

Developing Ethical Leadership to Conquer Employee Cynicism at Workplace

Avnish Sharma*, Aneesya Sharma**

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to underline the notion of employee cynicism and understand the role of ethical leadership in conquering employee cynicism and developing positive employees' outcomes at the workplace. This paper reviews some select articles on employee cynicism and ethical leadership. It briefly demonstrates the role of ethical leadership in reducing cynicism at the workplace. Ethical and value-driven practices of leaders help in minimizing cynical culture in organizations. This paper proposes a model of employee cynicism and helps in understanding ethical leaders' role in reducing employee cynicism. This study saves the time of organizational leaders in understanding the attitude of employee cynicism that considerably hampers the organizational goals and suggests few ethical leadership strategies for reducing employee cynicism. This study presents relevant information in a condensed way.

Keywords: Cynicism, Employee Cynicism, Ethical Leadership

Introduction

The word cynicism came from the ancient Greek word "Kyon," which mean "Dog" (Dean & Others, 1998). According to the Oxford dictionary (2011), "a cynic is defined as one who has the disposition to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions."

Cynicism is "an attitude distinguished by a dislike for and distrust of others" (Cook & others, 1954, p. 148).

Cynicism at the workplace can increase the intensity of bad behavior of the employees, and it can be a red flag

indicator, indicating that something is seriously wrong in the organization. Cynicism is a sign of lack of employee trust, which can adversely affect the employees' relationships, commitments, and performance, which are essential for achieving the organizational objectives. Therefore, minimizing employee cynicism should be one of the essential priorities of workplace leaders.

Employee Cynicism: The Negativity that Hurts the Workplace

Employee cynicism is defined as the belief that leaders care only about themselves and are not sincere or honest. It establishes the attitude or behavior of someone willing to let other people be harmed to get advantage at the workplace (Constantino, 2017).

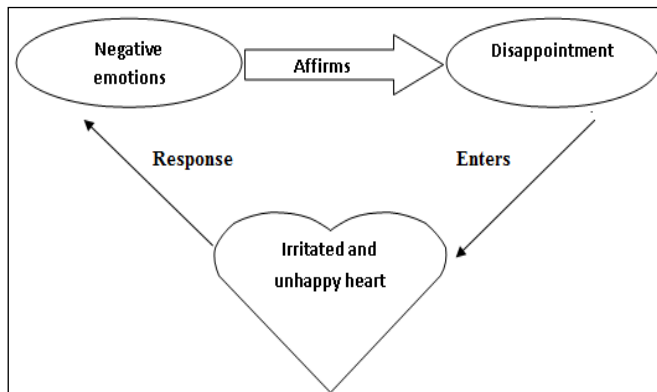
Employee cynicism is toxic to the working culture of an organization and spreads like a misguided tweet or blog post. It is an expression of uncertainty that develops in a working environment that lacks ethics, where employees don't feel valued, and information is withheld. When it flourishes in an organization, it adversely affects the organizational culture and outcomes. In a research conducted by a global engineering company on over 800 employees, Taylor Roberts and Drea Zigarmi found that cynical employees usually lack work passion (Fowler, 2017) and perform below the performance standards.

Employee cynicism is related to an internal state of mind that's made up of employee's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It shapes their perception of what they see, feel, and act in the workplace. Though cynicism itself is not an emotion, it can activate and support many life-sucking emotions, including aggression, anger, frustration, hostility, hatred, disgust, annoyance, doubt, anxiety, and fear. All these emotions adversely affect the

* Institute of Business Management, GLA University, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, India. Email: avnishgla@gmail.com

** Assistant Professor, Institute of Business Management, GLA University, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, India.
Email: aneesya.panicker@gla.ac.in

working environment, mental and physical well-being, relationships, level of trust, and operational efficiencies (Altman, 2010).



Source: Adapted from Altman, L. (2010), "Cynicism – The Price We All Pay"

Fig. 1: Cycle of Employee Cynicism

Fig. 1 states that employees experience negative emotions due to their fear and doubts about organization and leadership practices, leaders' behavior, and decisions. These negative emotions cause a feeling of disappointment, which develops an irritated, and an unhappy heart. Employees start generating a sense of helplessness, which results in inactive participation at the workplace that declines their level of job involvement and commitment. This is how employee cynicism continues as a cyclical process in an organization.

At the workplace, you can hear cynic's rationale expressed with statements like these:

- I have been "cheated" too many times in the past by my boss;
- My organization says something and does something else;
- This workplace is a tough place to work, and one has to become very hard for survival;
- My leader is dishonest and thinks of his benefits first, etc.

Many times, these statements carry some truths, and sometimes they carry old wounds and misconceptions about the boss and the workplace. But these negative experiences can poison the employee's creativity, involvement, and trust.

Dimensions of Organization Cynicism

Most of the researchers considered organizational cynicism as an employees' job attitude and classified it into three significant dimensions, including:

The Cognitive Dimension

Dean and others (1998, p. 346), defined a cognitive dimension as "cynicism being thought and experienced through cognition." Stanley and others (2005) defined this dimension "as the disbelief of stated motives".

The Affective Dimension

This is also defined as the emotional dimension of cynicism. Andersson (1996), Andersson and Bateman (1997), and O'Leary (2003) viewed the emotional component as "the feelings of frustration and disappointment."

