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MANAGER CYNICISM
AS AN AMBIVALENT RESPONSE
TO PERCEIVED TOP MANAGEMENT
LACK OF INTEGRITY AND COMPETENCE*

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Résumé

Des recherches récentes signalent un accroissement du cynisme dans le monde du travail. Le cynisme est perçu négativement dans l'organisation, alors qu'il peut présenter le rôle d'indicateur d'un climat interne de malaise. Une revue de la littérature managériale et philosophique montre que le cynisme a une double orientation: l'une négative et l'autre positive. Une étude exploratoire composée de 25 entretiens approfondis montre que le cynisme est un indicateur d'une représentation négative des dirigeants, qui se traduit en une perte de confiance à leur égard par les acteurs organisationnels, liée à un triple facteur : un manque d'intégrité perçue, une incompétence perçue et un niveau de politisation trop élevé. Le déclaratif cynique des managers s'explique comme une stratégie pour arriver à « dire » les choses quand les normes organisationnelles ne le permettent pas.

Mots clés

Cynisme, perceptions des dirigeants, confiance, expression cynique

Abstract

Recent research has reported an increase in cynicism in the workplace. Cynicism is perceived negatively in an organization whereas it can be an indicator of a poor internal climate. A review of the literature in management and philosophy has shown that cynicism has a double orientation: one that is negative and one that is positive. An exploratory study made up of 25 in-depth interviews showed that cynicism is a negative indication of top management representation which is expressed by a loss of trust by the other employees, in particular the managers in the organization and is linked to three factors: a lack of perceived integrity, perceived incompetence and a level of politicization that is too high. The cynical assertion of managers can be explained as a strategy to "say" things when the norms of the organization do not allow it.

Key words: Manager cynicism, top management perceptions, trust, cynical expression

INTRODUCTION

Cynicism is more and more present in organizations. Whether it is interpreted as a symptom of failing management practices or considered as a handicap for implementing corporate policy, it obviously indicates a poor internal climate. What is it really? What does its emergence correspond to? Following a review of the literature in management and philosophy, we would first like to define the notion of cynicism and to clarify its different forms. In the second part of this presentation, we will use the results of an exploratory study performed through non-directive interviews with 25 managers in order to identify the factors of cynicism and propose a model.

1. CYNICISM AS A DEPENDENT VARIABLE

What is cynicism? Despite the lack of a consensus, the most common definition in the managerial literature considers that cynics at work doubt the integrity of their enterprise and are persuaded that when possible, it will not hesitate to profit at their expense. According to Kanter and Mirvis (1989), over 40% of Americans are cynical, i.e. disillusioned. An example that leads to this cynical belief is the comic strip "Dilbert" which is very popular with managers (Feldman, 2000) or the French "Guignols de l'info" ("News Puppets") which presents "the spectacle of this cynicism (by the dominators) that is suffered by and makes millions of dominated laugh, not by concealing life's daily problems, but on the contrary by procuring a great impression of the truth" (Jouary and Spire, 1997, p. 89).

In behavioral studies of people in organizations, the concept of cynicism has been applied to different contexts with heterogeneous significations. Some authors have concentrated on psychosocial aspects such as cynical hostility and its role in health (Cook and Medley, 1954). Other authors have considered cynicism in the context of social work (Stevens and O'Neill, 1983, in Andersson, 1996) or the police (Niederhoffer, 1967, in Andersson, 1996). In the 1990s, cynicism was the object of several conceptualizations depending on the targets studied (the organization, directors, employees, change) (Andersson, 1996, Dean et al., 1998, Abraham, 2000, Stanley et al., 2005). It emerged that the cynical attitude was above all directed toward the organization or top management in general without focusing on the immediate hierarchy or a direct context. For this reason, our work is concentrated on the role

of the perception of top management and the organization in the emergence of a cynical attitude of its employees, in particular the managers.

In this article, we will distance ourselves from an approach through character traits or the inherent belief in relations with the powerful and define cynicism as a provocative attitude that is characterized by an ambivalent attitude of attachment and detachment to and from the organization which is expressed in rhetorical forms of irony and sarcasm.

