Recognizing a Dysfunctional Environment

Dear Dr. Mazie,

I've been in right of way for eleven years and just recently switched jobs. I thought most work environments were similar, but my new agency is completely different from anything I have ever experienced. Their communication is so open and encouraging! Teams meet regularly and express their opinions, and everyone seems comfortable enough to disagree without any fear of consequences. It feels so very liberating, and I'm wondering why other agencies don't have a similar culture.

Jeannine in Iowa

It sounds like you have found a great place to work! I applaud the leadership of your agency and their ability to establish such a healthy work environment. It takes a real commitment to create and maintain a corporate culture that supports open and honest communication.

There are two basic types of workplace climates: functional and dysfunctional. Now that you find yourself in a functional workplace, it's easy to look back and see how it compares to a dysfunctional environment.

For the most part, everything trickles down from the top, so whatever style is preferred by management will be encouraged and perpetuated in the workplace. There are usually some basic rules established, but they are seldom written or verbalized. They are simply modeled by an organization's leadership. So let's break down the two types.

Dysfunctional Environment

In a dysfunctional workplace, negativity develops because individuals' thoughts, feelings and opinions are not respected. In general, there is arrogance displayed by upper management that they 'know it all' and don't need input from others, especially those in inferior positions. Conversation is guarded, indirect and there is an underlining fear – primarily a fear of losing your job if you speak freely about problems and concerns.

An interesting aspect of a dysfunctional communication climate is that it requires everyone to go along with the implied negative rules. Staff is not encouraged to speak up, so no one does. People hold back and put up with being discounted, devalued and ignored. It's difficult to understand why anyone would want to continue working in that kind of hostile environment.

What I've observed over the years is that someone willing to work where blatant negativism is a daily occurrence, has little faith or confidence in themselves. They may also be extremely good at minimizing and rationalizing the reality of the situation. I think part of this comes from wanting to hold on to a job at any cost, while others choose to ignore or overlook the negative atmosphere because they think it's probably the same everywhere else.

Functional Environment

A healthy functional environment reflects a management team that is confident, open-minded and encourages collaboration. Individuals are valued and respected for what they think and feel. Everyone is encouraged—and even rewarded—for bringing forward concerns or new perspectives. Management takes the time to listen to other perspectives before making final decisions. They recognize that solutions developed by a group or team are usually the best alternatives, much like the theory that two heads are better than one.

In a functional communication climate, people avoid making assumptions and believe in checking the facts before moving forward or overreacting. Gossip is not perpetuated, and rumors are always investigated, not acted upon. Honesty is considered the best policy, and no one fears repercussions from expressing themselves openly. Employees are comfortable speaking up, and clearly know that management would prefer to find out about a problem early on, rather than being surprised after it has exploded up into a full-blown crisis.

Make a Good Choice

It's good you brought up this topic because we all have choices. Only you can determine whether your current environment is helping or hurting your self-esteem and career opportunities.

As you work toward advancing your career, it is helps to know what to look for in a healthy work environment. With proper investigation and preparation, there is no reason why anyone should get stuck in a dysfunctional environment.

A nationally recognized speaker, workshop leader and trainer, Dr. Mazie Leftwich, Psy.D has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.