The Behavioral Dimension

Turner and others (2001) stated that this dimension is connected with the intention to act. It includes hostile impugning and defamation of motives, unfriendliness, psychological exit, and detachment (O'Brien & others, 2004).

Altogether, these three dimensions define the overall nature and give the glimpse of cynicism construct briefly.

Conceptualizing Ethical Leadership

Ethics can be explained in terms of a tool that guides the conduct, attitude, and behavior of a person. In organizations, ethics play a vital role in developing a sense of honesty (Ponnu & Tennakoon, 2009; Yukl, 2006), sincerity, equality, transparency, and the trustworthy relationship of an individual with colleagues and others working in the same organization (Karakose, 2007). A leader acts as a role model for its followers and motivates them to adopt the right approaches and path to achieve predefined goals. The leaders demonstrate an appropriate style of functioning to achieve excellence in performance

in their functional areas. Thereby, they represent a role model for others to emulate in an organization.

Brown, Trevino and Harrison (2005) defined the social learning perspective concerning ethical leadership. According to the social learning perspective, for developing and carrying the image as ethical leaders in the eyes of followers, leaders must be trustworthy role models. Ethical leaders are considered as sources of guidance because of their charisma and trustworthiness as role models and seeking attention to their modeled behavior. For enhancing leadership attractiveness, two characteristics of models are power and status (Bandura, 1986). Most leaders hold authority because of their status relative to their followers. When leaders treat others moderately, he or she becomes attractive to followers. Leaders' fairness and trustworthiness increase their role model effectiveness. Ethical leaders are considered as credible because of their reliability and practices they sermonize (Brown & Trevino, 2006).

Brown et al. (2005) have defined ethical leadership as an "expression of normatively suitable conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and encouraged such conduct to followers through two-way communication viz., reinforcement, and sound decision-making."

Employee Cynicism and Ethical Leadership

"Employee cynicism starts with the behaviors and actions of dysfunctional leaders, and its spread can be slowed through the honesty and competency of true leaders."

Cynicism can defeat employees and leave them exhausted. Leaders play a vital role in limiting the development of negative attitude and culture through proactive measures such as regular observation of employee's attitude and behavior, continuous feedback and empowering them through involvement in decision-making process of the organization.

When employees feel esteemed and empowered in their jobs, they automatically think confident in adopting new ways of performing their duties and thus experience less cynicism towards workplace practices and decisions. Happy and satisfied employees help to create a happy

work environment and build optimism for the rest of the organization.

Ethical leaders use their proactive orientations to make themselves aware of the potential developments of a cynical culture in the organization, which are contributing to employees' negative attitudes. They express normatively proper conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and encourage such conduct to cynical employees through the means of two-way communication, reinforcement, and sound decision-making (Brown et al., 2005). They avoid discriminatory behavior and develop firm faith in chasing the principles of equality, fairness, and unbiased decision. This way, they foster employees' commitment, reduced employee turnover, and disengagement.

Ethical leaders are people oriented. They avoid serving self-interests and believe in promoting greater good through the use of social power (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leadership researchers studied leaders across various organizations and identified eight common ethical values, namely integrity, reliability, kindness, social justice, strong character, humbleness, endurance, and commitment to purpose. All these personal characteristics and values can be learned, but are mainly inherited from one's religious or spiritual base. Once employees perceive that their leader's personality is build on these traits, their negativity declines and commitment with the organization is increased automatically.

Research ascertained that ethical leadership develops a sense of security, motivation, passion, initiative, equality, and gumption, which are essential in dropping employee's cynicism and improving their commitment towards the organization.

Research says, to deal with the ill effects of cynicism, ethical leaders consider the following alternatives:

- Regularly observing own emotions and employees' emotions to keep a right balance of both;
- Creating a dialogue with cynical employees to understand and vent frustrations and concerns;
- Empowering and motivating employees by providing adequate resources to develop a reasonable degree of happiness and job involvement;
- Offering employees a choice of making inputs in organizational plans and decisions, if they suggest something great, following it and giving them credit;
- Developing equal opportunity and transparency in decision making and actions;

- Breaking down double standards between management and employees;
- Providing continuous support and discussing goals; working on positive reinforcement, in which if negative employees contribute and shine in an area, they motivate them to work continuously in that area to maximize their contribution and to receive performance awards; and
- Creating an ethical organization by developing ethical standards and moral guidance for employees and motivating them to report ethical violations.

All these ethical leadership strategies act as a catalyst in developing the higher degree of employee trust and commitment by conquering their cynicism at the workplace.

Conclusion

Employees may accept their responsibilities and accountability towards their workplace due to the ethical and trustworthy behavior of leaders, but when they realize that the working organization somewhere lacks in honesty and level of integrity, their morale, work loyalty, dedication, and organizational commitment get challenged (Nair & Kamalanabhan, 2010).

Employee cynicism can lead to severe consequences for the organization, including lowered productivity and low morale of employees, which can hamper the revenue generation (Argyle, 1989).

Cynical employees are dangerous for the organizations, but understanding the motives of their behavior and finding ways to treat it well can underline effective working relationships and healthy environment for all.

Ethical leadership behavior plays a vital role in the prevention and development of a cynical culture in organizations by practicing ethical and value-driven practices at the workplace. By adequately handling cynical employees, ethical leaders can enhance their commitment towards the organization. It is believed that employees with a positive attitude can spread their optimism to the rest of an organization and help in maximizing organizational productivity.

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