1.1. The different types of cynicism and their orientations

If in everyday language as in management literature, cynicism is condemned and even considered as harmful for society or for an enterprise, at its origin, a cynical attitude was a concept of life with the view to fighting the hypocrisy and normative social conventions that it denounces and its finalities were positive. This is the ancient Greek concept of cynicism and in particular the Cynic school. The word "cynicism" comes from the Greek word *kynikos* meaning "dog-like". In fact, in the Larousse Lexis (2002), the first meaning of "cynic" refers to "an informal group of Greek philosophers founded by Antisthenes who professed ascetic moral values and a total disdain for material comforts". In fact, Antisthenes (444-365 B.C.), a student of Socrates, and Diogenes of Sinope (413-327 B.C., who Plato described as a "Socrates gone crazy") adopted a life style qualified as resembling that of dogs in order to show their opposition to the social conventions of Athens that they considered as alienating individual liberty (Goulet-Cazé, 2000). For a cynic, morality was founded on arbitrary principles. This is why he or she did not hesitate to disrupt the established order and the politically correct (Jouary and Spire, 1997). A cynic's behavior was above all guided by reason and independence vis-à-vis all forms of power or taboo. Cynics sought the liberty to think for themselves, live in harmony with nature and be free of all social conventions. Critics of dogmatic Platonic thought, their remarks were often harsh and caustic without the aim to hurt but to encourage the individual to take another path. Thus, a cynic avoided moralizing discourse, preferring irony, sarcasm or caustic humor with the aim to teach and encourage awareness (Onfray, 1990). Diogenes of Sinope said "other dogs bite their enemies, I bite my friends to save them" (Onfray, 1990, p.33). In this sense, "the cynic [is] a scout for men for what is favorable and what is hostile for them" (Epictetus, ca. 110 A.D., 2005 Edition, p. 16).

Cynic philosophical doctrine was principally oral. We are indebted to Diogenes Laertius for our knowledge of this school¹.

1.1.1. The two positive and negative orientations of cynicism

This accepted definition of the term cynicism considerably evolved over the centuries until its current connotation assimilating a fault or even a perversion. In fact, during the Middle Ages the subversive traits of Diogenes of Sinope were purged and it was the Renaissance that, by reaction, restored its practical sense and its scathing nature. This interpretation gradually led to a forgetting of the virtuous dimension of the philosopher to a second meaning proposed by the Lexis: "a person who defies moral principles and proper behavior with impunity, who consciously shocks". Thus, cynicism swung from Diogenism to a misinterpretation of the word in the middle of the 16th century (Clément, 2005). It therefore progressively lost its connotation of pedagogy through derision and limited itself uniquely to its rhetoric, considered as discourse that no longer included philosophical thinking. So Machiavelli, Montaigne, Voltaire, Diderot, Nietzsche seized this notion of cynicism without reestablishing the first sense of this ascetic philosophy (Cutler, 2005).

Numerous publications have reported that contemporary individuals have a growing feeling of mistrust not only vis-à-vis institutions but also their peers. This is due to their loss of belief in the future that many believe will not potentially be better than the present (Jouary and Spire, 1997, Dupin, 2006). In this framework, cynicism is described as a defiant attitude vis-à-vis the intentions of others as well as a disenchantment and disillusionment more particularly towards top management. The principle underlying thesis that emanates from this literature is that cynicism represents a brake for organizational initiatives and their outcome. From that angle, it is a phenomenon that should be fought, particularly during periods of organizational change, which are especially fragile periods (Wanous et al., 2000, Vance et al., 1995, Stanley et al., 2005).

We argue that, on the other hand, there is a coexisting form of cynicism that is more related to the concept of Diogenes. It aims to point out managerial incoherence or failure in an attempt to improve and succeed through the perceptiveness or "clairvoyance" of the cynical managers in the organization. According to the German philosophers (Niehues-Pröbsting, 1979; Sloterdijk, 1987), the result is that cynicism currently presents two facets: one that is constructive and the other that is compromising or obstructive. Today, Sloterdijk (1987) takes both senses into account through two terms: *kunism* (in German "*Kynismus*"), invigorating

¹ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius

insolence of a thought that is not taken seriously and cynicism (in German "*Zynismus*"), like a snigger that, pointing the finger at massacres and atrocities committed in the name of pragmatism and Reason, tells the authorities who still believe in their good deeds: "Here is the result of your actions!" A more or less resigned forced laugh given the state of the world and our modern life – this is how one could define this other branch of cynicism. In today's language, the term has been shortened and transformed: the quest for liberty has disappeared and the term has become a synonym of double-dealing or even dishonesty and hypocrisy.

