An Introduction to Organizational Dysfunction

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This section uses metaphor to illustrate dysfunctional organizations, including the impact of dysfunction upon organizational trust, performance, and longevity. Dysfunction is the abnormal functioning or unhealthy functioning within an individual or an organization. An authoritarian manager who emphasizes organizational success at the cost of the individuals, a cancer growing within a body, or an individual who is negative and critical and breaks down a team are all examples of dysfunction. That dysfunction leads to the inability of the organization to fulfill its purpose, and therefore functional organizations require both a recognition of the dysfunction and a willingness to enact change.

Recognition of dysfunction is key, as researchers typically research what contributes to organizational well-being, growth, or success (Vacharkulksemsuk, Sekerka, & Fredrickson, 2011). Ignoring dysfunction does not contribute to a functional organization. Rather, organizations should either allow for dysfunction to build resilience, create systems to prevent dysfunction in order to build external strength, or create systems

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to remove dysfunction in order to build internal strength. However, it is important to note that dysfunction is rooted in the organizational culture, where dysfunctional cultural styles lead to decreases in operating efficiency and effectiveness (Balthazard, Cooke, & Potter, 2007).

Research has demonstrated some key aspects of conflict and dysfunction. External group conflict increases group cohesion over time (Konopaske, Ivancevich, & Matteson, 2014). A perceived external threat results in group members banding together while putting aside individual differences. One can think of Google® versus Facebook®, where each group is pitted against each other for internet user dominance. This results in an emphasis on loyalty, a focus on activity, but can also result in a further potential form of dysfunction by allowing for a rise in autocratic leadership (Konopaske et al., 2014). Dysfunction can happen when individuals allow their personal needs to rise over that of the organization or the task at hand (Anthony & Estep Jr., 2005). Individuals who focus more on their bonus plan goals as opposed to organizational goals may make decisions which favor themselves. Heller and Hindle (1998) demonstrate this in a Venn diagram (Fig. 2.1).

Zone A is where the team and task are more important than the individual; zone C is where the team and individual are more important than the task; zone B is where the individual's relationship to the task is more

Fig. 2.1 Competing organizational and personal priorities. (Source: Adapted from Heller & Hindle, 1998)
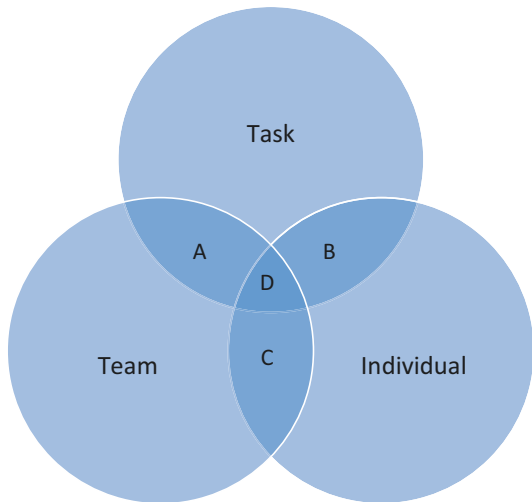
important than the team (which may put the organization at risk), and finally zone D is where all three elements reside is a sense of harmony.

Prevention of dysfunction can be an appropriate response for an organization. Adhikari (2015) describes two types of prevention: defensive and creative. Defensive prevention uses understood risk factors (a busy warehouse) and applies solutions to limit or eliminate those risk factors (painting safe walking zones within that warehouse). Creative prevention uses that same knowledge to strengthen known factors. Law enforcement uses creative prevention tools to create 'hot lists' of people who are at high risk of being victimized (Ridgeway, 2013). These hot lists allow the police to watch these individuals more carefully to prevent that victimization. Creative prevention can even be subcategorized into primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention, where primary prevention focuses on healthy behavior and secondary focuses on risky groups and engages them to withdraw from risky behavior, while tertiary prevention engages that same group to counteract the dysfunctional behavior at an early level (Adhikari, 2015).

METAPHORS OF ORGANIZATIONAL DYSFUNCTION

Three organizational metaphors are presented in this chapter. Organizations as zombies discuss when personal or institutional control becomes more important than ethical behavior, resulting in organizations that decline into unethical, immoral, and even illegal activities. Using biology as a background, organizations as lymphocytes (white blood cells) examine the immune system and describe the specific structural rules and processes that will allow an organization to respond appropriately to threats or error. Finally, the metaphor of Pygmalion organizations highlights the blurred illusion of organizational success as the result of a mismatch between the organization's design strategy and the environmental conditions, for the approach to be used can be very detrimental for an organization that has blurred vision.

Each of these metaphors depicts manners in which organizations allow for dysfunction to build resilience, create systems to prevent dysfunction in order to build external strength, or create systems to remove dysfunction in order to build internal strength.

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