



Don't Let Cynicism Undermine Your Workplace

By Jamil Zaki

An open CEO role at Microsoft should be the holy grail for executives in the tech industry, but that wasn't the case in 2014. The company's growth had stagnated. By botching early leads on smartphones and other new technologies, Microsoft had lost market share to Apple, Google, and Amazon and had gained a reputation as creaky and out of touch—a giant ship lurching in the wrong direction. The Bloomberg journalist Dina Bass listed those downsides in an article bluntly titled “Why You Don't Want to Be Microsoft CEO.” Five days later Satya Nadella took the helm. Microsoft's failures stemmed from a deeper problem: a culture mired in mistrust, competition, and tribalism, which killed morale and stifled innovation. In his 2017 book, *Hit Refresh*, Nadella described an illustration of Microsoft's org chart by the designer Manu Cornet that showed the company's divisions in a standoff, with circles representing rigid silos aiming guns at one another. The cartoon was meant to be funny, but the problems it highlighted weren't. Nor are they rare.

Countless organizations have been overrun by cynicism—a belief that other people are selfish, greedy, and dishonest. Texas A&M's Dan Chiaburu and his coauthors have found that cynicism predicts a slew of negative outcomes at work, including poor performance, burnout, turnover, and cheating. Cynicism also spreads rapidly. People with a dim view of others' actions gossip and are prone to backstabbing—behavior that brings out the worst in their colleagues, causing the cynics' suspicion and mistrust to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Fortunately you can take steps to avoid that scenario. Decades' worth of research—my own and others'—offers insight into how people fall into the cynicism trap, how an organization's policies and practices may be responsible, and what leaders can do to help employees escape it.

The Cynicism Trap

When we look at the world through a cynical lens, people appear to be out for themselves, acts of kindness hide ulterior motives, and trusting others makes you a sucker. That way of thinking is understandable in the age of WeWork and Theranos. But too much cynicism can become toxic at every level. Individually, cynics earn less money over the course of their lives, are more likely to experience depression, and are at greater risk of heart disease than noncynics are. And Microsoft is just one example of how detrimental cynicism can be to organizations and work life.

Despite its dire consequences, cynicism appears to be on the rise. In 1972, 45% of Americans believed that “most people can be trusted,” according to the General Social Survey. By 2018 that share had dropped to about 30%. In the 2022 edition of the annual Edelman Trust Barometer, nearly 60% of people across 27 countries said their default is to distrust others. And people aren’t skeptical of individuals only: Over the same period trust in political leaders, institutions, and corporations plummeted as well.

Why is cynicism so widespread, even though it hurts us so much? Some reasons are cultural. In countries and states with rampant corruption and inequality, cynicism takes hold more quickly. Professions have cultural inducements as well: Journalists succeed by sniffing out lies, and start-up founders are often incentivized to exaggerate—which significantly contributes to mistrust.

Cynicism also takes advantage of bugs in the way people think and feel. By understanding three of its drivers—badness attunement, preemptive strikes, and the cynical-genius illusion—you can take steps to eradicate it from your organization.

Badness attunement. The greatest threat to human beings is other people, who may cheat, steal, and take advantage of our trust. Nature’s answer to such social threats is to equip us with a psychological armadillo shell—what scientists call “cheater detection.” From an early age we are vigilant for signs that someone may be trying to pull one over on us. Cheater detection helps us distinguish between bad actors (such as crooks and swindlers) and good ones, but it can also cause us to assume that

people are bad and to focus on their worst qualities. Psychologists call this “positive-negative asymmetry,” but let’s call it badness attunement.

A Russian proverb holds that “a drop of tar spoils a barrel of honey.” Our social judgments can work the same way. In what’s now considered a classic pair of studies, the researchers John Skowronski and Donal Carlston told people about someone who acted morally (helping strangers), immorally (cheating on taxes), or a combination of the two. People judged immoral actors more quickly than they praised moral ones and considered people who acted in both ways to be morally tainted.

In other words, we imagine a version of others that is much worse than the flesh-and-blood folks actually out there. And when we interact with that version rather than with their true selves, our responses can cause harm and spread cynicism further.

Preemptive strikes. Cynics often act as though the best defense is a good offense. In my lab’s recent research we found that cynical individuals—those who disagree with statements such as “Most people are generally good”—are less willing to donate time or money to help others. Another study, led by Malia Mason at Columbia University, reveals that people who consider others dishonest are more likely to negotiate dishonestly themselves.

Preemptive strikes may look savvy, but they hurt everyone involved. People reciprocate kindness and retaliate against cruelty, meaning that cynics’ actions bring out the worst in others. In a 2020 survey psychologists explored those self-fulfilling prophecies by asking people about their social interactions once a day for a week. They found that a cynic tends to act disrespectfully toward friends and colleagues, which increases others’ disrespect for the cynic. And in one prominent study the psychologists Harold Kelley and Anthony Stahelski asked pairs of people to play a game in which they could either cooperate or cheat. Because cynics expected their partners to cheat, they were more likely to begin the game by cheating. In subsequent rounds cynics’ partners were less likely to trust and more likely to cheat as well, which the researchers call “behavioral assimilation.”