In order to properly differentiate these two orientations, we have retained the distinction made Sloterdijk (1987), the term "*Kynismus*" for the antique concept, and the term "*Zynismus*" for the derived concept. In order to be clear and at the risk of making a Manichean reduction, we will qualify the first as "positive cynicism" because its goals are improvement and the second as "negative cynicism" given its absence of finality or morality. A cynic is detached, provocative and perceptive or 'clairvoyant'. A negative cynic is detached from the fate of the organization, a bitter and perceptive agitator which reinforces his or her disenchantment. A positive cynic is detached and concerned by the fate of the organization, an agitator that arouses awareness and perception in order to point out whatever appears to be incoherent.

Up to the present, the literature on organizational cynicism has been focused on negative cynical attitudes in the workplace without taking much interest in positive cynical attitudes that are closer to the antique concept of cynicism. The former have a general and durable feeling of disenchantment and profound bitterness that they emanate. The latter are individuals who have a realistic perception of life, of its "dark reality" according to Epictetus (ca. 110 A.D.). While both are excellent in analyzing a problem, the negative cynic will seek to take advantage of the problem that he or she has brought to light whereas the positive cynic will seek a solution (Jouary and Spire, 1997). It is important to note the ambivalent character of the latter who, believing that improvement is possible in the organization, predicts the inevitable failure of efforts to change which he or she considers as vain given the inherent shortcomings of the system (Vance et al., 1995; Piderit, 2000). Such reactions can appear to be ambiguous since they are a simultaneous mixture of despair and commitment (Mc Clough et al., 1998).

The degree of cynicism as a variable can therefore be explained by identifying its level of intensity understood according to the individual's position in three attitude dimensions (cognitive, affective, and conative), but also by whether its orientation is negative or positive.

1.1.2. The perception of double-dealing cynicism by top management as an independent variable

The height of negative cynicism often indicates "scandalous, immoral, inadmissible" attitudes and actions by the top management of large firms. Insider trading, golden parachutes, time lag between a speech that reassures employees followed by an opposite action such as, for example, the closure of a factory: "scandals in the economic news [that confirm] to what point corruption is central to contemporary cynicism" (Dupin, 2006, p. 55). This is qualified in the literature as "double-dealing cynicism" (Dupin, 2006) or "dominant cynicism" (Jouary et al., 1997). This cynicism is colored with hypocritical and opportunistic discourse. From the reflections of Sloterdijk (1987) on this subject, Dupin compared dominant cynicism to the cynics who "show radical irony for morality and social convention, as if, so to speak, the laws are only there for idiots" (Dupin, 2006, p. 56). This cynicism "consists in covering with universal principles practices that violently trample such principles [which] fuels massive rejection of politics, [...] reinforcing the power of the authorities and discrediting it at the same time" (Jouary and Spire, 1997, p. 87-88).

In reaction to this cynicism, another cynicism has emerged called "sincerity" or "dominated" cynicism for which it is "out of the question [...] to be duped by a "morality" that is respected by so few people and hypocritically advocated by grotesque "buffoons"". (Dupin, 2006, p. 89). Double-dealing cynicism therefore generates this other form of cynicism that is "more subversive: derision for these processes", in order to "readapt with a certain hindsight to the double-dealing that they suffer, thereby transforming their suffering into joy" (Jouary and Spire, 1997, p. 88).

We can therefore infer that employee cynicism, and in particular manager cynicism, whose target is top management, conveys a poor internal climate. The result is a feeling of disillusionment and the loss of the appearance of power by top management. All the same, it cannot be considered as proof of their failure or absence of ethics. It uniquely corresponds to an indicator of negative management representation. The present study is therefore on the factors of cynicism in organizations with for a first proposition that employee and manager perception of double-dealing cynicism by top management represents an explanatory variable.

2. THE PERCEPTIONS OF TOP MANAGEMENT AS FACTORS OF MANAGER CYNICISM

In order to better understand the phenomenon of cynicism in organizations, we performed an exploratory study through non-directive individual interviews² of 25 managers³. We then carried out thematic content analysis in order to identify a series of factors in the emergence of cynicism.

