

Organizational Strategic Problem Solving

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Anxiety in Organizations

I. Introduction

A. Systems Thinking – Systems thinking is a way of looking at individual behavior by evaluating how someone interacts within a group and how that person impacts the group. Some of the major topics of Systems Thinking consist of - Anxiety Types, Conflict Types, Anxiety Effects and Triangulation. Understanding these ideas will allow someone to be able to see their workplace as a large number of interacting parts that is in constant movement responding to internal and external stress.

B. Problem Solving – Problem Solving is a technique for changing dysfunctional organizational patterns. Problem solving uses Systems Thinking to recognize how anxiety impacts employees and then uses a specific protocol to address and change the negative pattern. The focus of problem solving is behavioral as opposed to emotional or insight oriented. There is an emphasis on creating solutions that are doable and measurable. Using Problem Solving in an organization or workplace allows for optimal performance.

II. Anxiety Types

A. Acute Anxiety – Acute Anxiety comes from usual day to day stressors. Acute Anxiety is easily recognized and generally it is easy to understand its impacts on a group of people. Examples of Acute Anxiety are – workplace accidents, broken equipment, being understaffed or getting to work late.

B. Chronic Anxiety – Chronic Anxiety is a long term anxiety that is caused by past organizational events and employee reactions. It is usually hidden, very difficult to detect and contagious. Chronic Anxiety has many forms. For example, it may be initiated by a traumatic event in an organization and unknowingly spread through people and across time. Examples might be an employee death, chronic illness, the loss of a CEO, and mergers. Due to anniversaries, constant reminders, communication, perceived threats and unspoken reactions, Chronic Anxiety will spread from one generation to the next. A new employee may feel anxiety on their first day of work due to an event that occurred a decade before. Chronic Anxiety may be experienced to a higher degree if the employee's past consists of several common themes or conflicts to the traumatic past event of the organization.

III. Anxiety and the Workplace

A. Anxiety in the workplace is variable over time – Both Acute and Chronic Anxiety are common in the workplace and are always changing due primarily to outside forces such as the economy, the availability of resources, and personnel changes.

B. Increased anxiety causes physical, social and psychological consequences for employees.

1. Physical Consequences – Headaches, tightness in the chest, heart palpitations, muscle tension, sleeplessness, stomach problems, dry mouth and psychosomatic reactions.

2. Social Consequences – Drug use, gambling, overeating, verbal outbursts, impatience, conflicts and tardiness.

3. Psychological Consequences – poor concentration, worry, low mood, confusion and forgetfulness.

C. Anxiety in the workplace is contagious and spreads across people and time – Anxiety will spread through a workplace as people react to the initial cause of anxiety. Employees are susceptible to anxiety as they are exposed to constant reminders spoken and unspoken.

IV. Anxiety and Employee Reactions.

A. Closeness – As an employee grows anxious he may respond with getting too close to fellow employees, managers or customers. This may be shown by private complaining, secrecy, hidden agendas and inappropriate decision making.

B. Distance – Anxiety may cause an employee to become distant from everyone else. This may be shown by a decrease in communication with colleagues, hiding behind closed doors, leaving work early and a non-participatory attitude. The extreme form of distance is a complete cutoff.

C. Over and Under Functioning – As an employee feels stressed he may bond unconsciously with another worker in a pattern of over/under functioning. This is shown by an uneven sharing of a workload. One becomes lazy while the other picks up the pieces.

D. Projection – As an employee becomes stressed he may revert to a personal defense of projection. Projection is shown by an irrational behavior shown to one person when it is actually meant for another person. It has the quality of being unfair and unreasonable.

The Movement of Anxiety through Organizations

I. Triangulation

A. Triangles and People – Triangles are a symbolic representation of a group of three people. In the area of Social Science, Family Therapy and Systems Theory the three person unit is seen as the basis for understanding group behavior, social change, anxiety management and dysfunction. The reality and impacts of triangulation are universal and inescapable for all people. How people manage the pressures of triangulation is an indication of their ability to maintain health and optimal social behavior. Triangles are in constant motion in all human organizations and institutions.

