

DEVELOPMENT

Organizational Anxiety

It's chronic, but you *can* break the cycle.

By Jeffrey A. Miller

Anxiety in the corporate world has reached an all-time high. Terrorism alerts, the war with Iraq, corporate accounting scandals, and the sharp downturn of the stock market have created an atmosphere of uncertainty that puts nearly everyone on edge. Add to those challenges some of the everyday workplace stresses—tight competition, budget cuts, doing more with less—and you

have a recipe for anxiety levels that can easily outstrip the ability of an organization and its people to cope.

Despite its bad rap, anxiety itself is neither good nor bad. It's a normal, natural response to something we perceive to be threatening. When we become anxious, we respond in a number of predictable ways that are variations of our hardwired fight, flight, and freeze responses.

If our anxiety is short-term, it can infuse us with a burst of energy, sharpening our focus and mental acuity. Jane's anxiety-based response of jumping out of the way of an oncoming bus protects her from getting hit. But longer term, more chronic anxiety is likely to wear us down, resulting in acting-out behaviors and relationship disturbances.

Take the example of Dennis, who lost credibility in an anxiety-driven argument with his boss over a discretionary merit increase. The boss, his own anxiety rising from Dennis's outburst, dug in his heels and told Dennis there would be no exceptions to the normal salary review schedule, regardless of what he had indicated in earlier conversations.

Is your organization anxious?

Just as people become anxious, so do organizations. Some of the symptoms of organizational anxiety include people

- taking sides on issues instead of taking stands; forming coalitions and cliques
- claiming turf and feuding over territory; backstabbing
- blaming and scapegoating; focusing on the shortcomings of particular people or departments
- distancing; not saying what they really think in meetings or communicating with each other, literally hiding out in their offices or cubicles.

The results of this organizational anxiety can be faltering productivity and morale and a sense of overwhelm on both the group and individual levels. Flexibility, objectivity, and creativity give way to tunnel vision, resistance to change, and faulty decision making.

Anxiety is highly contagious and when unchecked will spread across an organization rapidly. Fortunately, calm is equally contagious. Like a pebble that creates wide ripples in a pond, one relatively calmer person in an anxious system can have a strong positive effect for all involved.

Creating the ripples

The first step towards becoming calm in an agitated system is to recognize your own personal anxiety triggers and signals. We may blame disturbing events for setting off our anxiety, but it's not so much specific events that upset us as our individual reactions to them. When a customer turns Stan down, he dusts himself off and goes on to make the next cold call. Leslie, in the same situation, feels rejected and dispirited, and has to recover for a while before attempting further contacts. If you can put your finger on the workplace situations and relationships that trouble you most, you can learn to manage them more effectively just by lowering your anxiety about them.

One surprisingly effective method for reducing anxiety is to try to predict exactly how you'll behave when a particular upsetting event occurs. As you engage the thinking part of your brain in remembering how you've reacted in similar situations and analyzing how you're likely to respond this time, you'll suppress the domination of the more primitive brain structures that initiate and maintain anxiety. Then, you'll be free to chart a new, more effective course of action.

Another way to reduce anxiety is to focus on facts rather than feelings. Feelings can tell us that we're anxious and experiencing an emotional reaction—feeling mad, glad, sad, confused, stuck, and so forth. But what feelings don't tell us is how to resolve the issue that led to that emotional reaction. That takes thinking. As we shift our emphasis from how we feel to how we understand the issue, we again suppress the lizard-like functions and energize the more advanced ones. We can better differentiate fact from fear, foresee the consequences of our behavioral choices, and select the approach we think is best.

Another shift in focus can also greatly reduce anxiety: the shift from emphasis on the other to emphasis on the self. As long

as we hold onto the illusion that "If only Jamie were different, this entire problem would go away," we do nothing but perpetuate the problem. Experience tells us that there's no way we're going to get others to change, and yet we still see the solution to so many problems as the other person acting differently. Relationships are about interactions and transactions among people. When any person in a relationship makes a change in how he or she relates, the whole relationship changes.

Being the change

Consider the case of Roberta and Sanford, colleagues in the tax department of a large utility company. Roberta, the supervisor, felt that Sanford, a sales tax specialist, was underperforming in his job. Despite superior knowledge in his field, he showed little initiative, had trouble making decisions, and regularly failed to meet his filing deadlines. Roberta discussed her concerns with Sanford in several performance reviews, but nothing seemed to change. Then one day, she overheard Sanford on the telephone telling his wife he wished "Roberta would stop micromanaging" and give him some real responsibility. Confused, Roberta asked Sanford to lunch to discuss what she'd heard. Sanford pointed out that Roberta, in her zeal for detail and accuracy, redid most of his work, held onto it until the last minute, and then gave it to him for extensive revision of format, style, and language.

Roberta took Sanford's concerns to heart and decided to try altering her part of their working arrangement. She would still review his work but would offer her comments only verbally, allowing him to accept or reject any or all of them. The strategy worked just as planned. Roberta was freed from the exhausting burden of a double workload. Sanford paid careful attention to Roberta's input, but made his own decisions and was able to move through his work with greater confidence, efficiency, and pride.

The Six-Second Vacation

For many people, the greatest workplace anxiety comes from not knowing what to expect next. Fran used to “die a thousand deaths” when her supervisor would summon her into a meeting unexpectedly. She remembers having felt the same way in school when faced with a pop quiz. Fran’s anxiety in unpredictable situations has come under greater control since she learned a technique called the Six-Second Vacation. She likes this approach because it’s quick and can be used in any setting, even while sitting across the desk from her boss.

It works like this: First, inhale for two seconds, sending the air wherever you need a little help. It can be sent to any part of body, mind, or spirit, or you can direct it to a worry or concern. Next, ex-

hale for two seconds, releasing all muscle tension in your body, starting at your head and moving to your toes. Think of yourself as a calm, still pool. Finally, do nothing for two seconds. As you practice the Six-Second Vacation, you will find yourself capable of more calm in anxious circumstances than you might ever have expected.

Although events and situations that set off anxiety are often beyond our control, everyone in an anxious organization can take emotional leadership. That means managing situations by taking control of your own reactions when anxiety starts spiraling upward. Typically, people can have a significant effect on others lower in the organization, at their same level, and one or two levels up. Top leaders, because they touch more people within an organi-

zation, can have an especially positive influence. When they’re able to become even a bit calmer than the rest of the organization, they calm the entire group.

Some people have a natural talent for managing anxiety, but the important implications for training are that those skills can be learned and taught.

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