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Unlearning cynicism
A supplemental approach in addressing a serious organizational malady

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Abstract

Purpose – "Unlearning" is discussed as an additional perspective or supplemental strategy for managers/leaders to consider when addressing cynicism in organizations. The article is not intended to be definitive. The aim of this paper is to generate ideas and encourage further exploration amongst practitioners and scholars regarding the feasibility of this perspective. There are a number of plausible explanations for the origin of cynicism, including the notion that cynicism is learned. As anything that is learned can also be unlearned, "unlearning" seemed to be a compelling perspective worthy of further exploration.

Design/methodology/approach – A targeted literature review of cynicism (with a specific focus on some of the more salient and well-respected research) was utilized to develop a conceptual overview of cynicism, a discussion of key causes/antecedents of cynicism, and common symptoms of cynicism. Select literature was also reviewed relative to the concept of "unlearning". These varied sources were then synthesized into a framework that outlined the premise of "unlearning" applied to cynicism in organizations.

Findings – This article focuses on the attitudinal dimension of cynicism, discussing "unlearning" as a possible method for addressing cynicism that can be used to supplement, but not necessarily replace, other methods that have proven effective.

Originality/value – Cynicism in organizations has received notable research attention. This article contributes to this important topic by exploring "unlearning" as a supplemental approach or perspective for addressing cynicism with the intent of generating ideas and encouraging further exploration of the feasibility of this approach.

Keywords Attitudes, Cynicism, Unlearning

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Cynicism is prevalent in organizations (Andersson, 1996; Kouzes and Posner, 2005; Dean *et al.*, 1998; Feldman, 2000; Ferres and Connell, 2004). Initial rationale for this article centers on the fact that cynicism has been singled out as a significant problem impacting employee relationships with their employers (Feldman, 2000), impeding

organizational improvement efforts (Lewis, 2011), challenging organizational leaders (Caldwell *et al.* (2012) and being an important issue confronting specific professions such as law enforcement (Niederhoffer, 1969; Poole *et al.*, 1978; Richardson *et al.*, 2006). Frymier (1997) focused on cynicism of middle and high school teachers, whereas Bedeian (2007) included cynicism in his study of college faculty. Interestingly, Kanter and Mirvis (1989) noted that cynicism is a challenge for organizations, regardless of size. Considering the wide array of seriously negative impacts identified in the literature, it stands to reason that organizations want to reduce levels of cynicism. Consequently, a few techniques have been tried, though with varied success.

Cynicism in organizations deserves more serious consideration and a broader spectrum of remedies. More than a mere "problem", cynicism is a malady that deeply affects organizations similar to cancer in humans as it may go undetected for extended periods only to appear suddenly as a serious set of symptoms. For better informed organizations, the dreaded "C" word is cynicism. Upon discovery, sometimes, it is treatable, other times, it can be terminal. Early detection and intervention can be critical. Doctors, particularly oncologists, have attempted for decades to detect and eradicate all sorts of cancer. Although some progress is reported with certain types of cancers – because of improved detection and treatment techniques – generally, there has been limited progress. Consequently, new techniques, technologies and treatments are developed and tested. The same should be true for organizational cynicism interventions.

This paper suggests that it is time to more deeply explore the technique, "unlearning cynicism", as a possible addition to organizations' arsenal of tools to battle cynicism. This article is intended to be conceptual in nature, directed toward those with a practical interest in cynicism. As a conceptual article, the assertions and conclusions offered are based largely on a review and application of the literature, rather than on empirical data. To promote a sense of clarity, transparency and explicitness, the following section generally describes the process/method undertaken in crafting this article, as well as the rationale for each element of the process.

Literature review process, method and rationale
First, a literature search was done for articles related to cynicism through well-respected library data bases (including ABI/INFORM). Unless otherwise stated, subsequent searches outlined in this section were undertaken using the same databases. The initial search resulted in several thousand articles containing the key word "cynicism". Given the magnitude and sheer volume of articles, it was necessary to refine the search for literature that was well respected and more directly related to the scope of the article.