The cynical-genius illusion. Self-proclaimed cynics often view their cynicism as hard-earned wisdom and consider anyone who doesn't share it to be naive. In research led by Olga Stavrova of Tilburg University, 70% of participants said they believed that cynics are generally smarter than noncynics—even though the former don't perform as well on cognitive tests and are not “socially smart.” In another study Nancy Carter and J. Mark Weber of the University of Toronto Mississauga conducted mock job interviews in which they asked half the candidates to lie and half to tell the truth. Participants watched videos of the interviews and guessed who was lying, and although 85% of participants believed that cynics are better equipped to detect liars, people who had self-identified as cynics were actually less accurate with their guesses.

Although they may accuse others of blindly trusting, it seems that cynics themselves blindly mistrust. By viewing everyone through the same dark lens, they fail to notice cues that distinguish cooperators from cheaters. Yet as long as people continue believing that cynicism is smart, cynics will be rewarded.

How Policies and Practices Breed Cynicism

It's not just human psychology that drives employees toward mistrust. It's quite possible that your company's policies and practices are based on and reinforce cynicism as well, as was the case at Microsoft. Nadella's predecessor, Steve Ballmer, made decisions and created policies that bred distrust and corrosive competition. Two of Ballmer's strategies—zero-sum leadership and overmanaging—are common in many organizations.

Zero-sum leadership. Ballmer implemented “stack ranking,” whereby top performers on each team reaped rewards while stragglers were warned or fired. Stack ranking is meant to tap into people's “natural” competitiveness, but it also causes employees to see their workplace as a zero-sum game. In a 2012 Vanity Fair article Kurt Eichenwald laid out the policy's effects: “Staffers were rewarded not just for doing well but for making sure that their colleagues failed. As a result, the company was consumed by an endless series of internal knife fights. Potential market-busting businesses—such as e-book and smartphone technology—were killed, derailed, or delayed amid bickering and power plays.”

Few organizations use stack ranking today, but many still promote a “culture of genius” that values the lone creative star who comes up with new ideas. Such a culture encourages people to outshine colleagues, sparking unhealthy competition. When workers are pitted against one another, they have little reason to contribute to collective ideas and are more likely to hide knowledge from their peers—damaging relationships and killing innovation. A research team led by Elizabeth Canning, a professor at Washington State University, found that Fortune 500 companies with cultures of genius have lower levels of employee trust and receive worse ratings on Glassdoor.

Overmanaging. In *The HP Way*, David Packard tells a story from his early career at GE, when the company locked up and closely monitored computer parts to prevent theft. “Faced with this obvious display of distrust,” Packard writes, “employees set out to prove it justified, walking off with tools or parts whenever they could.”

Leaders who don't trust their people are more likely to restrict, pressure, and surveil them to ensure that they do the bare minimum and to prevent shirking and cheating—and employees read that mistrust loud and clear. They in turn trust their organizations less, feel less motivated, and are—ironically—more likely to game the system.

The pandemic has made it harder to hover over people's desks, but companies now use a dystopian array of tools that enable them to, for instance, monitor workers' keystrokes and screens. In response, online retailers have sold thousands of “mouse jigglers,” which allow users to appear to be working. (An Amazon review of one such product reads, “If your boss is a micromanaging worthless idiot who doesn't realize that presence does not equate to productivity, this is the device. If you are one of those bosses reading this review...nobody likes you.”)

When employers force workers to do at least the bare minimum, they make it much more likely that workers will do only that—and morale is harmed in the process. In December 2021 EY released new data on employees who had left their jobs during the first part of the Great Resignation. Many of them said they didn't feel that company leaders cared about or trusted them.

Escaping the Cynicism Trap

This picture can be bleak: Mistrust and competition seem to be taking us on a one-way street toward failure. Fortunately, there are clear strategies that can help organizations reverse course. Injecting “anticynicism” into yours requires implementing two approaches: First, develop policies and processes that redirect the organizational culture toward collaboration and trust. Second, make sure that all leaders—not just those at the top—model trusting behaviors and combat cynicism in their interactions.

Redirect the culture. In his book Nadella commented on the cartoon Microsoft org chart: “The caricature really bothered me. But what upset me more was that our own people just accepted it.” He and Microsoft’s chief people officer, Kathleen Hogan, introduced policies meant to undo the company’s cynical habits, including a restructuring of Microsoft’s review and incentive system. No longer would employees be elevated for outshining their peers—or punished if their peers excelled. Instead they were reviewed and rewarded for collaborative behavior, such as how they showed up for others and created things together. That shift encouraged workers to lower their defenses and share knowledge, skills, and perspectives freely. Such “task interdependence,” whereby individual success rests on the achievements of others, increases trust among employees and strengthens the chances of trust and team success.

Nadella took a similar approach to Microsoft’s competitors. In a move that would have been unthinkable the year before, he walked onstage for an industry keynote and pulled out an iPhone equipped for the first time with Office, Outlook, and other Microsoft products. By showing how Microsoft and Apple could complement each other, Nadella not only de-escalated their rivalry but also provided a benefit to consumers. “Partnering is too often seen as a zero-sum game,” he wrote in his book. Both inside and outside Microsoft, Nadella sought win-win solutions to grow the pie—tapping into people’s collaborative instincts rather than their selfishness.

