



Organizational Anxiety

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Anxiety in organizations today has reached an all-time high, and anxiety levels can easily outstrip the ability of an organization and its people to cope. If anxiety is short-term, it can infuse us with a burst of energy, sharpening our focus and mental acuity. But longer term, more chronic anxiety is likely to wear us down, resulting in acting-out behaviors and relationship disturbances.

Some of the symptoms of organizational anxiety include:

1. Taking sides on issues instead of taking stands - forming coalitions and cliques.
2. Claiming turf and feuding over territory - backstabbing.
3. Blaming and scapegoating - focusing on the shortcomings of particular people or departments.
4. Distancing - not saying what they really think in meetings or communicating with each other and often literally hiding out in their offices or cubicles.

The results of this organizational anxiety can be faltering productivity and morale. Both the group and individuals can become overwhelmed. Flexibility, objectivity, and creativity give way to tunnel vision, resistance to change, and faulty decision making. Anxiety is highly contagious and when unchecked will spread across an organization rapidly. Fortunately, calm is equally contagious. One relatively calmer person in an anxious system can have a strong positive effect for all involved.

To reduce anxiety and become calmer in an agitated organization:

1. Recognize your own personal anxiety triggers and signals, and remember that it isn't so much specific events that upset us as our individual reactions to them.
2. Try to predict exactly how you will behave when a particularly upsetting event occurs so you can chart a more effective course of action.
3. Focus on facts rather than feelings to better differentiate fact from fear, foresee the consequences of our behavioral choices, and select the approach we think is best.
4. Shift from emphasis on the other to emphasis on the self. We see the solution to so many problems as the other person acting differently, but experience tells us that we may not be able to get others to change. When any person in a relationship makes a change in how he/she relates, the whole relationship changes.

“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

--Leo Buscaglia

Recommended Reading

The Power of Full Engagement, by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz

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