B. Triangles are the cell of all human social interchanges – It is nearly impossible for two people to exist without involving a third person either through personal contact or discussion. This is especially true as anxiety increases during the interaction of the two people. As the third person is introduced through discussion or contact this is considered the creation of a triangle. Additionally, it is nearly impossible for three people to remain in equal relational balance without creating exclusiveness between two of them and then ostracizing the third. This relational balance of the triangle is constantly changing. Generally this shift is seen as normal, expected behavior but when members of the triangle become stressed two of people take on the negative anxiety reactions listed above - closeness, distance, over/under functioning and projecting.

C. Triangles and Social Hierarchy – All of society has the understanding that hierarchy is necessary to avoid chaos and maintain order. In other words, we need leaders. This structure of hierarchy is held together by rules. Hierarchy is first presented to people through the order of the family and recognized as the order of society through all organizations including the workplace. Stress in a workplace combined with the reality of triangulation threatens the order of hierarchy as there is a triangulation shift that involves employee and leader. A group of three under stress may create exclusiveness between an employee and a leader and will then ostracize the once connected leader. The interaction of triangles and social hierarchy has the potential to create dysfunction as employees are put into inappropriate roles and important decisions are made under this poorly functioning order. On the other hand, a healthy triangle is when leaders are alienated and exclusive with subordinates being the more distant third of the triangle. If this healthy pattern is challenged by workplace anxiety, the hierarchy is disturbed and organizational performance decreases.

D. Triangles, anxiety and change – Social Science, Psychotherapy and Family Therapy have a long term understanding that most all problems related to behavior, mental health and emotional development are caused by some form of inappropriate triangulation leading to a challenge of hierarchy and authority and the improper placement of responsibility onto those unable to manage it. This

is particularly well understood in families and there is a growing understanding of its role in organizations. Change and optimal organizational performance comes when these unhealthy triangles are recognized and then changed to the more proper, expected pattern.

II. Triangulation applied to Conflict Types (Some Examples)

A. Closeness leading to Triangulation – There are two sales managers that had a good working relationship. However, during a time of losing a key employee, the entire department became stressed and one of the managers found comfort from stress through his relationship with one of the staff. As time went on, the relationship became more exclusive with the sharing of managerial concerns and agendas. The other sales manager had less and less contact with his partner. Communication decreased, decisions were poorly made and the company lost a big customer.

B. Distance leading to Triangulation – Two architectural partners were professional and very good at their jobs. However, they did not like each other personally. For the most part they could get along well enough to run a business but when one of them went through some family stress he had no interest in communicating his high stress and reasons for poor performance to his partner. Instead, he turned to the draftsman for some key business decisions and his relationship with his partner grew more distant. The other partner felt excluded and was unaware of all of the transactions with customers. Angry, he threatened to leave the firm.

C. Over/Under Functioning leading to Triangulation – Two VP's maintained a good working relationship but when the company grew overwhelmed with more business and not enough help, one of the managers began to take on extra work. One of the VP's allowed this to happen and even encouraged it. As this pattern continued, the manager began to take on some of the VP's responsibilities. The VP, relieved of his overwhelm, did not step in to address it. As the pattern continued, the manager played an inappropriately powerful role as he began to assist in decision making with the other VP. A number of problems occurred as the CEO recognized the decline in the VP's work performance as well as recognizing that key decisions were changing the course of the organization.

D. Projection leading to Triangulation - An employee performed well in a successful food distribution company. He was successful and got along well with his bosses. Unfortunately, his direct manager reminded him of his father and his childhood relationship with his father consisted of a great deal of conflict. For the most part, this was not a problem except for times of increased stress around the time of the anniversary of his father's death. Unable to deal with his direct manager, the employee avoided him and got directives from the shift supervisor. The employee's performance decreased as the shift supervisor openly expressed his irritation with the employee demands and questioned the manager's ability to take charge. (Note the generational triangle)

Problem Solving, Triangle Types and Results

I. The Five Stages of Problem Solving

A. The Initial Stage

1. After a leader recognizes a triangle or a series of triangles he should arrange a meeting to problem solve for change. The leader may be involved in one of the triangles or recognize it from the outside. Leaders should order the solving of triangles by first addressing triangles that involve the most senior members.

