

# Productivity Killers

By Fred Kofman

“Warning! This organism has a virus. Take urgent measures to stop the infection”. With this ‘call to arms,’ our immunological system focuses on combating health threats.

“Warning! This computer has a virus. Take urgent measures to stop the infection”. With this ‘call to arms,’ our antivirus focuses on combating threats to computer health.

“Warning! This organization has a virus. Take urgent measures to stop the infection”. Usually, this ‘call to arms’ is left unanswered –a fact that has serious consequences for our social health.

All organizations are exposed to ‘cultural viruses’ that may threaten their existence. The bad news is that very few have immunological systems or antiviruses to combat them. How do these viruses reach the organizational operative system? Hidden in a ‘Trojan horse’: in the mind of each member. How do they reach the individual mind? People are born with certain weaknesses that are exploited by ideological virus latent in the social atmosphere. Every human being (and every human organization) suffers the consequences of five viruses that were installed in his or her ‘biosoftware’ during early childhood:

- Ethical shortsightedness: values are subordinated to immediate success
- Irresponsibility: ‘victim of circumstances’ philosophy
- Ontological arrogance: my truth is ‘the’ only truth
- Narcissistic negotiation: I only win if the rest loses
- Empty commitments: lack of integrity and creditor care

Ethical shortsightedness is the unremitting pursuit of immediate gratification. A personal example: a drug addict. An organizational example: a company addicted to term results, like Enron.

Irresponsibility is the focus, when giving explanations, on factors that are beyond control; an account where one is a victim of the circumstances. The ‘infected’ party regards him or herself as a play thing of larger powers. A

personal example: a child claims the “toy broke” (he or she had nothing to do with it). An organizational example: a manager says the “the project slowed down” (he or she had nothing to do with it).

Ontological arrogance is the belief that my perception of the world constitutes the objective truth; that those who do not see what I see are blind. The ‘infected’ party regards him or herself as the owner of reality and ‘reason’ and hence demands obedience. A personal example: a child does not eat broccoli “because it is horrible” (rather than “because I don’t like the taste”). An organizational example: the salesperson accuses the customers of being “difficult” (because he or she does not know who to make an attractive sales pitch).

Narcissistic negotiation is the intention of increasing one’s self-esteem by destroying our opponents’. The ‘infected’ party needs to prove his or her value and power, and the strategy is to demean and weaken the power of everyone they deal with. A personal example: a pair of siblings fight over who eats “that” cookie on the plate (there are ten others just like “that” one in the jar). An organizational example: managers fight as they attempt to ‘build their personal empires.’

The lack of integrity is the incongruence between what we promise and what we do; the self-indulgence that breaks our word. The ‘infected’ party promises without the intention of delivering, and breaks his or her promises without prior notice, apology or care for the damaged party. A personal example: the saying “Lend a friend a book and lose both the friend and the book”. An organizational example: the standard delays of meetings because nobody respects their agreed timeframe.

This is a presentation of “productivity killer” viruses in their personal and organizational dimensions. In subsequent articles, I will examine each virus in depth, pointing out their origins and consequences and, most importantly, explaining how to develop the necessary defenses to successfully combat them.