50 Signs of an Unhealthy Organisation

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This article was first published within *Training and Development* in December 1991.

I wrote it to point up the tell-tale signs that are the early indications of all not being corporately well. These days I am all the more interested in looking for, finding, and doing something about the often obvious evidence that there are organisational issues that require urgent attention.

Trouble is, as you know only too well, despite the fine words, too many organisations seem incapable of finding the will and the energy to confront the really prickly issues, and we can list plenty of previously successful organisations whose past glories have caused them not to maintain their sharpness - success can indeed breed failure.

I have made a few changes to the original, to sharpen it up, but I remain convinced that these and other signs – see 50 more signs published in April '93, and also posted on this site – are worth thinking about. Alas, more recently, 'yet another 50 signs' has followed.

Clearly, these are generic thoughts, 'though not without merit. Any organisation will have its own specific indicators of ill-health. Future organisational success in my view, will depend as much on the efforts made to put right what is going wrong, as 'just' focusing upon building on the positive factors.

Do get in touch if this is of interest, and particularly if you feel you up to the challenge of working with me on these sorts of issues!

1. Influential senior managers are in their last jobs, with no desire or incentive to rock the boat. As a result, change and those that crave it are viewed as threats and blocked or worse.

2. Confidence in the leadership diminishes and may even be challenged.

3. Managers are reluctant to develop their people for fear of creating rivals.

4. Employees get little or no feedback on their performance.

5. Needlessly bureaucratic and obstructive administrative systems get in the way the real business of the organisation.

6. Internal, inter-functional conflicts are not confronted, and these escalate.

7. Rumours abound.

8. New starters are left to 'sink or swim'. Induction is seen as an event and not a process.

9. Individuals feel they are not rewarded in relation to their specific contribution and effort.

10. There is no sense of urgency where this should be seen.

11. New ideas and innovations are suppressed by a management that feels it must be the source of all that is creative and praiseworthy.

12. Key decisions are taken without consultation or perceived consideration of those most affected – no thought is given to the fact that people will support what they helped to create.

13. Too long passes between deciding to do something and the implementation of decisions.

14. Rules and procedures are openly broken with impunity.

15. The purpose of the organisation is unclear – or senior managers have very different thoughts on what this is. This confusion is passed down with adverse operational effects.

16. Too many people play the 'that's not my job' game – doing the bare minimum and displaying a lack of concern for their colleagues.

17. Roles and responsibilities are unclear and/or overlap.

18. Even relatively minor decisions are made at higher levels than is sensible. Employees at all levels are typically unempowered to make their own decisions without reference upwards.

19. Praise is rare, particularly from senior managers, who if ever seen, are felt to be remote and uncaring.

20. People in one part of the organisation have no idea what other parts do – nor do they care enough to find out.

21. Meetings proliferate, often without purpose or structure, with too little happening as a result to cause those who take part to feel they were a good use of time.

22. There is little or no enthusiasm for learning and development, especially amongst senior management who lead by poor example, and know it all thank you very much.

23. Training courses are not based on learning and development needs, and are amongst the first cuts as employee development is felt to be a cost, and not an added-value benefit.

24. Resignations take management by surprise – when they should be close enough to people to know what was on the cards.

25. Incompetent people keep each others' company to moan and groan – and 'better' people gather together in the same way, creating self-sustaining tensions.

26. Good people leave because other organisations want them, leaving 'the sediment', of people who have given up getting out, but may not yet realise that nobody else wants them.

27. Things move *so fast* that nothing stands still for long enough to get real value from efforts and initiatives that could have significant impact.

28. A blame culture stifles innovation and discourages people from taking personal responsibility – 'it wasn't *my* fault.

29. Recruiters take on people in their own image – often out of a desire to maintain the status quo, and of a fear of the unknown…or even prejudice.

30. Genuine efforts to change things for the better are 'ridden out' by a hard-core of moaners and mutterers who reckon whoever is upsetting their placid existence only until s/he moves on.

31. In the opinion of employees, redundancies are managed badly, with lasting negative effects

32. Fads and/or quick fixes are adopted as a means of confronting major issues.

33. No support, and more likely discouragement, awaits those who return from training events.

34. A major distinction exists between success and effectiveness within the organisation. Thus, successful people may well not be effective, and effective people are neither recognised or rewarded, and therefore unlikely to achieve success.

35. Capable, highly competent people leave the organisation without making the positive contribution they wanted, and very often end up achieving their ambitions with a competitor.

36. Staff feel under-valued to the point that this gets in the way of performance

37. Cost-cutting measures are imposed, often without warning. These are felt by many to be unfair, petty, and unlikely to make any lasting significant effect.

38. Poor performance is not confronted – for fear of what? There may be a culture of 'acceptable underperformance' – letting inadequate achievement, collective or individual, go when it really needs to be tackled.

39. Senior managers are felt to be remote and unknown – would they be recognised if they walked into a workplace? They may also be like the Olympic torch…they never go out!

40. An immense amount of time within the organisation is wasted.

41. Willing horses are overloaded with work because they are dependable, and in contrast, unreliable people are given less or nothing to do, because they can't be trusted to do it right.

42. Strong financial performance discourages any serious effort to anticipate future demands, and to identify deep-rooted people-management issues and incompetence.

43. Key performance issues are not personally targeted – so it's nobodies' fault when these are not achieved.

44. The organisations' structure encourages a 'dead man's shoes' syndrome, with little or no promotion opportunities or efforts at genuine succession planning.

45. Quite simply, people within the organisation don't feel good - few if any, are having fun. This may be due to many things – for instance insecurity and uncertainty over future work.

46. The organisation is dependant upon one or a small number of customers or suppliers.

47. Employees pursue their own goals and interests ahead of those of the organisation.

48. Empire building and internal politics get seriously in the way of operational performance. People, in numbers that matter, put effort into making life harder for colleagues, not better.

49. Too many people new to the organisation, with important roles and contributions to make, go on about how things were in their past organisation, and seek to replicate all that recent past, without due consideration of how different things are in their current role.

50. People who no longer have a job are kept on, sometimes with little or nothing to do.