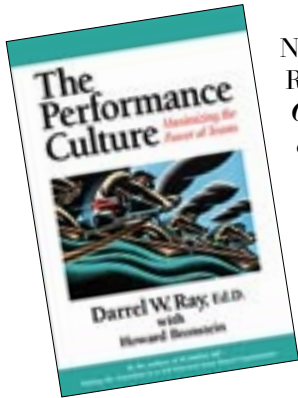


The Dilbert™ Effect

Or Why Is Dilbert So Popular?

By Darrel W. Ray ©2000

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Note: This article is based upon Dr. Ray's recent book, *The Performance Culture: Maximizing the Power of Teams*, (IPC Press, 2001).

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Corporate culture is serious business in business, but don't look at it too close, you will find Dilbert™ writ large. I like Dilbert because he treads with mud clodden feet on all organizational sacred cows: performance appraisals, employee surveys, motivational trinkets, teamwork, pay and promotion plans, management by objectives, corporate expense accounts, consultants, human resource managers and finance managers. He turns the logic of the pop management culture on it's head. For example, Dilbert finds the idea that a good manager hires someone smarter than him/herself very interesting. With his inimitable logic, he deduces that, such a practice, if it in fact were practiced, would mean the CEO is the dumbest person in the company!



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Dilbert has a pantheon of characters who can be found in most companies; Wally the do nothing engineer, Alice the overachiever, Asok the naïve new employee, and of course, the Boss who seems to have no name so we will just call him Boss. Boss exemplifies all the attributes of a manager who doesn't have a clue.

Before following Dogbert into the consulting world, I had the privilege of working for the Boss five different times. Two were most notable. My first, "Boss" came close to firing me after only two weeks because I spent too much time with Bart Simpson (not his real name but very, very close). Bart was the office troublemaker (Wally in Dilbert terms), but as a new employee I was naive. Bart had taken me under his wing and systematically initiated me to the workplace; something the Boss had not bothered to do. Bart told me whom I could and could not trust. He told me how to fix my expenses so that I got maximum reimbursement. He carefully pointed out all the best looking women in the department and whom they were sleeping with. He noted who slept with the Big Boss and even tipped me off, on who I could sleep with, were I so inclined. Needless to say, Bart had little use for the Boss. In this case the Boss was a religious fanatic who hired no one unless they established their religiousness discretely in their interview. I was coached by a friend to make a religious comment during the interview, and sure enough I was hired. Bart himself had once been a minister, that is how he got hired. The Boss never forgave him for failing to mention that he was now an agnostic.

My second experience with the Boss came after four years of working with a true mentor and excellent leader. When my mentor left, the Boss was hired to replace him. We could not figure out why he was given the position except that he had been around for 25 years. He was hired

ahead of four other candidates that all had stellar credentials including three Ph.D's. When the Boss came on board he called the entire organization together and said, and I quote, "I plan on retiring here." And he proceeded to retire! He did nothing for the next four years. It took less than a year for the Boss to destroy four years of hard work and high performance in our organization. He was later promoted to a bureaucratic staff job with NO management responsibilities.

You might perceive that Dilbert comes down hard on management, and he does; but he also finds plenty of humor in the games employees play: Tina who cries instantly when the Boss corrects her and conveniently avoids any consequences for her poor performance. Asok the clueless new employee, who is eager to climb a corporate ladder that has no rungs.

So why is Dilbert so popular? Is it because he makes fun of managers? I don't think so. Dilbert makes fun of everyone, even himself. I think his popularity comes from the fact that he understands human motivation and beliefs, and knows how to frame them so we can see ourselves and our coworkers.

We look at Dilbert and laugh. We identify with him because we have all been there, but we don't really know why it seems so true. How can something be so true across a wide range of companies and workplaces? What is he tapping into that crosses all organizational boundaries and even cultures in every corner of the world? (He is quite popular in Asia and Europe as well)

Dilbert is making explicit something we all suspect: There are really two cultures in most organizations, the official and the unofficial culture. I call these the Intentional culture and the Endemic culture. Both of these cultures have a set of beliefs and assumptions, but they are not talked about or shared between the two cultures. When Alice says to the Boss, "As requested, I did a 'Risk Management' assessment. I concluded that there is no risk of management." (p. 87) She is acting on the belief in the Endemic culture, that management is not competent.