2. The leader should decide if he wants a facilitator. The facilitator is generally the outside trainer or consultant. Also, facilitators can be trained inside of the company to do this specific organizational task. In general, the company should make it a goal that all leaders problem solve independently.

3. The leader should plan the meeting time in a quiet place such as an office or conference room. The length of the meeting should parallel the seriousness of the problem.

4. The leaders may discuss the issue prior to the meeting time but should be careful to not ostracize the employee. Leaders should sit near each other to symbolize the intended shift in triangulation.

B. The Problem Stage

1. During the problem stage, each person states what they see as being the problem. The leader may have to begin as the purpose of the meeting may have to be explained to the other members.

2. The leaders should hear each problem statement while challenging themselves to see it as a systemic problem caused by the group and not one individual.

3. The leaders should maintain an attitude that is helpful. Leaders and facilitators should keep from giving advice, interpreting behavior or asking how one feels about the problem.

C. The Interaction Stage

1. At this stage the members begin to discuss the problem with each other. If a facilitator is involved they should take a less active role.

2. All members should bring the action into the meeting. In other words, if there was a loss in sales, evidence of this should be brought in and explained. If leaders recognize that their relationship has been changed or

challenged, they should openly discuss this in the company of the employee.

D. The Change Stage

1. Each member says what change they would like to see related to the stated problem. The changes should be stated in terms that are measurable, solvable and realistic. If they are stated in this way it can be recognized in the future as solved or unchanged.

2. The leaders make the final decision regarding the expected changes. The leaders must come to a stated agreement that is heard by the employee. As the leaders do this, they are shifting the power of the triangle to its original healthy position. As all members participate in the suggested change, they are agreeing with and encouraging this healthy change.

3. The leaders may not completely agree on how to solve the problem but it is more important that they come to as close an agreement as possible and implement the change suggestion.

E. The Completion of the meeting

1. The leaders should make sure everyone understands the expected change in behavior and can provide a picture of how that will appear. The leaders should decide if there is a need to set a follow up meeting to evaluate change and facilitate accountability.

II. The Four Types of Triangulation

A. Hierarchy – This is the most basic and common form of Triangulation. It occurs when two leaders are disengaged through conflict or distance and a subordinate person takes the leader's place. One of the leaders is left outside of the authority pair and usually is ostracized and responds with negative reactions.

B. Two Generation Triangles – This occurs when one leader becomes exclusive with one of two subordinates. This might occur when a manager relies on one employee more than another and then allows him to begin making decisions that are inappropriate for his title.

C. Three Generational Triangles – This again is a very common form of organizational dysfunction. This occurs when a subordinate bypasses his immediate boss and turns to a boss in a higher position for problem resolution. The problem occurs when the higher leader allows it. This also can go in reverse with the higher boss bypassing the middle boss and giving direction to the employee. This triangulation can easily be started by a complaining customer.

D. Organizational Sequences – Organizational sequences occur when one triangle creates another. The sequence can be seen if leaders group together and assess the map of their organizational structure. Leaders should begin marking the

map from top to bottom and bottom to top (including customers) and visually illustrate interconnecting triangles.

III. The Results of Change

A. Relief – When a group of people solve a problem and solidify hierarchy the group feels a sense of relief. The old anxiety that was at the beginning of the conflict is resolved and controlled.

B. Insight – Although insight is not necessary for change, employees will begin to understand the reasons behind the behaviors of themselves and others. It may relate to an understanding about the company such as a generational conflict or a personal understanding like one's own relational shortcomings or family influence.

C. Productivity – Proper management of roles creates an appropriate boundary for relationships and tasks. When people operate in a system that is proper for them, this facilitates optimal professional growth.

D. Resistance – If someone has been given inappropriate power through triangulation, the problem solving process creates a loss for them. Although this is no reason to keep from resolution, it is important that leaders understand this possibility.

E. Needs – Often times needs will be apparent as one shifts to a position of responsibility. This is often the case if a leader is under functioning within a stressed triangle. After problem solving he will be confronted with higher expectations which may require training or counsel

F. More change – As a company problem solves, the people in contact with them will recognize change and will be influenced by this. This is especially true with three generation triangles as the reorganization of power and communication impacts several different areas. Also, change occurs as one ends projecting behavior that tends to have a far reaching level of negative reaction and impact.

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