

Healthy Executive, Healthy Company

To cure a “depressed” organization, start at the top

By Lois P. Frankel, Ph.D.

Organizations are like people. When you meet someone you often form an immediate impression of him or her as being “upbeat,” “quiet,” “assertive” or “depressed.” The same holds true for organizations. The moment you walk in the door you form an impression of their health or vitality. With depression being the No.1 psychological problem in our country, it is no wonder that entire organizations, or departments within larger companies, exhibit depression’s symptoms.

Although no research exists for how many organizations are depressed, the fact is that many companies exhibit the same symptoms of depression as individuals. Organizations such as these are often profitable and therefore may be inclined to overlook the importance of emotional health. Their motto: *If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.* Unfortunately, this cavalier attitude causes them to miss out on untold opportunities to be even *more* successful or sustain success by deriving the benefits associated with cutting edge breakthroughs, referrals from satisfied customers or clients, public acknowledgment of their excellence, and increased productivity.

What differentiates organizations that are known for organizational excellence from their profitable but less healthy counterparts? The answer lies (or sits) at the top: emotionally healthy senior executives. The health of an executive permeates his or her organization in measurable ways. Whether it’s an executive who impedes risk-taking because of the fear engendered by his or her emotional outbursts or someone who fails to inspire excellence because of a drug or alcohol problem, the effects are the same.

With just a little fine tuning, executives can ensure that they are not unintentionally creating a depressed or dysfunctional organization. Here are seven ways that a top manager personally can infuse new vitality into a company:

1. Recognize the effect you have on others.

What is the “word on the street” about you? Are you known as someone who brings out the best in others through exemplary behavior or do your employees wonder what kind of mood you’ll be in when you arrive at the office? One senior manager commented that she felt as if she were in a fish bowl—and she was right. Positions of leadership are highly visible. Staff members look at you not only as a technical expert, but also as a role model. Use upward-feedback tools, climate surveys, or one-to-one conversations to find out how you are perceived and what staff members need and expect from you. When you receive the results, avoid the tendency to be defensive. Instead, look for themes running through the feedback and take action to correct those behaviors that are getting in your way of your being an exemplary leader.

2. Address your personal problems.

As much as you may think that your problems are not apparent to anyone but you, most of us just aren't good at hiding what's going on inside emotionally. Don't ignore your own symptoms of depression or try to brush under the rug personal problems you may be having at home or work. They are more visible than you imagine. Additionally, emotional problems sap energy and can contribute to physical symptoms such as heart attacks, high blood pressure and increased incidence of colds and flu. Seek counseling through your employee assistance program; rabbi, priest or pastor; or from a private psychotherapist. Whatever it takes—address those issues that impede your ability to perform at your personal best.

3. Enroll in leadership development seminars.

The dysfunctional behaviors exhibited by many executives frequently stem from lack of training in the area of leadership. Those who rose quickly through the ranks were often never afforded the kind of developmental opportunities that contribute to self-confidence in their roles as leaders. They frequently use outdated methods of management that they learned from *their* management over the years. As a result, they operate from a place of fear and ignorance rather than one of confidence and empowerment. Executives who keep abreast of the latest trends in leadership know that the more control they have, the more they give away. They are confident that they need not control every one and everything around them because in the end, they are capable of handling any eventuality.

4. Communicate, communicate, communicate.

Highly productive organizations are ones in which executives communicate continually and thoroughly with their staffs. They not only *provide* the information that others need to do their jobs properly, but also *gain* information needed to knowledgeably run their departments or organizations. The rule is *tell everyone everything*—don't assume certain people don't have "the need to know." Organizational "secrets" are stumbling blocks to productivity. By setting the example for information sharing you encourage others to follow suit. Failure to communicate will result in unnecessary mistakes, the absence of interdependent functioning, and costs associated with redundant activities. When open communication is the norm rather than the exception, the synergistic process emerges and creative solutions to problems and challenges result.

5. Know your biases.

We all have biases. Regardless of how liberal or open-minded we think we are, our actions often belie our attitudes. We unknowingly communicate these biases through our actions and words. You communicate your values to the organization when you minimize the effect of telling (or laughing at) a joke at the expense of another, of the importance of using gender appropriate language, or the failure to value diversity through proactive hiring and promotional practices. It is important that you know how to capitalize on the differences within your workplace and avoid even the appearance of discrimination or favoritism. By acknowledging your own biases, and actively seeking to compensate for them, you can avoid costly ramifications (both morale-wise and dollar-wise) and accusations of unfair or unlawful treatment.

6. Make everyone responsible for organizational success.

Don't get caught up with your own self-importance. You can't do the job alone. Find ways to involve everyone—from the entry-level position to the most senior executive—in decision-making and direction setting. You can do this through the formation of task forces, regularly scheduled team meetings, incentive programs, or brown-bag brainstorming sessions. General Electric uses something called “work out sessions,” where people from diverse parts of the company come together to address barriers to productivity and devise solutions to overcome them. Management willingly follows their advice and has found that the resulting suggestions are realistic and cost-effective. In the long run, you get greater support for goals that are generated bottom-up than for top-down directives.

7. Communicate your expectations for organizational health and provide developmental opportunities.

Talk about your expectations for organizational health and offer staff members the opportunity to develop skills that allow them to contribute to it. Even if your organization exhibits healthy behaviors now, there is no guarantee that it will always be so. You can overcome existing barriers to organizational health and ensure continued health by incorporating 360-degree feedback programs into your normal staff-development process, offering in-house seminars on effective communication and interpersonal skill development, developing an orientation program that includes reference to your company's expectations for the emotional and physical health of its staff, and providing managers with training in how to effectively lead others.

Healthy organizations have healthy leaders. It isn't always the smartest, most competent people who contribute to a company's growth and profitability. The organization that will flourish with the challenges of the new century will be the one that insists not only on healthy business practices, but also that its leaders create a healthy climate for its staff, its customers, and community in which it operates.

Is Your Organization Depressed?

Organizations often exhibit the same symptoms of depression as people do. If you agree with three or more of the following statements, then it is likely that your organization is depressed.

- ✓ There is a general feeling of lethargy.
- ✓ There is little creativity or innovation.
- ✓ Productivity is marginally acceptable.
- ✓ There is a high rate of absenteeism.
- ✓ Communication between and within departments is limited.
- ✓ Decisions take a long time to be made or are postponed indefinitely.
- ✓ There is little joy, happiness, or enthusiasm exhibited by employees.

Causes of Organizational Depression

Executives and managers have a significant amount of influence on the emotional health of their organizations and departments. Here are some factors that commonly contribute to depression within entire companies or isolated departments of larger organizations.

- Clinically depressed executives
- Drug / alcohol abuse among managers
- Blatant disregard for ethical, racial or gender diversity
- Tolerance of and reward for mediocre performance
- Dysfunctional behavior of senior managers (e.g., paranoia, passive aggressiveness, inability to communicate)
- Highly controlling managers
- Organizational “secrets”