

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DISENCHANTMENT

BY ADRIAN FURNHAM

Justice has always been a major issue among people. Especially in an organisational context, where many employees with different values, interests, and problems have to act in concert, a fair treatment is of huge importance. People who face injustice may become dissatisfied with their job, superior, or organisation and hence turn into a threat for the organisation by showing Counter Work Behaviours (CWBs). This article looks at the perception of injustice at work, and further motivational factors of CWBs.

The Edmund Snowden case has very clearly shown the problem of the *Insider Threat*: the threat to organisations from people working in, or for, them. It is not only governments and security services that are deeply concerned with the leaking of important secret information dramatically illustrated by Edward Snowden and Chelsea/Bradley Manning. The leaking of seriously important information to the wider world can also break commercial organisations.

Insider Threat is the term most commonly used when referring to current and past employees, associates and contractors who possess sensitive information about an organisation's internal systems, information, clients and operating procedures. They then sell or utilise their knowledge for an inappropriate or illegal purpose. This misuse of information causes damage to the organisation in the form of financial loss, loss of productivity, damage to reputation or may have some form of legal implication. These individuals may act alone or in

concert with others to perpetrate a variety of crimes against the organisation.

But what are the *motives* of those who commit fraud, theft, who disclose confidential information or who commit sabotage? Are they simply greedy, criminal or pressured from outside for financial gain? Do they start out like this, or do they have such bad experiences in an organisation that they become bad apples?

Counter Work Behaviours

Psychologists have a long list of Counter Work Behaviours (CWBs):

1. Theft (cash or property) and related behaviour (giving away goods or services).
2. Destruction of property (arson, Ludditism).
3. Misuse of information (revealing confidential info, whistleblowing or falsifying records).
4. Misuse of time and resources (wasting time, altering times).
5. Unsafe behaviour (ignoring safety procedures).
6. Poor attendance (unexcused absence).

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7. Poor quality work (intentionally slow or sloppy).
8. Alcohol and drug use on the job.
9. Inappropriate verbal actions (arguing with customers, verbal harassment of coworkers).
10. Inappropriate physical action (physically attacking coworkers, sexual harassment).

It is both too common and too easy to blame worker misdeeds and CWBs on the workers themselves, any more than to assert that all accidents are caused by accident-prone individuals. This is not to deny that there are devious criminal types. Investigations into those who have turned on their employer note that they have become seriously disenchanted from being very badly dealt with.

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Poor Management

A great deal of blame can be laid at the feet of poor managers or poor managerial processes. The idea is that transformational leaders who inspire and model satisfaction (engagement) and productivity lead to healthy and happy relationships at work (leader-worker exchange), trust, and adjusted and motivated employees. That is, bad management, just like bad parenting, causes serious long-term problems for all concerned (staff, share-holders, customers etc.).

Below are some of the characteristics of bad managers.

- **Arrogance:** They're right and everybody else is wrong.
- **Melodrama:** They want to be the centre of attention.
- **Volatility:** Their mood swings create business swings.
- **Excessive caution:** They cannot make important decisions.
- **Habitual distrust:** They focus only on the negatives.
- **Aloofness:** They disengage and disconnect with staff.
- **Eccentricity:** They think it's fun to be different just for the sake of it.
- **Passive resistance:** Their silence is misinterpreted as agreement.
- **Perfectionism:** They want to get the little things right even if the big things go wrong.
- **Eagerness to please:** They stress that being popular matters most.

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Managers have two main roles. First, they are at the front line in *identifying* counter work behaviours and participating in any or legal actions against the individuals. Second, they have to generate an atmosphere and environment which actively



discourages such behaviours. They need to generate engagement (commitment, satisfaction), loyalty and a strong work ethic, not distrust and alienation.

Too often they are blind to what is happening around them; but worse, their actions and own behaviours lead to resentment, which in turn leads to staff becoming disillusioned and vulnerable to CWBs.

The job of a leader/manager is to select, motivate and direct teams to achieve organisational goals. They need to set SMART goals, give timely and useful feedback, and support staff informationally, emotionally and financially. Good managers support both the organisation and employee goals. Tyrannical,



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nature and potential size of the threat as well as the motivations of those committing the CWBs.

All organisations have a distinct corporate culture simply defined as "the way people do things around here." They have easily observable (particularly to the outsider) implicit and explicit codes of behaviour, that specify what is acceptable, desirable and expected behaviour at work (and often outside it) that gains approval and reward – and that which does not. This culture is often established, maintained and changed by senior managers. Unfortunately, what they say is often not what they do. Many do not see their role in establishing healthy cultures that lead to Organisational Citizenship Behaviours (OCBs), rather than unhealthy cultures that lead to CWBs.

Finally although CWBs have always been around, the ways in which they are expressed have changed with the times. Thus, rapid and widespread developments in technology have led to what is now called *cyberdeviancy*: cyberloafing, cyberaggression, workplace blogging and cyber whistle-blowing. As things change, so do the opportunities for, and incidences of, Insider Threats.

