

Let's Wipe Out Systemic Mistrust

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Abstract

Many organizations are inflicted with systemic mistrust, an invisible and highly contagious condition that stifles individual, team, and overall effectiveness. If left unchecked systemic mistrust can become part of corporate culture, resulting in chronic morale and productivity problems. OD practitioners can make an important contribution by helping organizations build trust and drive out systemic mistrust. This article defines systemic mistrust, explains why it often mysteriously resists treatment, and offers tips for eradicating it.



Introduction

Remember Legionnaire's Disease? It's an acute bacterial disease that incubates in water. In 1976, an outbreak occurred at a state American Legion convention in Philadelphia, hence its name. Aerosolized water droplets contaminated with the bacteria were found in the air conditioning system. In other words, it was *in the air*. More recently, we were shaken by the news accounts of people all over the world who contracted the SARS virus simply by breathing it in. Similarly, organizational mistrust is often *in the air*. While bacterial infections lead to physical illness and sometimes death, mistrust leads to a whole host of personal, interpersonal, and organizational problems. It starts out as a vague uneasiness, followed by a feeling of vulnerability, second-guessing, and paranoia, culminating in alienation, backstabbing, and a "Look out for #1" mentality. In my experience, mistrust is the leading cause of organizational sickness. If left untreated the illness develops into *systemic mistrust*: a pervasive, invisible epidemic that can destroy an organization. OD practitioners can provide an invaluable service by helping organizations identify and wipe out systemic mistrust. The purpose of this article is to provide you with some tips for assessing and dealing with systemic mistrust.

What is Systemic Mistrust?

A brief overview of trust will help us understand systemic mistrust. As humans we have a natural drive to develop our full potential, but certain conditions are necessary to support and nurture this drive. Since we are social beings who depend on others to meet our needs—no person is an island—trust is an *a priori* requirement for healthy and effective functioning. Trust can be defined as believing others have your best interests at heart; mistrust is the

opposite, believing others do not have your best interests at heart. Trust inspires confidence; mistrust evokes fear—ravaging human effectiveness. Jack Gibb defined trust as the opposite of fear. Eric Erikson described life's first developmental task as trust versus mistrust, and Abraham Maslow maintained that safety (i.e., trust) is a *sine qua non* for growth. Whether or not people can trust others impacts all subsequent development for good or bad. By extension, the same is true of teams and organizations.

In determining whether or not to trust others, we evaluate their behavior according to two criteria: consistency and sincerity. Consistency has to do with the predictability of people's behavior, while sincerity concerns people's motives, which cannot be directly observed but are inferred from what they say and do. Trust requires both consistency *and* sincerity; one without the other is insufficient. We not only need to believe the other person will do the right thing, but will do it for the right reasons. Trust is a dynamic variable that fluctuates up or down, depending on how we interpret each other's behavior. It is common to trust someone more at one point and less at another. We make adjustments like this on a conscious or subconscious level all the time.

In an organization, systemic trust is a shared set of beliefs that you can generally count on others to be consistent and sincere. These beliefs give people a feeling of psychological safety, freeing them up to develop their potential by pursuing growth values such as creativity, altruism, innovation, and collaborative partnering. High levels of productivity and morale follow, enhancing an organization's vitality and competitive position. In contrast, systemic mistrust is a shared set of beliefs that you cannot generally count on others to be consistent and/or sincere, triggering fear and apprehension. When people become infected with systemic mistrust, fear causes them to focus narrowly on survival and self-protection by pursuing such defensive values as power, control, expediency, and manipulation, which has a devastating impact on productivity and morale.

Some brave souls struggle to move beyond the disease process to preserve their creativity, but it eventually takes its toll on their energy and enthusiasm.

Systemic mistrust is highly contagious. It is incubated when individuals form negative assumptions about others and treat these assumptions as facts; it spreads when the negative assumptions are shared with others who also treat them as facts. In everyday language we refer to this as talking about people behind their back. These exchanges may appear to be benign, but systemic mistrust is a form of covert terrorism that always has a destructive impact. If left untreated, it can develop into a full-blown epidemic. In fact, sometimes it becomes so deeply embedded in corporate culture that it functions at the meta-level; people get so accustomed to its presence that they regard it as "normal," almost as if it is supposed to be there. To the casual observer it may appear to be business as usual as people go about their various tasks, but to those infected the workplace is a battlefield full of land mines, booby traps, and treachery.

Why Does Systemic Mistrust Resist Treatment?

