



## Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal

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### Article information:

To cite this document:

Nobin Thomas, Sonakshi Gupta, (2018) "Organizational cynicism – what every manager needs to know", Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal, Vol. 32 Issue: 2, pp.16-19, <https://doi.org/10.1108/DLO-01-2017-0005>

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# Organizational cynicism – what every manager needs to know

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## Introduction

Cynicism dates back to the early fifth century when the “Cynic School” was set up in Greece. Though the meaning of cynicism has changed over time, society still regards cynics as people detached from the evils of society. In a work context, this detachment manifests itself as an attitude, most often expressed in terms of frustration, hopelessness, or distrust toward organizations and managers.

An early study by [Kanter and Mirvis \(1989\)](#) found 40 per cent of American workers and 43 per cent of supervisors and managers to be cynical. Surprisingly, almost 49 per cent were of the opinion that if given a chance, management will take undue advantage of workers, and 41 per cent of respondents were doubtful of whatever management tells them. Eight years later, another study conducted by [Reichers et al. \(1997\)](#), reported that 48 per cent of the employees as high in organizational cynicism.

## Organizational cynicism

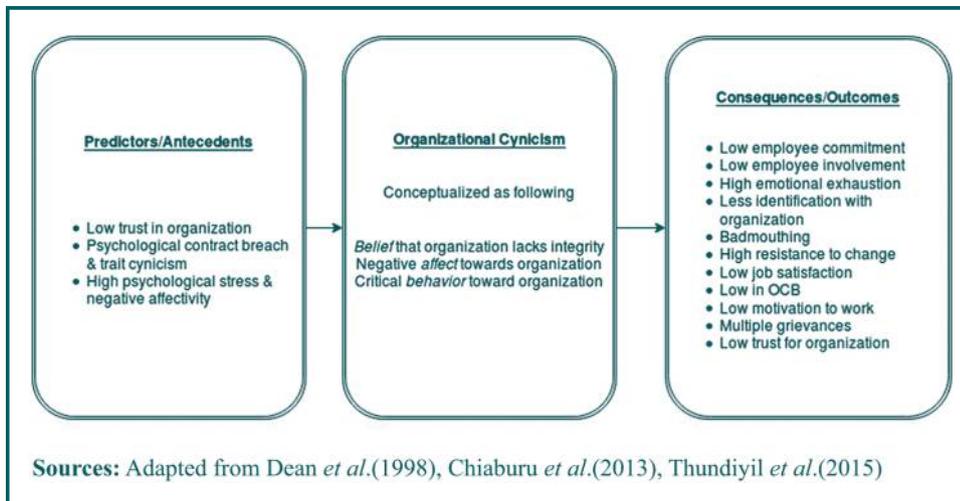
A seminal article in the *Academy of Management Review* started the conversation on organizational cynicism saying “cynicism is everywhere in organizations” ([Dean et al., 1998](#), p. 341). They defined organizational cynicism as a negative attitude toward the employer in terms of three dimensions, belief, affect, and behavior.

People who are organizationally cynical *believe* that their organization lacks principles of fairness, integrity, etc. *Affect* dwells on the emotions side and corresponds to a feeling in addition to the belief. The third criteria is *behavior* that includes a strong criticism of organizations (e.g. badmouthing).

It is important to note that cynicism is different from skepticism or resistance to change. Though doubtful about the likelihood of success of the change, skeptics believe it can bring some positive change. Cynicism would mean a complete lack of trust in top management and a negative response targeted at historical failures. Other antecedents and negative consequences of organizational cynicism are summarized in [Figure 1](#).

To understand the theory behind the development of cynicism toward organizations, social learning theory (SLT) provides some clues. SLT is based on the central tenet that organizational members’ attitudes partly rely on how information is processed and shared among other members. From a cynicism perspective, when an employee makes a negative comment/observation about the organization, chances are high that others’ attitudes in that specific context may get heavily influenced by these remarks, and hence, their behaviors may get affected.

