

Healing the Ailing Workplace

Jean McLendon



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I am a stranger in a strange land. You and I speak different languages. As a therapist, I deal with individuals, couples, families, teams, and small groups. As a teacher, I train my students to deal with people issues rather than technology. As a consultant, I deal with human systems— political, social, and cultural dynamics—rather than computer systems.

Despite our workaday differences, we all operate in human systems. My consulting work brings me to your demanding, highpressure work environments, where you face the coveted but challenging situation of overwhelming success. Your marketing departments portray you and your products as just what we all need to improve our performance and increase our sales. Everybody wants more for less, and faster.

In my practice, I see the results of your stressful work lives. All human systems—individuals, families, and companies—are vulnerable to such relentless pressure and uncertainty. Those who do not manage these demands get sick. Pressurized, chaotic settings can generate incredible accomplishments but over time may compromise the immune system and erode health. Fatigue, a major source of thought and judgment errors, sets in, and becomes chronic with insufficient relief and rest from resource depletion.

I offer a potential antidote: Understanding more about feelings and emotional needs will deepen your relationships, enrich your collaborations, build your creative problemsolving skills, and help you develop your leadership abilities. Knowing how to build and sustain quality relationships will facilitate your personal and professional development—but you need a healthy environment.

Does your workplace offer a healthy environment or a sick one? Does it meet critical human requirements? If not, what can you do about a cure?

Does your workplace offer a healthy environment, meeting critical human requirements? If not, what can you do?

PRESENTING SYMPTOMS

To determine if your workplace is ailing, explore and assess how it deals with pain, pleasure, problems, plans, performance, and power. How we experience and deal with these factors influences whether we view our past negatively or positively, and whether we nurture or suppress vitality in our present and future.

A healthy system supports expression of its members' pain.

People get their toes stepped on at work. It hurts, and this gets expressed in one way or another. In a climate of acceptance and understanding, people will more likely talk out their feelings than act them out. Apathy is a good example of acting out a feeling rather than talking it out. Suggesting that someone should not feel the way they feel commonly results in poor conflict resolution and fractured relationships.

A healthy system supports the experience and expression of pleasure.

In fact, it celebrates its members' successes and fortunes. If you want to let someone know you really care, let yourself get high on their high. Celebratory rituals and spontaneous appreciation and acknowledgment build success on success.

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A healthy system does not freak out over problems.

Problems present opportunities for collaboration and creativity—they invite change. Resolving problems is the primary way a system builds capability and confidence. Avoiding problems stifles learning. Management strategies that respond to problems by seeking fault create firewalls that block the surfacing of problems. Such management subtly encourages mediocrity.

A healthy system enjoys making plans.

Strategic planning that lets participants express their hopes fosters both formal and informal selforganizing. Connections and paths emerge that give people visions of possible futures and invite support, collaboration, and contribution. Plans should be guideposts, not trenches that prohibit redirection and review. Successful outcomes depend on genuine commitment to the plans but also depend on mechanisms for correction, modification, and expansion. As my mother used to say, “Plans are only plans.” I knew she took seriously any plans she made with me; when they changed, it was for good reason. Healthy systems value accountability, not rigidity.

Healthy systems know that the broader the base of empowerment, the better.

A healthy system supports all members learning about and having power.

Power is positive energy, dynamic and variable. Individual or group power directly relates to the quantity and quality of relationships. Few or weak relationships mean an absence of power—powerlessness is the absence of viable connections. There is no more potent resource than power.

Since power derives its energy from connection, it requires responsibility to those connections. You cannot learn consideration, regard, and mutuality if you never experience power. Healthy systems foster opportunities to develop connections and contacts, thereby creating power among members who know the value of relationships and have the courage and competence to risk contact.

Healthy systems know that the broader the base of empowerment, the better.

A healthy system notices and monitors its members' performance.

Members know how they are doing and that they can count on appreciation and help. Healthy workplaces offer genuine encouragement, coaching and training, and positive reinforcement. They expect highquality performance, and acknowledge it. They do not expect lowquality performance; when it happens, they recognize it and offer support.

ARE YOU A CARRIER?

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FREEDOM IS A PROCESS

When we begin to genuinely care about ourselves, we have something special to offer ourselves and others. We then become capable of what Virginia Satir called the “five freedoms:”

- To see and hear what is here now instead of what should be, was, or will be
- To say what you feel and think instead of what you should
- To feel what you feel instead of what you think you ought to
- To ask for what you want instead of waiting for permission
- To take risks on your own behalf instead of choosing to be secure and not “rocking the boat”

When we claim and develop these freedoms, we can most effectively help others. When we don't, we are carriers of oppression. I am not saying we must have our own house in order before we have something to offer others. I am saying that if we are blind to our own disorder, we will not respond effectively to stress—ours and others'.

THE CONGRUENT CURE

If you find yourself in a sick workplace and you suspect you may be a carrier, what can you do about it? Owning the five freedoms lets us develop healthy relationships and thus achieve “congruence,” both inner and interpersonal. Six steps move us toward congruence; these apply to individuals and systems, and they begin with you.

1. *Awareness*. Become aware of your personal experience; let yourself feel what you know to be true.

2. *Acceptance*. Allow yourself both mercy and choice. Accept where you are, and don't berate yourself for not being someplace else. Tap into your wisdom, and acknowledge you do the best you can, just as everybody does.

3.