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Is Your Organization Passive-Aggressive?

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Organizations, like people, have personality traits that affect their ability to get things done. Execution is closely linked to these characteristics. Resilient organizations, for example, are open-minded and agile. It's not just that the people are responsive; the organization is set up, in formal and informal ways, to respond effectively when changes in the marketplace require a new strategy.

At the other end of the spectrum is the passive-aggressive organization. It is insular, defensive, and rigid. Resistance to change is rooted in its essential nature. It struggles, and sometimes fails, when change is needed.

Though no one ever set out to create a passive-aggressive company, there are hundreds of them. They evolve naturally when people develop practices designed to reinforce comfortable, familiar ways of operating. Some typical symptoms: A herd mentality values "fitting in" over excellence. Internal agendas supersede broader corporate goals. Information is seen as a valuable resource to be hoarded. Decision-making processes are murky, follow-through is weak, and last-minute objections are commonplace. Superior performance is discouraged; most employees strive for the mean.

If this sounds like your company, you're not alone. Booz & Company analysis of more than 14,000 responses to the Org DNA Profiler® found that 11 percent exhibited the hallmarks of a passive-aggressive organization.

The remedy is careful organizational redesign: or, as we refer to it, changing the DNA of the company. The metaphor "DNA" describes the innate aspects of an organization's formal structure and informal identity. These determine how people execute decisions and the practices they follow. Small changes in organizational DNA can have large and long-lasting effects.

Organizational DNA comprises a double helix of formal and informal elements. But formal elements such as organizational structures, decision rights, information flows, and motivators matter carry relatively little weight at passive-aggressive organizations. More influential are informal elements of organizational DNA—the mind-sets, norms, networks and commitments that guide day-to-day behavior across the organization. These act as sand in the gears of execution.

To change a passive-aggressive organization, you must understand these four informal characteristics and look for ways to change them:

- **Mind-sets** are deeply embedded ways of thinking—assumptions and biases that pervade an organization. They're rarely reexamined, even when new or contradictory information comes to light.

The default mind-set at a passive-aggressive organization is defensiveness. Employees feel they are vulnerable to arbitrary attack. This leads them to spend much of their time on activities of low value to the company.

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They feel they must “guard their turf” by manipulating relationships, forging alliances, and mining informal networks for gossip. Information becomes a tactical weapon in power plays, doled out strategically to expand or insulate an internal fiefdom. Corporate strategy takes a backseat. There is an automatic bias favoring the safety of the status quo, driving collective performance toward a mediocre mean that makes the company less competitive.

Organizational mind-sets are highly resistant to change. A frontal assault that appears to blame employees for organizational shortcomings will only drive people deeper into their defensive shell. Instead, champion and model openness and approachability. Give employees opportunities to discuss their concerns and the company's goals. Draw out their views on the obstacles to better performance and their ideas for change. Keep the focus on solutions and desired outcomes, not fault-finding. Recall earlier times when another mind-set existed: “We're all in this together. Our fate depends on the whole company, not on our small part of it.”

- **Norms** encompass working habits and routines, unwritten rules, and the values and expectations of the workforce. They embody the way things are done at your organization, regardless of what the formal process flows might say.

Decision-making practices are perhaps the most troublesome norms at passive-aggressive organizations. Formal processes and open meetings are largely irrelevant. Actions agreed upon in those open settings often unravel later. The real decision making happens behind closed doors. Only a select few take part in these informal sessions, which tend to operate as forums for advancing attendees' internal agendas. All of the healthy

give-and-take of an open culture—dispassionate evaluation of relevant data, thorough consideration of alternatives, debate between opposing viewpoints—are discouraged.

Fortunately, norms can be changed. The first step is a series of open staff dialogues, examining workplace norms and explaining their impact on performance. Pinpoint practices that must change, and build consensus around better ways of operating. To make changes stick, identify a core group of leaders who will support and model new norms, making them “the way we do things here.”

- **Networks** are the informal channels of communication through which individuals build trust and explore common interests across formal hierarchical lines. These channels are important mechanisms for sharing information, gathering insight, and mobilizing employees.

In healthy organizations, informal networks help advance organizational goals. In passive-aggressive organizations, they have the opposite effect. They've grown up around personal and group agendas that conflict with company priorities, and they control access to information. You can't learn what's going on if you're not in the network. And you can't get in if you don't conform to network norms, like mediocrity. This can keep top performers from getting the information they need to do their jobs.

To make networks less passive-aggressive, try a two-pronged approach. First, identify key influencers (they won't always be top performers) and try to win their support for new objectives. Second, dilute the networks' power by creating alternative open forums (such as regular cross-functional lunches).

- **Commitments** are the unwritten aspirations that motivate individuals and groups within your organization. At passive-aggressive organizations, these often center on fitting in with the herd, rather than on driving success in the marketplace. Key network influencers regulate commitments through subtle rewards and punishments that may contradict company objectives. A manager who meets corporate budget targets while peers fall short may suddenly be excluded from important meetings.

Highly motivated, talented employees inevitably grow frustrated in this environment. Many leave the company, accelerating its descent into mediocrity.

As a leader seeking to counter dysfunctional commitments, you need to clearly articulate corporate priorities across the workforce, in ways that informal networks can't misinterpret. Establish criteria for measuring progress toward your goals, and institutionalize performance management mechanisms—such as surveys that solicit staff feedback on managers—to ensure that everyone is pulling in the right direction.

In a competitive world, no organization can allow passive-aggressive characteristics to undermine execution. Expunging these characteristics requires a consistent, systematic, collective effort to change attitudes and behaviors. Leaders must show a commitment to change both their personal management styles and organizational patterns.

Change begins with honest dialogue addressing the root causes of performance failures. Employees at all levels must take part and help develop the pragmatic strategies needed to change the passive-aggressive collective temperament into a high-performance personality. +

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