As more and more dysfunctional behaviors are brought into the workplace, the make-up of our organizations will continue to change. So must our management strategies.

We need to adopt a new perspective in order to keep our organizations, and the people they employ, from becoming more dysfunctional. The perspective offered in this book stems from thirty years of working, consulting, and training in dysfunctional settings. The book provides a collection of simple ideas woven together through practice and experimentation. Not all of these ideas work all of the time, but all of them have worked at one time or another in a variety of difficult situations.

I hope they work for you.

Tom E. Jones

The level of organizational dysfunction can be assessed at any time. However, it is most easily exposed when an organization undergoes change. The actions that people take in response to the change will uncover whatever dysfunction has been lurking below the surface. Your ability to overcome dysfunction in the workplace will be put to the test during a period of transition.

Generally, people react to change in three different ways. Some are proactive/assertive. They view change as a way of making improvements within the organization. Others are reactive/aggressive, and respond to change by trying to stop it. The remaining group consists of people who are inactive/submissive. They won’t take a stand one way or the other. The level of dysfunction that exists in an organization is determined by the size and influence of the latter two groups.

Progressive in their approach to change, proactive/assertive people tend to value innovation and respond positively to negative comments, difficult challenges, collective concerns, and personal criticisms. Most notable characteristics: anticipating change, making things happen, problem-solving, and self-assessment.

Negative about most things, reactive/aggressive people tend to openly resist change in counterproductive ways. Their survival instinct is strong and they are quick to feel threatened. These individuals avoid responsibility and, when things go wrong, shift the blame to someone else. Most notable characteristics: finger-pointing, outright resistance, overt obstruction, and sabotage.
Neutral toward growth and development, inactive/submissive people go along with change without enthusiasm. They avoid offending others by side-stepping commitments and dodging serious issues. They accept change only when they see it working. Most notable characteristics: fence-sitting, limited approval, qualified support, and conditional agreements.

In order to overcome dysfunction in the workplace, you must first assess the current level of dysfunction. The next step is to develop a set of management practices that have a three-pronged purpose: (1) to reinforce functional behaviors, (2) to discontinue dysfunctional practices, and (3) to help those in the middle make the right choice. More on this later.

When we get into that section where change is discussed in greater detail, you will gain a deeper perspective of change. But for now, please accept the premise that you can’t change dysfunctional behaviors until you understand what they are and how they impact your workplace.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES of a DYSFUNCTIONAL ORGANIZATION

An organization does not become dysfunctional overnight. It typically moves through four distinct stages. While some organizations may reach stage one or two and remain there, others may move, unchecked, toward stages three or four. By understanding the conditions that define each stage you may be able to intervene and bring about productive change before the dysfunction sets in permanently.

STAGE I

Ambiguity is not questioned. Say a company directive is somewhat vague, and can logically be interpreted more than one way. Two supervisors interpret the directive differently, and give conflicting instructions to an employee, not realizing they have contradicted each other. The employee chooses not to point this out or ask for clarification. Instead, she follows the direction that suits her best, or drags her feet until one of the supervisors discovers the ambiguity and provides clarification. The employee does not feel comfortable pointing out an area of potential conflict, even though doing so would relieve her anxiety.

STAGE II

Inconsistencies are ignored. A rule is followed by some and broken by others, but nothing happens to the violators. For example, a group of employees ride together and consistently arrive late for work. Others in the same unit, who travel independently, have been disciplined for not being on time. Attempts to enforce the policy are periodic and lack substance. The inequity is widely known among the staff. When the affected employees finally complain to management, they are told that the issue is being looked into. They are encouraged to mind their own business and the situation continues, unchanged.

STAGE III

Ambiguities and inconsistencies are undiscussable. It becomes politically incorrect to openly talk about the existence of ambiguity and inconsistency. Should management ask how things could be improved, employees provide shallow responses like, “Well, to tell the truth, the air conditioning doesn’t work and there’s not enough parking. But don’t get me wrong—I love it here.” People won’t risk getting themselves and others into trouble by sharing real issues and telling the truth.

STAGE IV

Undiscussability is undiscussable. No one will openly discuss the fact that there are serious problems, and that employees are extremely reluctant to discuss them in front of management. Silence during meetings not only implies that problems don’t exist, it also implies a code of silence should be observed regarding any actions management might take to address problems. For example, say management conducts an organization-wide climate survey and finds that employee morale and job satisfaction are both low. Shortly after the results are published, the board of directors fires the CEO, three vice-presidents, and the human resources manager. Despite the empty seats at the next management meeting, it’s business as usual, with nobody mentioning the survey or the purge.
BEHAVIORAL CHECKLIST

In the highly informative book, The Addictive Organization, psychologists Anne Wilson Schaef and Diane Fassel identified behaviors that contribute to dysfunction in addictive organizations. After years spent consulting with a variety of dysfunctional organizations, I have added several items to their original set, identifying dysfunctional behaviors that may be present in any organization. The resulting list of twenty specific behaviors is presented below in Figure 1. Are any of the behaviors on this list common in your organization? Check them off. Then note the number of check marks you have made. Use the results to assess the current level of dysfunction in your organization or work unit.

Figure 1.

DYSFUNCTIONAL BEHAVIORS CHECKLIST

☐ Communication is indirect.
☐ Conflicts are not stated openly.
☐ Secrets are used to build alliances.
☐ Gossip is used to excite and titillate.
☐ Corporate memory is lost or forgotten.
☐ Requests for policy clarification are ignored.
☐ The open expression of true feelings is absent.
☐ The search for the cause of a problem is personalized.
☐ People look for direction on how to act and react.
☐ Friendship between professional colleagues is lacking.
☐ Complex procedures are initiated by memorandum.
☐ Meetings have long agendas and end up going in circles.
☐ Inconsistent application of procedures is not challenged.
☐ Mundane announcements are given more time at meetings.
☐ Promises of better times ahead seduce people into a status quo.
☐ Dualistic (us or them) thinking creates conflict and sets up sides.
☐ Perfectionism creates an atmosphere of intolerance for mistakes.
☐ Judgments are made about people and things being “good” or “bad.”
☐ Isolation by management keeps them from seeing what’s happening.
☐ Management isolation is used as the basis of decision-making by cliques.

Total items checked:

The greater the number of check marks, the greater the level of dysfunction. Keep the results of this checklist handy. As you weave your way through this book, use the specific items you've checked to develop an action plan.

Inconsistency and uncertainty are everywhere today. There are daily reports of companies restructuring, seeking bankruptcy protection, or going out of business. A steady parade of experts on the nightly news offer contrasting opinions on the meaning of current events, political developments, and consumer trends. It seems the more that is known, the more there is to know—and the less knowing we can be. In his widely quoted book, Fire In The Belly: On Being A Man, noted author and respected philosopher Sam Keen decries this current state, saying, “The more the world is governed by experts, specialists, and professionals, the less anybody takes responsibility for the most troubling consequences of our success-failure.”

Anyone responsible for producing results is keenly aware of the mounting problems facing today’s leaders. Managers in every field of endeavor are discovering that the responsibility for getting things done keeps floating back up the chain of command. This newly emerging phenomenon is called “upward delegation.” Upward delegation is at work when a subordinate, hoping to avoid the consequences of being wrong, repeatedly sends an issue back up the chain of command, requesting more information each time, until management runs out of patience and makes the decision. In another version, called “unless otherwise directed,” the subordinate offers to make the decision—but lets it be known he or she is willing to change it if you say so. If you let it stand and it works, the subordinate takes the cred-