2.1. Methods

We performed in-depth interviews of 25 middle managers in organizations in the PACA region (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, South of France). This sample was from a class of part-time Executive MBAs who were working at the moment of the interview. The subjects volunteered to participate in an interview for research purposes without knowing the subject in advance (in order to avoid any possible bias of managers communicating information to others on this theme). The managers were asked not to say anything to the others after each interview. The interviews lasted a mean of 75 minutes each and were all recorded and transcribed. We then analyzed the thematic contents.

Interview guidelines aimed to provide as much freedom as possible for the interviewee. The first question dealt with the opinion managers have of cynicism in organizations and, if necessary, we asked them to develop an example. Then the interviewees talked at length about their personal experience with cynicism without the interviewer giving them a particular definition of the word or attempting to structure the interview at this point. In the last part, the interviewer asked them to comment on examples of famous people who have proven to be cynical. In case an interviewee became particularly emotional, he or she was asked to describe the experience in the third person in order to distance him or herself from an imaginary person named Sophie or Pierre who was confronted with the same situation.

It is of interest to note that the interviewees whose statements could be qualified as cynical expressed an ambivalent feeling of attachment to the organization but one of defiance towards their directors.

² The first question was: "What does cynicism in firms evoke for you?"

³ The 25 managers were of French nationality, with 36% women, 48% under 34 years of age, with at least 5 years of professional experience broken down into 4 categories (5 to 6 years, 7 to 9 years, 10 to 14 years and 15 years or more) and seniority in their current firm broken down into 4 categories (1 to 2 years, 3 to 4 years, 5 to 6 years and 7 years or more) in small, medium and large French firms as well as in diverse sectors of activity (high technologies, aeronautics, energy, building, distribution, agribusiness, services).

Moreover, we verified that the target of cynicism was top management and not the immediate hierarchy. *"My boss is nice and accessible but that does not depend on him [making us understand the raison d'être of restructuration]; I don't know, it is as if he has given up, he knows that nothing will change no matter what he does,... and I think he is right, it's always like that."* [Male, 42 years old, 17 years of experience, large firm, 3 years of seniority]

2.2. Perceived top management competence and manager cynicism

Competence, defined as the degree of savoir-faire, both technical and interpersonal, required for a given position (Butler and Cantrell, 1984, in Kim et al., 2006) is one of the points where managers were the most critical of their directors. *"They often do things wrong [to set up a new customer relations policy] and never listen to us. And it cannot be said that we haven't tried to get this message to them. It isn't complicated. All that is needed is a steering committee which will include loyal customers, guide and evaluate our action."* [Female, 37 years old, 13 years of experience, large firm, 5 years of seniority].

All the same, even if managerial know-how is a top management competence, the impact of this explanatory variable appears to be modulated by the perception of management style that more or less depends on concertation. *"But it is well known that when they ask for our opinion without getting back to us, it's called participative management! (smile)"* [Female, 37 years old, 13 years of experience, large firm, 5 years of seniority].

On the other hand, when top management is viewed as being competent, no cynical expression is generated: *"They know what they are doing and we have enough information to do our work properly."* [Male, 41 years old, 15 years of experience, medium-sized firm, 6 years of seniority].

2.3. Perceived top management integrity and cynicism and manager cynicism

Managers are more virulent when they evoke the perception of a lack of integrity of their directors. Defined as the degree of adherence to a set of practices that are considered as acceptable (Mayer et al., 1995, in Kim et al., 2006), when it fails, it is one of the major sources of disillusionment for the managers interviewed. It is viewed as "fatal harm" against which it is useless to fight. Contrary to competence, when directors are viewed as honest, this

dimension is not mentioned. On the other hand, when it appears to be lacking, it is highly illustrated.

The perceived integrity and cynicism of top management appear as different variables. Indeed, while the cynicism of the dominant is defined as double-dealing in the literature, the two notions appear to intersect without reducing each other. We consider that the following statement reveals a perception of the double-dealing cynicism of top management that is consistent with the idea of only serving personal interests to the detriment of collective well-being while, at the same time, making it appear to be the contrary: *"The scheming that goes on is outrageous! The worst is when they try to tell you that everything that is being done is for the good of the company but you know that they have validated the referencing of a new supplier because the supplier paid them under the table to do it."* [Female, 34 years old, 9 years of experience, large firm, 2 years of seniority] *"In any case, we know that they only have two objectives: make the shareholders happy and fill their own pockets and for that they will stop at nothing. And that's the way it is, I have always believed that and in my opinion, if you think otherwise, you are naive"* [Male, 44 years old, 18 years of experience, medium-sized firm, 7 years of seniority]

On the other hand, an unscrupulous director could commit fraud such as a bribe to ensure the survival of his or her organization. We have differentiated the two variables at this stage in our study.