Now you might think that people would want to get rid of systemic mistrust but, since the disease attacks the mind, the afflicted often exhibit *la belle indifférence*, or complacency toward their symptoms. You see, when people regard their perceptions as facts, they lack motivation to check them out. Even convincing people that they should check out their assumptions would not wipe out systemic mistrust completely, however, because some of them have a vested interest in keeping it. This highlights the sheer madness of the disease. Sometimes these vested interests become institutionalized. Unions, for example, grew out of mistrust toward management and depend on continuing mistrust for their survival and growth. In more subtle cases, people sometimes:

- Become addicted to the drama surrounding an environment of mistrust. They get a “fix” by talking about the dynamics and plotting their strategies. In fact when things are going along too smoothly, they may even start a rumor just to make something happen.
- Exploit mistrust as a way of building or maintaining a power base (“We’ve got to stick together or they’ll take what’s rightfully ours”). Such use of mistrust leads to conflict and internal competition.
- Perpetuate mistrust to divert attention from their mistakes or inadequacies. Systemic mistrust remains undetected as long as we keep pointing my fingers at others (“How can I do my job if they never tell the truth?”).
- Offer mistrust as a justification for their actions (“What else could I do?”), or as an excuse for not doing something (“I decided not to say anything because I don’t trust them”). Mistrust makes a convenient scapegoat.
- Use mistrust as a rationale to resist change (“I’m sure there’s more to this than they’re telling us”).
- Harbor mistrust to get revenge for perceived wrongdoing (“I’ll get even with him if it’s the last thing I do”).
- Use mistrust to manipulate others, by making them prove that they are trustworthy (“How do I know you can be trusted?”).

Vested interests such as these are tough to assess because no one admits to having them. In fact, frequently people are not even consciously aware that they are using mistrust to serve such hidden purposes. While this might seem discouraging, organizational leaders usually sense when such underlying dynamics are operating—it is important to trust your instincts—and can find corroborating evidence by holding candid conversations with others. Then they can mount a campaign to combat it. In the next section, I will present a number of approaches which I have

found to be effective over the years.

How Can We Wipe Out Systemic Mistrust?

Like many other diseases, systemic mistrust *never* goes away by itself but must be killed or “eradicated.” While some strains are more resistant than others, there is a very powerful treatment: honesty and openness. Systemic mistrust is a cowardly bacteria. It hides in the dark and waits for opportunities to infect unsuspecting victims; however, it cannot survive if exposed to the light of honesty and openness. At Enron, for example, fear of reprisals kept many employees from expressing their legitimate concerns about company policies—questioning the prevailing logic was largely regarded as the kiss of death—ultimately resulting in the organization’s untimely demise. Any time “groupthink” blocks open communication, you can bet that systemic mistrust has gained the upper hand. Here are ten tips that can help you wipe out the disease and nurse a sick organization back to health:

1. People in organizations always consider themselves trustworthy (“You can count on me; it’s the others you should watch out for”). In fact, they’re often surprised and defensive when confronted with data that they are not trusted, such as during 360-degree feedback. When it comes to trust, however, it is not how we perceive ourselves but how others perceive us that counts. Actively seeking feedback is the best way to close the gap between our self-perceptions and others’ perceptions of us.
2. While we do not have control over other people’s behavior, we do have control over our own. The single most effective way to increase trust, therefore, is to ask ourselves, “What can I do to be more trustworthy?” If we do this on a routine basis, systemic mistrust could never gain a foothold.
3. Humans are complex beings. What you see is not always what you get. In addition to logical reasoning, we’re influenced by emotional factors and subconscious and unconscious

urges and desires. There are even times when it is tough to understand our own behavior (“I’m not sure why I did that”). One method I use to deal with this is self-confrontation. Before acting, I often ask myself, “What’s the real reason I want to do this?” This helps me bring my hidden motives to the surface so I can be more honest with others and myself.

4. Evaluate beliefs according to their impact on trust. Beliefs that foster trust should be encouraged, while beliefs that foster mistrust should be reassessed.
5. Establish trust as an organizational value and develop norms that define acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. An example of an effective norm is *we don’t talk about people behind their back but deal with our issues directly*. People should be held accountable for behavior that is inconsistent with the norms.
6. Always check out assumptions about other people’s intentions. Never treat assumptions as facts.
7. Never accept mistrust as an excuse. People should be expected to resolve their trust issues.
8. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Like mistrust, trust is contagious. If we demonstrate that we trust others, they will be more inclined to trust us. In addition, say positive things about people. Mistrust focuses on the negative. By emphasizing the positive, we model behavior we want others to emulate.
9. Actively identify and remove barriers to trust. Whenever I enter an organization I always ask, “How well do people trust each other around here?” This gives people permission to *discuss the undiscussable*, bringing issues out in the open where they can be assessed and treated.
10. Sometimes people bring trust issues with them to the workplace. While these issues may not be caused by the organization, they always have a negative impact on performance and working relationships. It is a good practice, therefore, to raise this topic with people when appropriate, and to suggest that they seek coaching or other professional help.

Conclusion

Mistrust is not just a necessary evil we are forced to endure. It is a disease. If left untreated it develops into systemic mistrust, devouring performance and morale. Systemic mistrust is a creativity killer, the archenemy of organizational success. It takes many forms and is often illusive, but it can be treated effectively with honesty and openness. There is, however, no permanent cure for the disease. It can be wiped out in one place only to surface somewhere else. Building organizational trust is a process of continuous improvement. OD practitioners can make an important contribution by helping organizations improve trust and eradicate mistrust. By doing this they are making the work environment healthier for everyone.

