of cynicism have less trust in their colleagues, leaders, and organizations, poorer job performance, lower earning power, and higher rates of turnover. "As cynicism develops," burnout experts Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter tell us, "people shift from trying to do their very best to doing the bare minimum." Low engagement alone has cost the global economy \$7.8 trillion in lost productivity.

Cynicism can also spread rapidly throughout teams and organizations through a phenomenon known as "emotional contagion." Employees are more likely to "pick up, take on, and echo" the negative and critical attitudes of close coworkers, leaving everyone more stressed, less effective, and more vulnerable to burnout.

Of the three components of burnout, cynicism is the most powerful predictor of employees' intention to quit. And really, it's no wonder — when cynicism steals your motivation and prevents you from seeing a path to improvement, it's much easier to give up than try to change your work environment. Indeed, the loss of happy, highly engaged, and deeply motivated employees — either to quitting or to underperformance — is one of the most tragic consequences of workplace cynicism.

How to Create an Anti-Cynical Culture

As dire as all of this sounds, it is possible to improve even deep-seated cynicism — and better yet, to prevent it from infecting your organization in the first place. Here are some strategies to help reverse existing cynicism and to create an anti-cynical culture at work.

Attend to yourself first.

Leaders must have the self-awareness to monitor their own emotions and behaviors, and the self-regulation to project the positive emotions and behaviors they'd like to see in others. If you find that negativity, cynicism, or indifference are creeping in, take small, effective countermeasures to reconnect with optimism and hope. Limiting your news or social media consumption, writing down the things you're grateful for, speaking with a trusted advisor about your negative feelings, spending more time in nature or with loved ones, and focusing on the good in people rather than their faults are all ways to begin loosening the grip of cynicism.

To help shift his negative attitude, Jason made a list of his coworkers' strengths and endearing qualities, which allowed him to reconnect with positive memories and open up new lines of communication with his team.

Stop the cycle of negative emotional contagion.

If you find that others are engaging in cynical attitudes and behaviors (e.g., negativity, eye-rolling, gossiping, blaming, etc.), address it right away to stop the spread of negative emotional contagion. Set up a one-on-one to restate your expectations and explore what's driving this behavior — deep, empathetic listening can often assuage cynical feelings. With the employee's input and involvement, make changes to workplace conditions that may be causing the behavior.

Encourage and practice empathy.

Unlike cynicism, empathy (often referred to as the antithesis of cynicism) encourages us to see things from other people's perspectives, rather than from a limited viewpoint where we anticipate the worst from the people and experiences we encounter. Create an environment of empathy at work by getting to know your employees, welcoming their perspectives, and listening to their input. Don't ignore or put off their concerns — act on them.

Cultivate trust.

People at high-trust companies report 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 76% more engagement, and 40% less burnout than people at low-trust companies. Promote an environment of psychological safety where employees feel free to speak honestly about their feelings and ideas and to make mistakes without fear of shame or repercussion. (This also encourages innovation.) Resist the urge to micromanage, which communicates a lack of trust.

Practice transparency.

A Deloitte survey found that nearly half of cynical employees cited a lack of transparent communication as the key reason they were quitting. No one likes to feel left in the dark, especially when it comes to decisions that affect them, so share impactful decisions with employees and maintain open lines of communication. When setbacks or mistakes occur, own up to them and address them as an organization, rather than sweeping them under the rug.

Allow employees more control.

Cynicism and negativity often arise from a sense of helplessness and a lack of autonomy. If employees feel they have no control over when, where, or how they work, it erodes their sense of agency and their energy — and their hope that things can improve. Where possible, offer flexible work schedules and arrangements. Encourage employees to contribute ideas and help set direction, and give them ownership over their deliverables.

Remove uncertainty and ambiguity.

Uncertainty is one of the biggest causes of stress and anxiety, and ambiguity about objectives — what you're doing and why — can leave workers feeling directionless and devalued. Make sure your mission as well as your team and individual mandates are clear and achievable, and let employees know what they can expect from you, too.

Try micro-doses of positivity.

Changing an entire company's culture may be an impossible task, but you can inject micro-doses of positivity into work life that help alleviate stress and increase connection, engagement, and morale. Say thank you face to face. Buy lunch for your team. Celebrate wins together. Spontaneously announce that work is over at 3 p.m. and take the whole team out to bowl or play pool.

Or try Jason's practice of periodically leaving a note of gratitude on someone's desk. His team members felt acknowledged and appreciated, and the warm feelings it engendered allowed them to reset the emotional tone at work and begin healing damaged relationships.

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One of the best things about emotional contagion is that it works both ways, so it's just as easy to spread feelings of empathy, trust, appreciation, and genuine idealism. In a work environment where positivity has gone viral, cynicism doesn't stand a chance.

Editor's note: Names have been changed throughout to protect privacy.