How to Fix the Toxic Effects of Conflict Avoidance

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Summary

- Self-actualized professionals stay solution-focused, while shadow behaviors create toxic workplace dynamics.
- Dramatic cultures prioritize politeness over problem-solving, leading to gossip and avoidance of other toxic behaviors.
- Ten practical strategies help firms build a healthy culture in which lawyers thrive, issues are resolved, and the firm is profitable.

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The Thriving Lawyer Column

Every law firm has a personality. A collective emotional fingerprint that both shapes and is shaped by how people interact, solve problems, handle conflict, and confront uncertainty. This culture emerges from colleagues' capacity to recognize and regulate a shared emotionality, which can be passionate and authentic or include frustration, despair, fear, anxiety, anger, and apathy.

Dr. William Sparks's work on leadership reveals a crucial insight: The difference between thriving and struggling firms often comes down to whether their people operate from self-actualization or fear.

The Self-Actualized Professional

Self-actualized lawyers and staff are people who have moved beyond concerns over basic survival and other deficiency needs. They're purpose-driven rather than reactive and self-protective, approaching challenges with calm, confidence, and objectivity. These professionals don't take disagreements personally, stay solution-focused under pressure, and maintain their performance and well-being even during difficulties.

When a firm is populated by self-actualized individuals, the culture reflects these qualities: communication flows openly and honestly, trust runs deep, diverse perspectives are welcomed, and people take ownership of both problems and solutions. The individuals, and therefore the firm, are resilient and successful.

But even accomplished legal professionals have a "shadow"—that part of themselves that can emerge under stress and is fueled by negative emotions such as fear, anger, or jealousy. There is no eliminating the shadow. Instead, the key to self-actualization is to recognize and regulate it rather than succumb to it. As Carl Jung noted, "We meet our destiny on the road we took to avoid it." When fear drives our actions, we ironically create the very outcomes we're trying to prevent.

The Culture Spiral

And that's where many firms get stuck. The firm's partners are committed to creating a positive culture, a "kinder, gentler firm," but something feels off. Yes, people are pleasant, but they are also frustrated. They complain to each other about each other instead of addressing issues directly with the relevant colleague. Partners don't provide constructive feedback to associates and instead avoid working with the associates and bad-mouth them to other partners. Gossip and unresolved complaints fill the hallways while crucial conversations with the right people rarely happen. Difficult questions go unasked, uncomfortable situations are avoided, and everyone defaults to "it'll work out" or "I'm too busy right now to deal with this now."

This is what Dr. Sparks calls a "dramatic culture"—one where conflict avoidance trumps candor, objectivity, and problem-solving. It's where individuals' fear of rejection shadow—the shadow side of the natural human drive to affiliate—dominates culture. While these environments feel polite and friendly on the surface, the real issues are just under the waterline, causing angst as they are smoothed over rather than resolved. Triangulation and indirect communication are the norm, with people hoping time will heal what direct action could fix immediately.

It may seem contradictory that lawyers—professionals who handle conflict and pressure for a living—would be conflict-avoidant within their own firms. Yet this pattern is surprisingly common. The fear of rejection can cause even seasoned litigators to lose their objectivity when dealing with internal firm dynamics. And, to make matters worse, if left unchecked, the frustration over the failure to address problems often leads to other culture-killing behaviors such as anger, negativity, passive-aggressiveness, territorialism, micromanagement, bullying, manipulation, lying, and sabotage.

The Path Forward

The question isn't whether your firm has cultural challenges—just about every organization does. The question is whether you're ready to address them directly rather than hoping they'll resolve themselves. These tips create a comprehensive approach to building a more direct, solution-focused culture.

1. **Recognize your own shadow.** There is no avoiding your shadow—only amplifying its impact through denial. Identify your specific triggers: Which situations, people, or pressures cause you to react rather than respond? Develop a personal strategy for staying solution-focused when stress hits, whether that's preparation, taking a pause, asking clarifying questions, or reframing the situation.

2. **Recognize colleagues' shadows.** Learn to spot when team members are operating from fear rather than clarity. Are they avoiding difficult conversations, making decisions based on anxiety, or becoming defensive? Understanding their triggers helps you respond with empathy rather than react to their reactions, thus amplifying both your own and your colleagues' shadows. Don't take anyone's shadow behaviors personally.

3. **Create psychological safety for dissent.** Actively encourage expression of concerns, doubts, and criticism. Make it clear that questioning decisions or raising uncomfortable issues is not only acceptable but valued. Ask directly: "What are we not seeing?" or "What could go wrong with this approach?"

4. **Make honest feedback the norm.** Provide critical feedback regularly and constructively. Focus on specific behaviors and outcomes rather than personality. Frame feedback as investment in growth rather than criticism of value. Debriefing every project, starting with what went well, normalizes critical thinking about performance.

5. **Confront problems early and directly.** Address poor performance, unrealistic expectations, and obvious problems immediately rather than hoping they'll resolve themselves. The longer issues fester, the more intense the eventual confrontation becomes.

6. **Set ambitious but achievable standards.** Establish challenging performance goals that push people beyond their comfort zones while remaining realistic. Clear expectations eliminate the ambiguity that feeds the dramatic culture.

7. **Institutionalize constructive dissent.** Formally appoint rotating "devil's advocates" to critique performance, plans, and decisions. Make challenging ideas a structured part of your process, not something that happens on occasion.

8. **Practice direct communication.** Replace "we should probably . . ." with "we will . . ." Replace "maybe we could consider . . ." with "let's decide on . . ." Be specific about timelines, responsibilities, and outcomes.

9. **Address gossip immediately.** When someone brings you a complaint about a colleague, ask: "Have you spoken directly to them about this?" If not, either facilitate that conversation or redirect the person to have it themself.

10 **Celebrate productive conflict.** Publicly acknowledge when colleagues engage in healthy debate or raise difficult issues. Make it clear that working through disagreements strengthens rather than threatens relationships and the firm.

If this resonates with your experience, you're not alone. The good news is that the dramatic culture isn't permanent—it is a pattern that can be changed with these strategies, a little courage, and a commitment to direct, honest communication.

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