**Figure 1** Antecedents and consequences of organizational cynicism



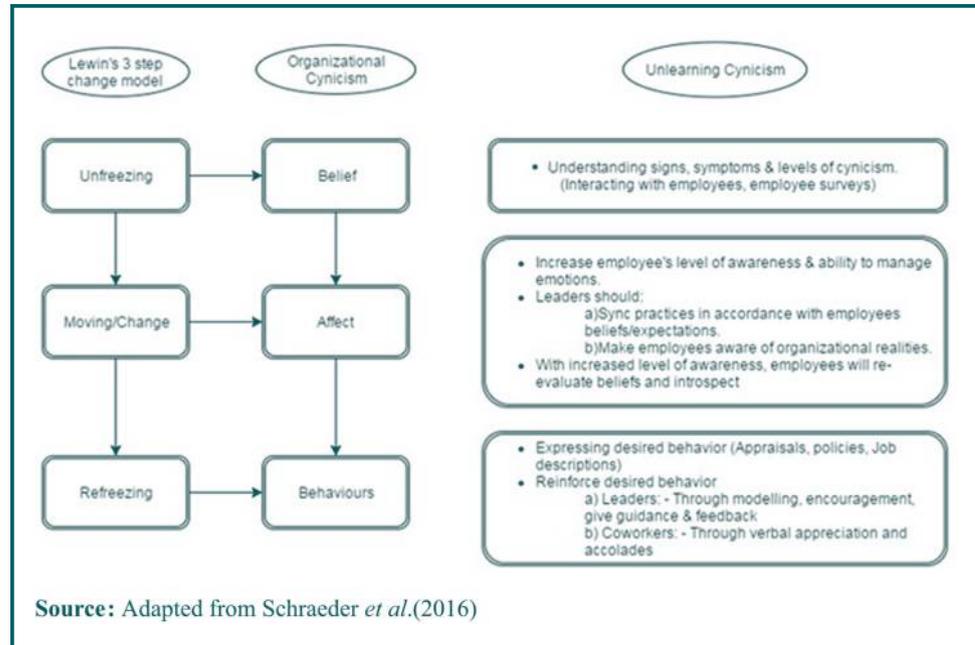
The relationship between social information and attitude formation (SLT) and behavioral change can be best explained by social comparison theory. The organizational members with whom the employees share strong ties are more likely to be the sources of information to guide their own behaviors, and hence, organizational cynicism can have a contagion effect through such information sharing.

### Factors leading to organizational cynicism

- When the organization acts in its own interest and organizational members perceive it to be so, there is a possibility that members may look at the organization as less trustworthy. This lack of trustworthiness can manifest as cynical attitudes and behaviors.
- Psychological stress and negative affectivity (NA): Psychological stress results from a members' appraisal that the environment is too taxing and exceeding their resource constraints. As a result, they feel overloaded and perceive inequitable social exchange from the organization. NA is the chronic expression of distress. Members high on NA have a more negative experience at work that leads to states of guilt, anger, and disgust. High psychological stress and NA often lead to cynical attitudes.
- Trait cynicism and psychological contract breach: Trait cynicism is a general disbelief in others. Members' high on this trait are pessimistic, and they perceive others as dishonest, selfish, and manipulative. The psychological contract gets breached when the reciprocal exchange relationship between the employee and the employer is not as desired/expected and hence employees perceive the organization as less trustworthy. Anyone high on trait cynicism or whose psychological contract is breached is susceptible to cynical attitudes.

### What can be done?

First, the primary challenge is regaining credibility. It implies doing (by employers) what has been conveyed (to employees). In other words, actions should be consistent with the words.

**Figure 2** Drawing parallels: Lewin's 3 stage model and unlearning cynicism

Second, cynicism can be brought down by giving control to employees that ensures their active engagement and by providing a role in decision-making. It also includes dissemination of information to help them take the right decisions.

Third, style of leadership also has an influence on removing the maladies associated with cynicism. Research has shown that transformational leadership can impede cynicism to an extent, if there is proper sharing of information.

Schraeder *et al.* (2016) talk about the process of unlearning cynicism (Figure 2) by comparing Dean *et al.*'s (1998) conceptualization of organizational cynicism with Lewin's three-step change model (unfreezing, moving, and refreezing).

### Conclusion

The effects of organizational cynicism on employee well-being are strong and rising. Our study points to the need for paying serious attention to the construct of "organizational cynicism", which is an attitudinal negativity and, if left unchecked, can cost the organization dearly. However, with interventions in place, perhaps, organizations can control the negative effects of organizational cynicism. As described earlier, "unlearning cynicism" can help contribute to positive beliefs, affect and behaviors – another perspective of employee well-being.

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### Further reading

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