Management Minute & More: Swimming in the Toxic Waste of Fear

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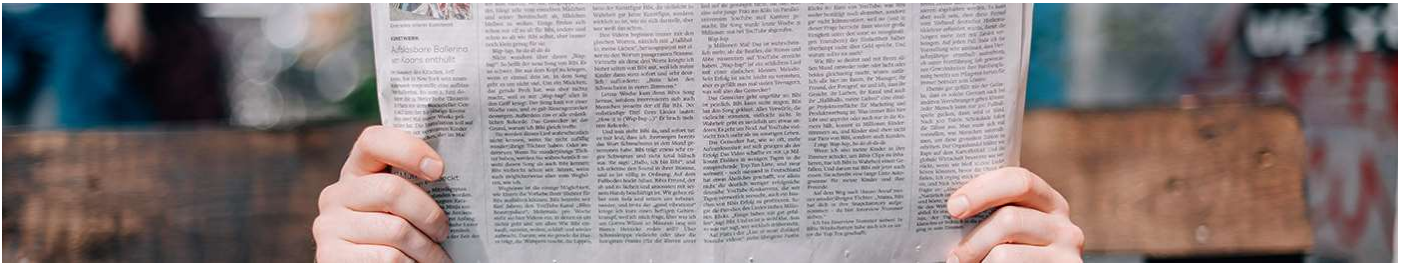
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Just going to work was so stressful for David that he dreaded mornings and Mondays. He worked in an underperforming healthcare company where an insecure boss belittled people in public and back-biting employees blamed each other for team failures. Swimming in this corporate culture of toxic fear, he wondered which he would lose first - his job, his professional reputation, or his sanity.

Nothing is more toxic than fear. Fear causes health problems, workplace violence, and family and relationship stress. Workplace bullies thrive, mediocre service is the norm, and truth is hard to come by in fear-based work cultures. Fear brings out the worst in employees, who become withdrawn, political, gossipy, cynical, or dysfunctionally critical.

After several people publicly turned down the job, David was named the new group leader. He started the turn from a fear-based culture to a positive, appreciative culture when he honestly addressed these questions:

1. Do you need extensive rules, policies, and procedures to protect the quality of the product or service you make? Employees who need to be restrained frame their work by compliance not creativity. They spend energy not getting in trouble rather than building a better product.
2. Do you focus on image rather than performance? One of the most troubled leaders we ever met told me that "image is everything." This leader was facing serious quality problems within her team, and rather than deal with them, she chose to launch a public relations campaign to improve the team's image The PR polish failed because the substance did not support the message.
3. Is there an "in" group and an "out" group? Are cliques forming with critical information being withheld from those who should know? Are politics pervasive, with negotiations and exchanges between different power groups?

Safety, appreciation, honesty, transparency, and creativity can eliminate fear in an organization. **Safety** means employees need more than job security or a workplace free from hazards. They need to be psychologically safe. This means being free from public criticism, discrimination, and humiliation. It also means that you are supported with the right tools, skills, and resources to do your job effectively.

Appreciation means you are socially recognized for effort and success. "Thank you" is said often. Bonuses and awards are given. Everyone's progress is recognized. Because performance measures are clear, the **recognition** is honest. An honest culture is **transparent**. Everyone can see everything. Information is not hoarded or used to control. When people are given information freely, **creativity** kicks in, and new and better ways of working can be found. As a leader, how do you get started in leading change away from fear?

1. Be positive in your communication. Give praise and appreciation in abundance. Refrain from gossip and information hoarding. Tell everyone everything.
2. Ask for and give clear performance expectations. Know what your role is and make it clear what you expect from others. Define quality and measure success. Leave as little as possible to guessing, but do not obsess with measurement.
3. Create growth opportunities for yourself and others. Do not stay in the same place doing the same thing. Expand your capacity for quality work and influence.
4. Listen and ask to be heard. If you have suggestions for improvement, make them. If you are wrong, accept it. Take time to listen to others, and they will in turn listen to you. Nothing decreases fear like listening.
5. Stay in a positive social environment where colleagues feel safe. Create a safe space, free from gossip and criticism. If you do, it will grow and could impact the whole organization.

David turned his work group around in 18 months, and within three years, they won a national quality award. Some people had thrived in the fear culture because they used it as leverage to evoke power. But in the light of transparency, those people left the organization; and those who stayed embraced excellence.