When we see the world as zero-sum, it shrinks, and so do our partnerships. Anticynicism may seem naive, but it turns out to be the wiser long-term strategy.

Model trust. Nadella encouraged employees to learn and take greater creative risks, such as in enormous hackathons—collaborative coding runs in which groups worked on a free-for-all of fresh ideas. Those ideas helped Microsoft move beyond software and into cloud and AI technology. Bringing them to fruition also required a loosening of the bureaucratic reins—and a leap of faith by the company's leadership.

People we put faith in are more likely to step up, demonstrating what economists call “earned trust.” In one study Gerardo Guerra and Daniel John Zizzo asked people to play a game: Trusters sent money to trustees, and the money was multiplied. Trustees could choose how much to repay the truster from the larger amount of money. In another study Guerra, Zizzo, and Michael Bacharach asked trusters to guess in advance what trustees would do with the money. Trustees who were told about trusters' high expectations were more likely to pay them back.

If cynical beliefs can become self-fulfilling, hopeful ones can too, as this study and many others show.

Demonstrating faith in people is an easy way for leaders to reduce mistrust and paranoia in their organizations. Give people room to make their own choices. When you cultivate trust, teams excel. Research on teachers, retail workers, and army personnel finds that those who feel trusted experience greater self-esteem and connection to supervisors and ultimately perform better, too.

Nordstrom takes this idea seriously. The company's “employee handbook” is a single card, which reads in part: “Set your personal and professional goals high. We have great confidence in your ability to achieve them, so our employee handbook is very simple. We have only one rule...Use good judgment in all situations.”

Employees at Nordstrom are supported—they can turn to HR or managers at any time—but they are also explicitly trusted, which isn't the norm in the retail industry. The result is a famously satisfied workforce, which in 2017 made Nordstrom the only clothing retailer on Fortune's list of the 100 best companies for employees. An important lesson is that when you trust people, do it loudly: Let them know you believe

in them. They will be more likely to see themselves positively through your eyes and want to live up to that image.

At Microsoft anticynical practices such as creating non-zero-sum outcomes and giving workers space and trust to create have paid dividends. Under Nadella's stewardship the company's market capitalization skyrocketed because of its nimble moves into cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and other new frontiers—innovations nourished by a culture that centers on collaboration, empathy, and community.

Teach Anticynicism

Redirecting a company's culture and modeling trust can begin to untie the knots that cynicism creates. But you also need to change the way leaders at all levels interact with employees. The good news? Anticynicism can be taught.

In 2020 I teamed up with the SAP Academy for Engineering and Mentora to create a multidisciplinary leadership training program, which we have shared with more than 100 managers around the world. SAP's academy is renowned for teaching technical skills, but it had done less teaching of soft skills such as empathy and anticynicism. We challenged managers to think of those practices as just as important, and just as learnable, as any type of code.

One pillar of the program is building trust. Leaders learn about the perils of cynicism and pick up practical strategies for combating it. We show them that the best way to inspire trust in employees is to demonstrate it first. The results have been remarkable. Managers in our program saw their Net Promoter Score on leadership trust—a core index of how they are viewed by direct reports—increase by more than 10%.

That statistic encouraged us, as did the stories we heard from participating managers. One of them, Alejandra, had experienced a meteoric rise at SAP Brazil. In 14 months she went from being an individual contributor to leading a team of 22 people, many of whom had been with the company longer than she had. Her advancement

created some resentment, and Alejandra felt the need to prove herself by tightly managing the group. She quickly became exhausted, as did her team.

After one anticynicism session, Alejandra met with a newer team member, an ambitious and talented individual who wanted more independence but feared failure. Before our session Alejandra would have watched this person closely, but this time she took a different tack. "I know you can do this," she said, "and if you trust me, then you should trust my judgment." Six months later that employee was applying for leadership roles herself.

Here is a key principle of this work—and of anticynicism in general: People are shaped by their situations, and as leaders, you are an essential part of the situation for your employees. If you mistrust, micromanage, and monitor them, they will resent you, shirk responsibility, and eventually head for the exit. But if you show faith in them, they will try to live up to it. People become who we think they are, so we should be conscious of our assumptions and generous with our goodwill. It can make a bigger difference than we may imagine.

Trust is only one component of anticynical leadership. Leaders should also examine structural factors in their workplace: Are your corporate values mere window dressing, or do you deliver on them in concrete ways? Are wages, bonuses, and benefits fairly and transparently determined? If those conditions are not met, no amount of kind conversation will defeat cynicism.

Microsoft and Nordstrom demonstrate the importance of corporate policies that center on collaboration and openness; Alejandra's story shows us how individual leaders can promote those ideas. Leaders who make use of both approaches are well equipped to combat the cynicism trap—and to reap the benefits for themselves, their employees, and their organizations.

<https://hbr.org/2022/09/dont-let-cynicism-undermine-your-workplace>