When the Boss goes into the conference room with other managers, closes the door and begins to discuss, "How can we empower our employees?" Dilbert decides such a closed-

door meeting must mean layoffs or worse. He empowers himself to update his resume! The Boss' hidden belief is that, "Employees can be empowered without involving them." Dilbert's hidden belief is; "If managers close the door they must be talking about something bad."



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When the Intentional and Endemic cultures come into conflict, I call this **The Dilbert Effect**. The Effect is this; looking at a Dilbert comic strip we can all see cultural conflict, but when it happens in our own organizational culture, it becomes invisible to at least one of the parties. The Boss cannot see how demotivating his empowerment meeting is. Asok, the new employee, does not see how naïve he is. (p. 96) Dilbert does not recognize the Boss' good intentions. This invisibility means change is not possible while games, fault finding, responsibility shirking and blaming become the norm.

Dilbert taps into something that is deeper than our everyday awareness. Most of us see the patterns of behavior in Dilbert as very similar to those in our own company. When the Boss brags about his new expensive luxury car, Wally pays the Dogbert Wreaking Company to crush it along with the little model the Boss keeps in his office. The pattern is familiar. What the boss thinks is cool, is seen by the Endemic culture as pretentious.

The status symbols managers have can be double-edged swords. They are intended to impress people and gain power and respect but they have a very different meaning to the Endemic culture. They can become objects of derision and disrespect behind the Boss' back. The two cultures can look at the same thing and see something very different.

When the Boss gives Alice a \$1,000 motivational rock, (Which she in turn uses to hit him, p. 27), the Boss is acting on the belief that expensive status symbols are intrinsically

motivating. He is showing a total lack of understanding about what motivates Alice or others in the Endemic culture. He quite unintentionally motivated her to hit him!

How many times have you wasted vast amounts of time and energy being angry at your boss or a coworker? While you may not actually hit the boss, you certainly thought about it. How much have you seen this in others in the workplace? Go to the lunchroom and listen to the Endemic culture talk about management. Is that positive or negative energy? Do those people return from lunch focused and ready to do their best after having spent the lunch hour complaining about management (the Intentional culture)?

When the Boss says, “Alice, your performance exceeded all expectations this year... but I’m not giving you the top rating because I want you to have something to shoot for next year.” (p. 43) Alice in turn decides she needs to go get her harpoon. He is acting on the belief that Alice may deserve the recognition but she might not work as hard next year if he gives it to her.

Little of the behavior illustrated in Dilbert is constructive, but it is all too true of most organizations. These hidden beliefs are very common, that is why Dilbert is widely read and recognized throughout the world.

I believe high performing organizations know how to challenge hidden beliefs and channel the behavior in constructive ways. A great deal of the negative emotion and frustration in organizations comes from the Dilbert Effect - a conflict between the cultures that no one talks about

High performing organizations have organizational traditions and structures that open the dialogue between the Endemic and Intentional cultures and keep it open. With an open dialogue, hidden beliefs have to compete in the light of day against more legitimate concerns. Hidden beliefs no longer have the power to sap energy from the company and the motivation from employees.

What if Dilbert had been invited to the meeting on employee empowerment? Would he have updated his resume? What if Alice were given full credit and recognition for her achievements, would she feel a need to harpoon

the Boss? What if the Boss challenged his own belief about human motivation and gave Alice something she valued? Would she have hit him with it?

This all can get kind of depressing when you think about it. But there are very specific and practical ways to get these two cultures talking to each other and to challenge the hidden beliefs and assumptions that drive behavior. High performing organizational cultures reduce or eliminate the Dilbert Effect with several **Organizational Disciplines**. In less than one year, most organizations can eliminate a great deal of **The Dilbert Effect** and begin focusing the energy of the organization in more productive ways.

These disciplines include:

The Discipline of Training: Training is the way high performance organizations feed and care for the Endemic Culture. The more training and information given to people, the less opportunity or inclination they have to engage in rumors and fear related behaviors. Training sends many positive messages to the Endemic Culture about the organizations level of commitment and investment in people.

The Discipline of Communication: Open up formerly secretive meetings and create opportunities for a wide range of people to participate in decision making and planning. Ensure that there is a clear two-way dialogue between the Intentional Culture and the Endemic Culture. I discuss a number of these techniques in *Teaming Up* (McGraw-Hill, 1995).

