

Personal Enrichment

Does Your Company Need Family Therapy?

How Companies Are Like Families

Like a family, a company is a group of people who have an ongoing relationship with one another. Companies have several things in common with families:

1. Families have distinct ways of communicating and degrees of togetherness. For example:
 - Communication may be overt or covert.
 - Relationships tend to be enmeshed (too close; overly involved) or disengaged (not at all close; uninvolved).
 - Boundaries may be described as diffuse (extreme togetherness), rigid (extreme separateness), or clear (ideal and appropriate).
2. There are unwritten rules which family members or employees must follow in order to survive and thrive in the system. For example, in an organization, the rules might be:
 - Never call the boss by her first name.
 - Always be at your desk by 8:00 A.M.
 - Never eat lunch with a person of lower status.
 - Don't place any personal items on your desk or credenza.
3. Unresolved issues from the past have an effect on current functioning and communication patterns.
For example: After an emotional event such as a major strike, employees need time to process their feelings. Family therapy following a disruptive event like this would heal such wounds much more quickly.

Four Dynamics That We Bring to Work from Home

We learn to relate to people first in our families of origin. We learn to trust, communicate, listen, cooperate, and share before we reach our tenth birthday. When we join a company, we bring those abilities with us. And every work team in every company becomes a place where family dynamics play themselves out, for better or worse.

Every member of every work team brings the following kinds of dynamics from home:

1. A preference for independence and autonomy vs. dependence and control

For example: Some people are most comfortable in a closely supervised work situation and prefer to have everything clearly spelled out. Others find such an atmosphere suffocating and seek an environment where they are left to their own devices.

2. The ability to recognize and respond to appropriate vs. inappropriate boundaries

For example: Some companies expect employees to demonstrate extreme loyalty and openness to those within the company. This atmosphere may feel comfortable to someone from a family with similar boundaries, but inappropriate to another person.

3. The ability to communicate with others effectively. This includes:

- Stating opinions and expectations overtly vs. covertly
- Demonstrating listening skills
- Asking for clarification when needed
- Speaking assertively
- Showing respect for others

Using effective communication skills requires strong self-esteem. This may be impossible for a person from a family where such communication was never modeled. A person who learned covert, aggressive, disrespectful communication patterns would not be successful in a work group where the preceding, effective behavior is expected.

4. Demonstrating the ability to trust others

When employees do not trust one another, team functioning is threatened. Empowerment and motivation are maximized when people trust each other.

Signs of Dysfunction

How can you tell if a work group (or a family) is not healthy? Here are some signs of dysfunction:

1. **Attendance:** Excessive absenteeism and high turnover correlate to family members responding to dysfunction by becoming emotionally distant and running away.
2. **Sabotage:** When employees feel unable to express their feelings and opinions, they sometimes resort to acting them out by violating rules, sabotaging the company, or by displaying other passive-aggressive behaviors.

For example: In a large company, an employee recently shared a confidential, sensitive memo with a friend who worked for a competitor. The memo became front-page headlines.

3. **Substance abuse:** Employees feeling excessive stress at work may respond as they would in a family, by abusing substances at work or after hours.
4. **Overachieving:** Companies with very high expectations may create employees who routinely produce miracles. This may look admirable to an outsider, but it can produce burnout among the employees. This dynamic resembles the family that looks perfect from the outside, but is in fact severely dysfunctional.
5. **Underachieving:** Employees who feel unappreciated or abused may respond by producing substandard results at work, just as such family members do at home.

For example: Most stores today have sales associates who act as if the customer is an interruption. These employees appear to have no interest in the success of the company.

6. **Emotional or physical abuse:** In some organizations, employees are routinely subjected to emotional or even physical abuse. These are obviously examples of severe dysfunction, just as they are when they occur in a family.

For example: There have recently been several reports of physical and emotional abuse in the military.

7. **Double bind:** Some work teams have an atmosphere in which employees feel “damned if you do and damned if you don’t.”

Strategies for Resolving Problems

Following an assessment, the following family therapy interventions may help the employees of a dysfunctional company relate with one another in a healthier and more productive way.

1. Teach employees the following communication and problem-solving skills:
 - How to define problems in a nonblaming way
 - How to listen with empathy
 - How to make requests assertively
 - How to brainstorm solutions
2. Help employees identify themes and company (family) myths. Explore those that may be discussed and challenged, as well as those that may not.
3. Triangulation is the process where two people side against a third. Teach employees to manage conflict by teaching them how to avoid triangulation.
4. Where a work team shows signs of being disengaged, help employees build stronger relationships and communication patterns. Use team-building techniques to accomplish this.
5. Where the system is enmeshed, help the employees strengthen boundaries and increase autonomy. Team-building exercises can be helpful here, too.
6. Teach supervisors how to manage employees more effectively through regular supervisory skills training. Just as parents benefit from parenting skills training, supervisors need similar instruction. Supervisory training should address the following skills:
 - How to demonstrate effective listening skills
 - How to encourage open communication among team members
 - How to empower team members by setting effective goals
 - How to encourage creativity and initiative
 - How to resolve conflict in a healthy and productive manner

The goal of such interventions is to energize employees by teaching them new ways to relate to one another.

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