

Cynicism, Skepticism, and Earning Trust as a Leader

Four years ago this month, I sent the first Weekly Brief. It was during the depths of COVID-19, and I was eager to keep in touch—even if I had to do it from my dining room table. Since then, this email has turned into BCG’s thought leadership piece most read by senior executives. Christoph and I deeply appreciate the time you invest with us each week, and we hope you’re finding it valuable. To mark this anniversary, we would love it if you would [complete a quick survey](#) so we can learn how to better support you on your leadership journeys. If this is your first time receiving the Weekly Brief, no need to respond. Thanks for considering that. And now onto a topic that long predates the Weekly Brief for me.

One of a CEO’s most important jobs is to figure out what kind of organizational culture to foster. This could include positive characteristics, such as being purpose-driven, embracing customer-centricity, sparking innovativeness, driving inclusivity, nurturing a change orientation, or building teamwork.

But just as important is understanding the cultural elements we want to avoid. And one of the most challenging to tackle is cynicism. Talking with new leaders, I often end up in a discussion about the corrosiveness of cynicism: how to understand its causes and circumvent them—while leaning into healthy skepticism.

Cynicism Is Rooted in Mistrust

Cynics question the underlying intent in others’ words and actions and often assume that the true situation is worse or the real motivation is different than it appears. Cynics also see others who are not cynical as naïve followers who don’t get what is really happening. As a result, they tend to oppose change agendas and can be a thorn in the side of leaders trying to rally a team.

Unfortunately, cynicism, however challenging to deal with, is not always

misplaced. We have all worked with others whose motives should be in doubt, who say one thing when we know they believe something else, or who mask the real situation in order to create a positive veneer.

I have most frequently observed cynicism amid the rubble of failed or insufficient change efforts. Organizations often initiate change with some fear but a generally positive attitude that this is a necessary onetime effort that will make the business stronger. However, when leaders (whether current or new) go back to do it a second time, the cynicism is often palpable.

So how can leaders tackle existing organizational cynicism? It starts, of course, with understanding.

- What are the embedded beliefs in the organization?
- How much cynicism exists today—in which pockets and for what reasons?
- Are there corrosive individuals, particularly within leadership?
- Are there past initiatives, leadership behaviors, or communications that underpin the cynical attitudes of colleagues?

After understanding, the next step is action. Sometimes that starts with leadership changes—when the only way to get beyond cynicism is to remove individuals who have eroded trust too deeply or who behaved or communicated badly multiple times. Failing to tackle these “elephants in the room” will only undermine other steps to rectify the problem.

Healthy Skepticism Is About Challenge and Debate

But after putting leaders in place who are credible and committed to earning trust, what comes next? To me, this is when encouraging healthy skepticism can make a big difference. Skepticism is often confused for cynicism, but it's very different. The core of skepticism is not about challenging motives but challenging insights, recommendations, and plans: “How rigorous is our thinking?” “How realistic are our plans?” “If this is such a great idea, why hasn't it already been done?”

Learning organizations encourage challenge and debate. They want to spot the issues early, and they view shortfalls as opportunities to learn rather than issues to cover up. Leaders who encourage skepticism often demonstrate other traits that minimize cynicism: transparency, honesty, open communications, admissions of mistakes, and celebrating those who smartly push back, particularly when the challengers got it right—but even when they didn't.

As organizational psychologist and author Adam Grant rightly puts it, the

best skeptics are often “disagreeable givers”—that is, pains in the ass but deeply committed to the success of the organization and eager to help others improve. That’s healthy skepticism, versus an approach that simply slows things down, is resistant to change, or makes others look bad.

Reducing cynicism has always been one of my highest priorities. It starts with encouraging healthy skepticism and even celebrating those who occasionally make your life more difficult.

Until next time, when we start year 5 together!



Rich Lesser
Global Chair

PS: Reiterating that we sincerely hope you will [share your thoughts with us via this survey](#).

Further Reading



From Purpose to Trust to Lasting Value

Understanding stakeholders’ perceptions of a company—and using purpose, trust, and reputation to thoroughly align those perceptions with their expectations—can drive lasting value.

[READ MORE](#)



Culture and Change Management

Explore BCG’s innovative approach to culture and change management. Learn how successful companies continuously adapt and transform to stay ahead.

[READ MORE](#)



Turning Superheroes into a Super Leadership Team

In a complex, fast-changing world, team members must shift from championing their own domains to putting the enterprise first. Here's how to make it happen.

[READ MORE](#)