



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### **Frustration Culture – Your Company’s Actions Don’t Live Up to Its Lofty Principles**

Believe it or not, there are many fine companies in the world that have great products and treat their employees well. There are also many companies that are just plain rotten. Of course, most companies fall somewhere in the middle.

One of the reasons that employees don’t like working at their companies is that their companies are not intellectually honest with them. They say one thing and do another thing. They have lofty ideals or principles on paper, but then they do not follow through and actually implement policies and processes to back up their words. This disconnect can happen within a team, within a department, within a division or within an entire organization.

#### **“Frustration Culture”**

In a broad sense, the term culture refers to “how we do things around here.” In a narrow sense, culture refers to the formal and informal policies and procedures that define how you do your job. More broadly, culture includes how you relate to your managers, peers and clients. It refers to how people treat each other. When it is all said and done, people who say that they like or don’t like a company are really saying that they do or do not like the culture of that company.

The term “frustration culture” can be used to describe the way employees feel when a company’s actions don’t follow their words because frustration is the most common feeling that people have in those circumstances. Sure, they are angry sometimes and they may not be motivated, but it all stems from a deep frustration with the inconsistencies.

Here are a couple examples to see how this happens.

#### **Employees come first – except when profits are threatened**

Consider this case of two consulting companies. Company A has a fine Mission Statement that explains that their people are their number one asset. Without their people, the company would not exist. (In fact, it’s true. Without its people, the consulting company would have no revenue.) However, it appears that people are their number one asset while they are on billable assignments. If you come off an assignment and sit on the bench for a few weeks, you are likely to be let go. Company A also touts their ability to train employees in new skills. However, training is all funded at each local branch. If your branch is behind its profit targets, training is the first area to be cut. The training that is provided is all taught by other consultants for free – not by outside experts. Company A also highlights the variety of assignments consultants can receive, which allows the consultant to pick up many skills in a shorter period of time. But, in reality, since all of their assignments are from customers who are looking for specific skills, it seems you can rarely get new work outside of your current skill set.



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Now let's look at consulting Company B. They are in this same business and have many of the same company goals and principles. However, Company B has a reputation for keeping people on the bench for a long time when necessary. When the bench costs are high, they ask employees to work four-day weeks and take a vacation day on the fifth – a much better alternative to employees than a layoff. Company B also has a real commitment to training, even paying to send people to outside classes and paying for certification. Company B also gets business managing projects, which gives them more flexibility to bring in consultants who don't have a perfect skill match and allow them to build skills in new areas. Employees love working for Company B.

### **Why is Company A bad?**

Both of these companies make money. Both have been around a long time. In fact, Company A may be larger and have more name recognition than Company B. However, based on this look at each company, Company A is an example of a place with a frustration culture. Their problem is that they do not have an honest culture. They say one thing and do another. Their literature talks about their commitment to employees, but that commitment is only an inch deep when company profits are on the line.

Company A needs to get their words aligned with their actions. For instance, instead of saying that employees are most important, they should say that their stockholders are most important. Many companies are aligned that way. Instead of talking about all of the training opportunities available, they should provide rich opportunities for self-study and then stress the importance of consultants taking responsibility for their own skills development. They should also put policies in place for bench time. It would be better to have a stated policy that says if you are thrown off a project for poor performance, you are subject to termination. They should also state up front that everyone is entitled to four weeks of bench time per year (or whatever length is appropriate). That way, if you are on the bench often, you know ahead of time that you are in jeopardy.

### **Summary**

Most companies are good places to work; however, many of them are not country clubs. Some are very hard-nosed. The good places to work usually tell you up-front what is important to them and, in fact, try to follow-up on those pledges. These companies try their best, and if they falter from time to time, that does not make them bad.

However, some companies can be truly bad to work for. A big reason is that they are not honest with their employees. In fact, in many cases they are intellectually dishonest when it comes to matching their written and spoken principles with their actual actions.

If you are an employee or a consultant, remember that a company's culture reflects "how we do things around here." A culture is not written in the company newsletter or posted on the wall in short slogans. After you have been with an employer for a while, you start to get a sense for how decisions are made and how people treat each other. That reflects the company culture. If the culture does not line up with the slogans, remember that the culture is what drives decisions, not the slogans. If you continue to believe the slogans instead of the actions, you will start to feel a part of the company's "frustration culture."



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However, if you understand the actual culture and how things work, you can either choose to accept it or go somewhere else.

For managers, the best course of action is to honestly evaluate your company's actions and words. You should also understand your own actions and words. If the words and slogans don't match up with your actions, then lobby for change. The change could come from two directions. First, you could try to make your actions align with your words. You can also try to align your words to match your actions. You may have a limited ability to change the entire culture, but you do have an ability to change your own organization. Start the change now if you need to – start in your own organization, then look for ways to move it upward.