The Discipline of Goal Setting: Develop methods that involve everyone in goal setting and goal measurement. My own goal for a company is that 90% of all employees can articulate the goals of their department and team at any time. To test your own organization, walk around and ask any employee, “What are the measurable goals for your team or department for this quarter.” Their response **MUST** be in measurable terms like this: “The team will improve throughput on engineering designs by 15% and reduce error claims by 25% this quarter. We are currently at 20% throughput improvement but only show 20% improvement in claims.” If they answer something like: “To make our customers happy and put out more product.” You have a lot of

work to do.

The Discipline of Praise and Recognition:

High performing organizations, without exception, show high levels of praise and recognition. People feel like their efforts are appreciated and that mistakes are something to learn from, not hide.

The Discipline of Performance Feedback:

All employees, including managers and leaders, receive real time performance feedback. Feedback comes from many sources including peers and subordinates, in a timely and structured way.

The hidden beliefs rampant in most organizations can be found every day in Dilbert. They profoundly affect organizational behavior. Unspoken and unexamined, they create huge bottlenecks in understanding and communication. The above described Organizational Disciplines will help your organization overcome the Dilbert Effect.

The next time you read Dilbert, ask yourself, “What are the hidden beliefs of each character and how does that influence their behavior?”

To begin implementing the power of teams in your company contact:

The Institute of Performance Culture

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A one-day seminar is available on “The Dilbert Effect” from Dr. Ray.

This one day seminar is designed to give leaders and managers a Dilbert’s Eye view of their company. For many people the Dilbert cartoons seem to tap into fundamental truths of organizational life. “Why is Dilbert so popular,” is designed to help leaders understand and avoid the Dilbert Effect. The Dilbert Effect is seen when there is a large disconnect between the intentions of management and management’s actual behavior. This leads to unintended and unproductive behavior on the part of employees. With concepts from Dr. Ray’s book, *Teaming Up* (McGraw-Hill, 1995) and his recent book, *The Performance Culture: Maximizing the Power of Teams* (IPC Press, 2001), participants will learn about the “Endemic culture” and the positive and negative effects of team systems within different types of organizations. Hidden beliefs and stated values in the Dilbert comics are used to help understand your own organization’s hidden beliefs and how they affect behavior and productivity. Participants will also learn:

- The “**Dilbert Effect**” what is it and how does it affect your organization?
- Why do managers unintentionally punish the Dilberts and reward the Wallys of the organization?
- How can an organization ensure that the Wally’s of the world actually produce or get out?
- Why would Alice kill the boss with a \$1,000 motivational rock?
- Does Catbert, HR Director, have any impact on performance?
- Three homework assignments that can help managers overcome many of the problems of the Dilbert Effect.
- What is the difference between Dilbert type teams and team based systems?

The seminar is available in-house or for association meetings.
For more information call **913-724-3600** or visit **www.teaming-up.com**

Some comments from seminar participants:

Your presentation was one of those “light bulb” experiences that explained many of the behaviors I’ve observed in my organization over the years. The clear definitions and the Dilbert examples made the concepts of formal and endemic cultures and the incongruity between stated values and hidden beliefs easier to remember and much easier to explain to others. Having an understanding of the cultural dynamics in a group and gaining some strategies to help a group recognize, experience and resolve their value-belief conflicts increases the potential for positive outcomes for any group I facilitate, regardless of the task before them. Thanks for a really great session!

Sue Kinas, Facilitator

State of Wisconsin, Department of Workforce Development

I found the information you presented to be a very practical approach to an age old problem. How can my organization really “walk the talk”? The idea of an endemic culture really helped to clarify the problem. If I don’t become very intentional about aligning the formal culture with the endemic culture, my organization will not be able to “walk the talk”. Also, I read the chapter of your new book. It was very interesting I’ve showing it to a couple of people here at Comdisco.

Thanks again for sharing your experience and knowledge with us at the MFN seminar.

David J. Fuller

Comdisco

Darrel Ray’s concept of teambuilding provides a totally unique dimension of how corporations can view and structure themselves to a whole new linear way of thinking. By utilizing the comic strip Dilbert, Ray provides quantitative examples of how others often view managers and companies in various subcultures, and how these same subcultures react to various situations. This entire process enlightens companies on how they need to react to make effective decisions, which will benefit all parties. Anyone who is attending Ray’s seminar will find his session interesting and stimulating as well as entertaining through the “Dilbert” effect.”

Helen Catlin, Facilitator

Ace Hardware Corporation.

What is so compelling in Dr. Ray’s approach is the completeness of the strategy. Our common sense observations pick up differences in a company’s walk and talk, Dilbert jokes us into painful awareness, but Darrel’s identification of the culture conflict is thought out clearly to do real surgery on the organization. Darrel identifies the Intentional culture so well that his guidelines for surgery will not be accepted by every group.