2.4. The link between politics and the power of directors as perceived by managers

Another element that was strongly evoked by the managers we interviewed is the link with the power of top management, expressed when it is criticized as a political concept of the organization. The more the interviewees perceived the organization as political, the more they found that: 1) top management is removed from "the field and the real problems"; 2) there is a high risk of a lack of integrity; 3) there is an explicit resolve to not include managers in strategic reflection in order to hold on to power. In organizations that are perceived as being very politicized, it is the attachment to this power that causes managers to perceive top management as careerists without a real desire to develop the organization. *"They couldn't care less about the firm – they are only interested in conserving their territory, showing off. I wouldn't care about that if they cared about the firm and its future, if they did their jobs*

properly." [Male, 28 years old, 6 years of experience, large firm, 3 years of seniority]. "They do everything to keep us out of the picture and make us believe that they control the situation. What a bunch of cowards! Mind you, if I wanted to get to the top and protect myself from real problems, I would do the same thing." [Female, 42 years old, 18 years of experience, medium-sized firm, 4 years of seniority].

This perception of a link between politics and power is associated with the concept that manager concertation and commitment are a risk for the loss of power. This is evident as a determinant of perceived director integrity. This verbatim is reminiscent of the definition by Mintzberg (1983, p. 172, in Hochwarter et al., 2004) who characterized organizations as political arenas: "individual or group behavior that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all, in a technical sense, illegitimate – sanctioned neither by formal authority, accepted ideology, nor certified expertise (although it may exploit any one of these". The perception of political arenas has a direct influence on decreasing manager satisfaction and the reduction of citizenship behavior by managers in organizations (Hochwarter, James, Johnson, Ferris, 2004).

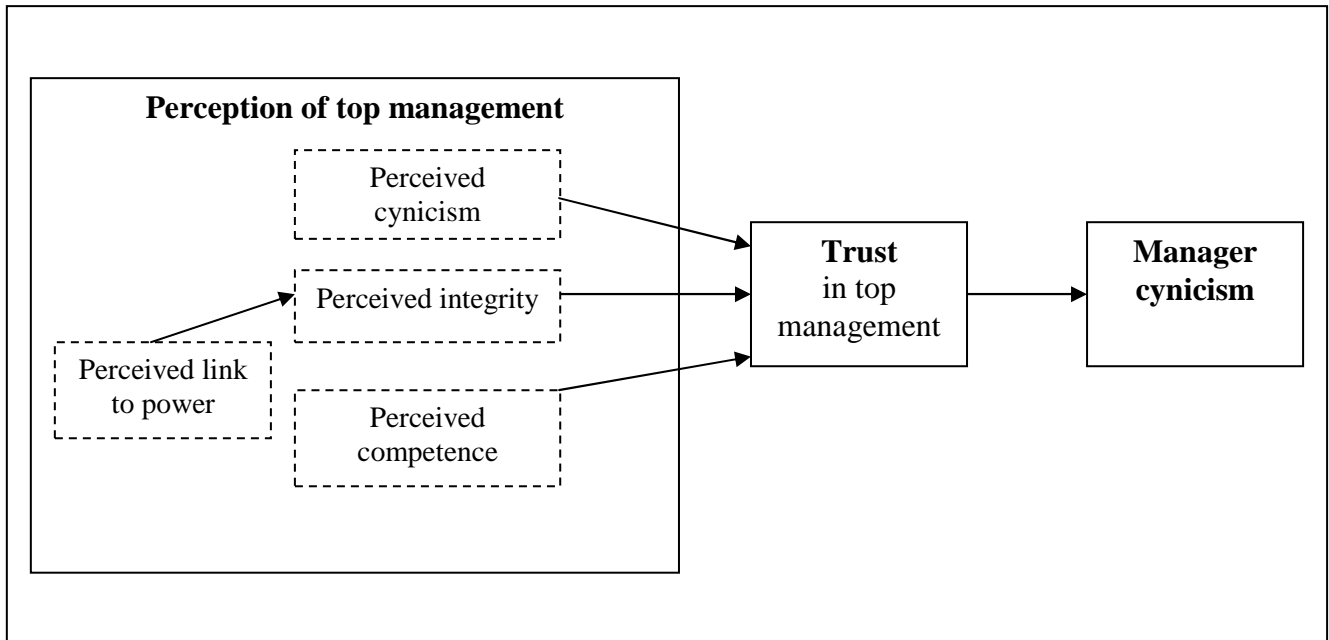
2.5. Perceived trust in top management and modeling of the factors for manager cynicism

