I once interviewed a man called ‘Tony’ about how he did his job. He worked in a national communications organization and had recently taken up a position as a liaison officer after his previous job as a truck driver. The job required him to liaise between the shopfloor, of which he was a member, and management. His story (later indirectly corroborated by executives) told of secret meetings with management, staged performances at union meetings (throwing chairs etc.), and other extraordinary actions and hidden communications with either the manager or union leaders. His phone bill, which covered long late-night conversations with troubled shopfloor workers about family or work, was astronomical. Tony controlled and managed everything. However, he was paid only for his shopfloor liaison officer job despite having informal responsibility for the efficient running of his unit, the pastoral care of the workers, and the propping up of management. Tony contrived to appear on the side of the union and the shopfloor, and although never appearing to support management (at meetings, he made the manager the butt of jokes), secretly colluded with management in order to bring about productive organizational outcomes. Both sides knew he was a power broker, but it was never spoken about. Tony was an altruist at heart. He saw that someone had to step in and take charge of things and, with little education (he hadn’t even finished high school) and no management experience, he did a terrific job. This was the way things got done in the organization – to avoid strikes, to compensate for an inexperienced and incompetent manager in charge of 120 staff, and to help workers who lived in constant fear of losing their jobs because of it. Furthermore, according to executives, this case was repeated across at least six other units in this national organization.

This is just one example of organizational dysfunction and the coping that took place to keep things going. There are surely a myriad of other cases like this that we all can bring out, stemming from our own work experiences.

Tony taught me a lot. I also began to realize that other people must also know of organizational dysfunction, perhaps derived from a more systematic perspective. As a consequence, the idea for this book emerged.

Organizational dysfunction, then, characterizes a facet of today’s workplace that is often hidden or ignored. While this aspect of organizational life may be evident to insiders, there are few systematic treatments of the dynamics of such dysfunction that capture the complexity of both its insidious nature and its powerful consequences – for employees, families, customers or for the firm as a whole. Our book offers such an examination and more. That is, in a modest way, it is also a testimony to the life of many unsung workplace heroes or heroines who, on a daily basis, must cope with such challenges as inefficiency and incompetence; people suffering from a disorder or a disposition, or the effects of these on people around them; people doing things they have to do and don’t want to do; organizational systems that don’t work well, make work and must be circumvented, and who make it all appear . . . normal!

When approached, authors of international repute enthusiastically embraced the idea of the book. Hardly anyone turned down the opportunity to write a chapter on their
dysfunction topic of choice. These outstanding authors come from diverse backgrounds including clinical psychology, organizational psychology, management and business, entrepreneurship and from consulting. We, as editors, are very grateful for their enthusiasm, generosity and wonderfully interesting and well-written chapters.

Consequently, we believe that the resulting collection of chapters brought together for this volume will be invaluable for a wide variety of readers: researchers from different disciplines – workplace health, psychology, commerce, management. Although we already know a great deal, as is made clear throughout the volume, there are still many issues or applied problems that need further investigation. Similarly, consultants and professionals-in-training will be better prepared to offer high-quality service delivery if they take to heart the many lessons already learned as presented throughout our text. And of course, those responsible for ensuring the effectiveness of work organizations, including managers, supervisors and HR professionals, should gain useful insights on how to improve the design of human resource policy and practices as well as how best to create the kind of progressive workplace culture that most of us desire.

We are grateful to Jo Betteridge of Edward Elgar, our publishers, and to Edward Elgar himself, who loved the idea of the book because of his own experiences! Cary, Richard and I wish to thank them for their assistance. Without it, this book would never have been published.

Janice Langan-Fox
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