Dan Heck

Motorola

About Dr. Darrel Ray

Dr. Darrel W. Ray has consulted throughout the United States since 1978 and has directed major departments in two organizations. He specializes in Management Development, Team Building and Self-Directed Work Group implementation. As a psychologist Dr. Ray has studied groups and group dynamics since 1976, and has worked with groups and organizations in development and change efforts throughout his career. He has been a pioneer in the development of Self-Directed Work Teams in both union and non-union environments.

A graduate of George Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, he holds a doctorate in counseling psychology. Dr. Ray is certified by two national organizations as a trainer and holds certifications in Neurolinguistics as well. He is a professional member of the Association for Quality and Participation, American Psychological Association, and The American Society for Training and Development.

His published works include articles in a number of national journals including: **The Journal for Quality and Participation**, **Manage Magazine**, **Working Woman**, **Management World**, **Training and Development Journal**, **The Journal of Basic and Applied Social Psychology**, **Evaluation and Program Planning**, **NAPM Insights**, and **Supervisory Management**. He has been interviewed and written about in such publications as **Industry Week**, **Fortune**, **Entrepreneur**, **The Employment Review**, **The Houston Chronicle**, **The Kansas City Business Journal**, **The Wall Street Journal**, **Black Enterprise Magazine** and many others and has appeared on numerous radio and television programs across the nation. He has also been included in **Who's Who in the Midwest**. His video, **Self-Directed Work Teams: The Inside Story** was released in the fall of 1993 and is available through IPC. Dr. Ray's books **TEAMING UP: Making the Transition to a Self-Directed Team-Based Organization** published by McGraw-Hill, and **THE PERFORMANCE CULTURE: Maximizing the Power of Teams** published by IPC Press, are available through IPC or your local bookstore.



Dr. Ray has implemented high participation and Self-Directed Teams in many settings, both service and manufacturing. An engineering group of 300 engineers and technicians saw improvements of 5-13% in productivity each of the first two years with no increase in staff. A mental health center increased revenues from \$1 million to \$3 million while also giving revenue sharing to its employees (an unheard of innovation). They climbed from virtual bankruptcy to being the top agency in the state. They achieved a small decrease in management staff through attrition and greatly **increased service levels** to clients. The organization has run record surpluses three years in a row. The director **received a national award** for the organization's achievements. A major manufacturer of specialty bakery goods reduced waste 50% each year, while setting profit and **productivity records** in the first three years. Their manufacturing Teams won **quality awards** two years in a row. A Fortune 500 unionized manufacturer reduced waste 96% in the first two years while **absorbing the work** of 250 from another union plant which was bought by the company. **Grievances reduced** dramatically and **management/union relations improved** greatly. An insurance company **reduced application turnaround time** from 15 days to 3 days and **reduced errors** by more than 75% in two years time. **Productivity increased** by over 100% at the same time with no increase in work force or management. A financial services company, achieved 100% **increase in customer service** levels and a 30% increase in productivity within the first seven months, with Self-Directed Work-Teams. A trucking company with 100 trucks and 20 office employees **decreased pallet loss** by \$20,000 while **increasing on time delivery and driver retention** in the first year.

Companies for which Dr. Ray has done significant work include: AFG Industries, APTUS (Division of Westinghouse), Bell Atlantic, Boelte-Hall Litho, Burlington Northern-Santa Fe Railroad, Butler Manufacturing, Cummins Engine, Inc., Data Documents, Exxon Corporation, Fleetguard Corp (Division of Cummins Engine), Georgia Pacific, Hallmark Cards (Crown Financial Services), Harmon Industries, Fort James Corp., Leader National Insurance, MCI Telecommunications, Mobil Oil, Motiva Enterprises (Division of Shell Oil), Niagara Falls Community Counseling Centre, North Bay Community Counseling Centre, North Supply Plastic Packaging Corp., Patchwork Tradition Food Co., QC Data of Calgary Canada, Salt River Project – Agua Fria Power Plant, Shell Oil, South Central Behavioral Services, Standard Motor Products, The General Services Administration, The State of Nebraska, Trailiner Corp, US Sprint, Windsor Group Insurance, Volume Shoe Corp., US Sprint, GE Capital, Exxon Corporation, Worth Harley-Davidson, Baptist Health and many others.