Cause and Prevention

Why do insiders leak information, and how can we prevent them? The simple and obvious answer lies in rigorous selection. Don't let these people join your organisation and then you won't have any problems. So government departments and the security services take selection

autocratic leaders may only support the organisation (and themselves) and be less concerned with their staff. Poor managers are undisciplined: they flout guidelines and the 'good psychology' of management. They belittle and intimidate, threaten and tease, ignore and exclude their staff. This in turn can lead to employee revenge, followed by managerial counter-retaliation, which then escalates into entrenched conflict. This is the ideal breeding ground for the Insider Threat.

It is also important to bear in mind that people become angry and disappointed when they see *others* treated unfairly, such as during redundancies, lay-offs, etc. That is, people don't have to always to be themselves the 'victims' of injustice. It is enough to see others badly treated for them to seek revenge.

For managers to be fully involved in the process of developing loyalty in an organisation and countering the insider threat, it is necessary to recognise the

very seriously. They screen their applicants very, very thoroughly. They know the cost of getting it wrong.

Yet, of course, some individuals do get through the net. Some attempt to join organisations in order to destroy them. Their aim is to infiltrate and to poison. And there are many well-known case studies, usually of people driven by a powerful political ideology to demonise and ultimately destroy anyone holding opposing opinions. Having penetrated the organisation, these types bide their time, collect information...then strike.

However, as many organisations find when they carry out the all-important and painful review of what went wrong and why, the cause is not necessarily a screening failure. Many whistle-blowers, spies and "enemies within" never start off with a motive to subvert or betray their organisation. Indeed, often precisely the opposite. But they turn sour because of the way they were treated.

It seems there are five reasons for why people go from being engaged to disenchanted; productive to subversive; a friend to an enemy of the organisation.

First, *organisational lying/hypocrisy*. This is the employee's perception that what the organisation says about itself in public, and even to its employees, is a pack of lies. The more the organisation tries to capture the moral high ground and come out on 'the side of the angels,' the more outraged the astounded and angry insider becomes.

The hottest word at work is fair. The feeling that you and others are being unfairly held back while a few succeed can stimulate a great deal of resentment.

All organisations do PR about their mission, vision, methods, etc. Some trumpet them loudly and frequently. Most talk about integrity and transparency, about customer and employee care, welfare, etc. But for some this is patently not true. It can come as a shock to the staff; and some can't live the schizophrenic existence of what they see to be a lie.

Second, *perceived inequity*. The idea that some people in the organisation are treated very differently from others. One law for the rich, another for the poor. The hottest word at work is *fair*: that people are fairly assessed, promoted and rewarded. And yet, it can seem to some that loyalty, hard work, and productivity have less to do with success than some other attributes such as demography, brown-nosing or particular experiences.

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Third, *bullying and mistreatment*. The belief that some senior people are callous, uncaring, nasty and manipulative, and that you are a victim. The workplace attracts all types:

the demanding perfectionist, the geeky inadequate, the flamboyant self-publicist. This is to be expected and we all have to adapt to the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities of powerful people at work.

But some at the top are bullies and backstabbers. Staff can forgive the occasional emotional outburst and unkind remark, but not chronic, remorseless nastiness aimed specifically at them. Further, some organisations have a management style that is essentially aggressive and Machiavellian. It is then not only the oversensitive type who buckles under the acute and chronic bullying that leads from disenchantment to the need for revenge.

Fourth, *distrust*. The feeling that the organisation does not even trust its own employees. It may have put in place a number of devious and not-admitted (often electronic monitoring) systems to spy on its own people. Whilst top management may talk about, and demand, loyalty from their staff, it is clear that they do not trust their own employees.

This, of course, is a two-way street. If the organisation lets it be known that it never really and fully trusts me with information, money and materials, why should I ever trust them?

Fifth, *broken promises*. This is all about expectations not being met. For some, the selection interview and the induction period are where people set your expectations about working for the organisation. They tell you what they stand for, what they expect and how things work.

But all too often an employee does not have his or her expectations clarified. Either supervisors do not know how to conduct, or they fudge, conversations about what the criteria are for promotion, salary increases, etc. Some feel they are personally powerless to bring these about while others use false promises as a sort of motivational technique that backfires.

Conclusion

So, soon the hopeful, bright-eyed-and-bushy-tailed, potentially productive and loyal employee becomes disenchanted. Cynicism can set in, along with a drop in morale and productivity. This can take months or years. Some simply leave; others may not have that option and stick it out. For others, there is the possibility of revenge which may involve anything from arson to the exposure of secrets. Few people start out angry with their employer, but a worrying number end up that way through poor management. **EB**

About the Author

Adrian Furnham is an organisational and applied psychologist, management expert and Professor of Psychology at University College London. He has written over 700 scientific papers and 57 books. In addition to his academic roles, he is a consultant on organisational behaviour and management, writer and broadcaster.