

Disempowerment and Learned Helplessness

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Under these conditions, helplessness, passivity, and passive-aggressive behaviors on the part of the subordinates in the hierarchy increase while leaders become increasingly controlling and punitive. In this way the organization becomes ever more radically split, with different parts of the organization assuming the role of managing and/or expressing different emotions that are then subsequently suppressed [1]. Such conditions as these make an organization ripe for collective disturbance that may go unresolved and unrecognized, while policy changes are made that insure that the underlying conflicts will remain out of conscious group awareness.

Learned helplessness at work has been defined as a debilitating cognitive state in which individuals often possess the skills and abilities necessary to perform their jobs, but exhibit suboptimal or poor performance because they attribute prior failures to causes which they cannot change, even though success may be possible in the current environment [2]. In a controlling, non-participatory environment exercising top-down management, every subsequent lower level of employee is likely to become progressively disempowered. After years, decades, and even generations of controlling management styles, reversing this sense of disempowerment can be extremely difficult, particularly under conditions of chronic, unrelenting organizational stress. Helpless to protect themselves, feeling embattled, hopeless and helpless, the staff and management often engage in risky risk avoidance – risk management policies that may virtually prevent healthy change and adaptation.

Excerpt from Bloom, S. L. (2010). Trauma-organized systems and parallel process. In N. Tehrani (Ed.), *Managing Trauma in the Workplace* (pp. 139-153). London: Routledge.

For more see: Bloom and Farragher, *Destroying Sanctuary: The Crisis in Human Service Delivery Systems*

- [Link to Bogus Empowerment](#)
- [Link to Increased Authoritarianism](#)
- [Link to Authoritarianism](#)
- [Link to Terror Management Theory](#)
- [Link to Commitment to Democracy](#)

References

1. Bloom, S.L., *Neither Liberty Nor Safety: The Impact Of Fear On Individuals, Institutions, And Societies, Part I I*. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 2004. **2**(3): p. 212-228.
2. Campbell, C.R. and M.J. Martinko, *An integrative attributional perspective of empowerment and learned helplessness: A multimethod field study*. *Journal of Management*, 1998. **24**(2): p. 173-200.