Perceived competence and integrity (which a cynical director lacks) are described in the literature as two of the principal determinants of trust in top management (Neveu, 2004; Kim et al., 2006). It appears to be possible to propose a model where trust is positioned as a mediator variable. Trust would mediate the relationship between, on the one hand, the lack of integrity or competence of the director and on the other hand, expressions of disillusionment (Serrano and Brasseur, 2009).

Interview excerpts show, on one hand, a sequence: (1) lack of integrity of top management (presented as cynical) – (2) deterioration of trust – (3) cynical and disillusioned language of managers. On the other hand, other interviews show the link between the incompetence of top management and the *cynicism* of the manager (in the sense that he or she uses "disillusioned language"). Trust therefore plays a mediator role. Such linking would follow the recommendations of Neveu (2004), who, after a review of the ample literature on this subject and a trust scale development invites one to "question the possible antecedents

and effects of the two types of trust [in the immediate superior and in the director] on employee attitudes and behavior at work."

Figure 1: Modeling of the factors of managerial cynicism



CONCLUSION: MANAGERIAL CYNICISM – A VOICE THAT IS LABORING TO BE HEARD?

During the interviews, we noted provocative formulations, a behavior that generally attracts disapproval in the organization⁴. They can be a means to vent the aggressiveness that comes from frustration by criticizing the people who are the subject of such provocative formulations. Frustration can appear when, for example, the person thinks that poor choices are being made by the directors and in particular when he or she supposes that these choices are distorting the reality, do not correspond to the needs of the organization and that their defenders are double-dealing. They are therefore expressions of "clairvoyance". Why do these managers' statements take a cynical form? Perhaps they cannot find a means to express themselves through the normal channels of the organization and therefore adopt a means of expression that is not normal.

Indeed, Argyris (1994) explained how, as a general rule, employees do not make their directors aware of the problems they encounter. Since directors do not value such feedback,

⁴ A result that the Greek cynics often obtained with those who listened to them.

they can put the quality of employee work in question. Managers are therefore obliged to calculate the level of risk and utility to openly express themselves and the most frequent reaction is to remain silent (Detert and Edmondson, 2006). This inhibition can be explained by the fact that organizations, even if it is detrimental to their performance, discourage critical expression through the transmission of implicit messages for fear of conflicts (Kassing, 1997). Managers only send up accommodating information about existing problems. This phenomenon progressively distances the employees, and in particular the managers, from the directors. This "distance [which] is then established without control over its size, [and] divides the people above from the people below." (Courpasson and Thoenig, 2008, p. 42). Sending up information about problems goes against the tendency of organizations to learn from their failures and errors – they prefer to show off their good results and successes (Detert and Edmondson, 2006).

A form of cynical expression is therefore not conventional – it offends and is a coping strategy that managers adopt if they cannot be officially heard. Despite the roughness of his or her remarks, this manager would have "pure" intentions that aim to make the organization progress, in particular against double-dealing cynicism. Following this argument, the lower the ability to influence those with power and the greater the willingness to improve things, the greater the disillusionment. This is a positive orientation of cynicism at work.

Under this angle, cynicism represents a form of saving dissent for the organization. It reveals a sort of catapult for managers, it is an indicator of mistrust or even defiance vis-à-vis the directors which can be found in a diagnosis of a deteriorated internal climate. Taking this argument to the extreme, cynicism in the form of organizational dissent and when it is expressed in an organization, it emerges as a support for identification of organizational failures.

A cynical director (in the sense of double-dealing driven by self-interest) can profit from double-dealing because the benefit of deception can be immediate. On the other hand, the effect on the manager is deferred in time. In the medium term, managers who know they are being taken advantage of will lose trust, feel discouraged and disillusioned but will, at the same time, continue to care about the fate of the organization. Then, in the long term, the "duped" can become really cynical, developing total detachment from the organization and no longer attempt to improve things. This is negative cynical behavior.

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