



By Jeffrey Miller

# LEARNING WAYS TO MANAGE ANXIETY

Managing anxiety can be vital for any business. Helping your organization manage excessive, chronic anxiety is pertinent for any employer. Ensuring employees operate on principles rather than on emotions is key for working in stressful or unsettled situations.

When people stay in low-grade panic mode, they can no longer think clearly or creatively. They make irrational decisions and when the irrational decisions start adding up, it can begin to take its toll on business. Of course, some anxiety in the workplace is normal and even desirable. It goes back to our primitive survival instincts. All organizations face threats, both internal and external, and anxiety is an instinctive response to any threat to one's survival. But when the natural chronic anxiety in an organization rises to an excessive level, they start operating on "fight or flight" instinct rather than thinking clearly, creatively and in a flexible manner.

Furthermore, anxiety is contagious. In order to relieve your anxiety, you unwittingly pass it on to a co-worker. He or she passes it on to someone else, who pass it on to yet another employee. Before long, the entire organization or department is trapped in a cycle of anxiety that seems to have no clear starting point. All the while, the underlying cause goes unaddressed.

Perhaps the anxious employees succumb to singling out one person as a scapegoat or they can't take the stress any longer and leave the company. A very common scenario is when people are let go to "solve the problem," which only reappears later with the new employee since the

system that caused the problem hasn't really changed.

Rather than accepting the cost of excessive anxiety as a way of life, you can change your organization for the better. It takes only one person to break the destructive cycle of anxiety. Following are some suggestions:

- **Strive to be a predictable leader.** The least stressful companies to work for are those in which the rational system is a

prevail. Employees tend to disregard the rational system when the emotional system contradicts it. They will, for instance, ignore their written job descriptions if the emotional system rewards them for doing something else, and disregard policies and procedures that conflict with the interpersonal ecology. The emotional system of an organization is simply more compelling than the rational system. People apprehend it with their entire bodies. It's personal.

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fairly accurate description of what actually transpires on the average workday, which includes stated goals, values, policies, procedures, and job roles. This means the rational system and emotional system are reasonably well aligned. What the leaders of such companies have in common is their predictability. If you want to guess what the leader will do in any given situation, check out the company's mission statement, current objectives, policy manuals and reporting structure. The leader's behaviour is consistent with what the rational system of the company would lead you to expect.

When there is a conflict between the rational system of an organization and its emotional system, the latter will usually

- **Map the anxiety in your situation.** Since anxiety feels uncomfortable, we tend to play "Hot Potato" with it. We dilute the anguish by passing it on to someone else. When you understand this mechanism, it's possible to figure out where your anxiety originated. Draw a circle that represents you and other circles labeled with the names of those around you. Use arrows

to indicate where anxiety is coming from and where it is going. Once you've mapped your anxiety, you can use the following techniques to help you defuse it.

- **Learn to take an "I-position."** When you have to solve a problem, it's tempting to worry about how your decision will affect the feelings of other people. But keep in mind that you'll never please everyone. Trying to control the reactions of other people is anxiety-driven behaviour and it results in only more anxiety. To take an I-position, you need to make a principle-based decision rather than one based on feelings and personalities. It's true that taking an I-position may temporarily cause

anxiety to rise. However, in the long run, the entire system will calm down.

- **Be calm when you are in a situation** that makes you feel anxious, you must distance yourself from it before you can think clearly. If you're in the middle of a meeting, conversation, or other incident that is triggering your anxiety, try taking a quick break.

- **Correct an overfunctioning/underfunctioning relationship.** Overfunctioners take over responsibilities that belong to another person. Underfunctioners allow this to happen. It is a reciprocal relationship—neither can exist without the other—and both parties are reacting to anxiety. Needless to say, too much of this type of behaviour is unhealthy for both people and for the organization as a whole.

Fortunately, either party can break the cycle by taking the all-important I-position. If you are an overfunctioner, realize you are not responsible for someone else's success or failure. You cannot do his

job for him. If he fails, he fails (but he probably won't). On the other hand, if you are the underfunctioner in the relationship, you must realize that your long-term passive approach serves to maintain the other person's overfunctioning behaviours (micromanaging, controlling, etc.).

Since anxiety is a very complex phenomenon, many companies need professional help in identifying its many permutations and sorting out its root causes. But don't despair. When you make an effort to rise above your own anxiety, you may start a "ripple effect" that transforms your entire organization.

I never cease to be amazed by the power one person can possess. Since everyone in an organization is connected, you can't change your own behaviour without changing the entire system. It's impossible. Sometimes these changes are subtle, sometimes they're profound. For example, I had one client who learned to manage his own anxiety and as a result, averted a strike, saved his company \$6 million, and earned a major promotion.

Taking responsibility for yourself—giving up the need to blame or control others—actually requires a tremendous amount of courage. That's the stuff leaders are made of. And when enough people are able to manage their anxiety and find this kind of courage, well, that's the formula for a successful organization.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

*Jeffrey A. Miller has worked with countless anxious organizations during his career—and has seen many of them come up with innovative and unexpected solutions to their problems. His myriad experiences have given him a unique perspective on creating healthy workplaces. Through his company, Jeffrey Miller + Associates, he helps businesses attain key goals and objectives by increasing their organizational effectiveness. He is active in professional circles, having published a number of articles and led workshops on his key area of interest, improving workplace effectiveness through the application of systems concepts.*

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