Next, articles that were deemed to meet the criteria outlined above were reviewed to identify key findings, assertions and insights. Although there were a variety of articles reviewed, major themes in the literature seemed to emerge, including antecedents of cynicism, outcomes, symptoms and methods for reducing cynicism. These themes, then, served as a partial guide for the structure of this article. An article by Dean *et al.*'s (1998), as well as a book by Kanter and Mirvis (1989), were among the most frequently cited works related to cynicism, with insights from these sources serving as key components of this article.

Importantly, literature highlighted personality and attitude as two of the predominant categories for conceptualizing or defining cynicism. "Unlearning"

appeared to fall more clearly into the "attitudinal" category, prompting additional review of related literature to glean insights.

A separate search for literature through respected library databases was then undertaken to identify salient research related to the topic of "unlearning". The literature search for concepts of unlearning applied to cynicism was largely unsuccessful with Gardner's (1993) address to graduates at an honor's convocation serving as the only reference to "unlearning cynicism" that was found. In a more general sense, the overall search for articles using just the keyword "unlearning" resulted in hundreds of articles, with a select few that were deemed relevant to the scope of this article being reviewed. Appropriate conclusions and insights from these articles were incorporated into the section summarizing unlearning cynicism, as well as the perceptual framework for unlearning cynicism.

As this article was intended to be practical, generating ideas, as well as further exploration of "unlearning cynicism" as a feasible method of addressing cynicism in organizations, the article concluded with two practical/illustrated examples of how unlearning of cynicism might be deployed in an organizational context.

Cynicism –a conceptual overview

The vast majority of what has been written on cynicism is focused on understanding the phenomena, not treating it. Cynicism is discussed in a variety of conceptualizations, distinctions and characteristics (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989; Stanley *et al.*, 2005; Vance, 2007). Indeed, over the years, authors have presented an assortment of definitions and descriptions of cynicism (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Stanley *et al.*, 2005). Although these definitions vary, a negative attitude is the dominant dimension of organizational cynicism (Abraham, 2000; Dean *et al.*, 1998; Stanley *et al.*, 2005). Andersson and Bateman's (1997, p. 450) reflection on a number of definitions for cynicism leads to their depiction of cynicism as both a "general and specific attitude, characterized by frustration and disillusionment as well as negative feelings toward and distrust of a person, group, ideology, social convention, or institution". The element of disillusionment is consistent with other contemporary definitions of cynicism which include both close-mindedness and disillusionment as key characteristics of cynicism (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989; Kouzes and Posner, 2005). The component of distrust in Andersson and Bateman's (1997) definition appears to be in line with Stanley *et al.*'s (2005) assertion that an individual's disbelief regarding the motives of others is a salient characteristic of cynicism. Viewing cynicism as an attitude has important implications in the context of organizations, as attitudes play an important role in influencing behavior (Ajzen, 1980; Evans *et al.*, 2011).

Disposition has also been acknowledged as a plausible foundation of cynicism (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Ferres and Connell, 2004; Kanter and Mirvis, 1989; Vance, 2007). Specifically, pessimism and higher levels of negative affect are embedded within the personality dynamic of cynicism (Vance, 2007). In Dean *et al.*'s (1998, p. 342) conceptual review of cynicism, they also explain that the dispositional perspective may be reflected as "[…] an overall outlook on human nature". Dispositions or personalities are typically regarded as relatively stable, not readily amenable to change. In recognizing this, Dean *et al.* (1998) accept that there are inherent limitations in addressing dispositional dimensions of cynicism. However, this article's focus is on attitudinal components of cynicism rather than dispositional components.

Parallel to the broad scope of definitions of cynicism are clarifications that cynicism has multiple components and a variety of potential targets. The range of potential targets may include, but is not limited to, fellow employees (Vance, 2007), the organization (Dean *et al.*, 1998), management (Niederhoffer, 1969) and organizational change (Reichers *et al.*, 1997). In regard to different forms of cynicism, Dean *et al.* (1998) reviewed five conceptualizations of cynicism, a personality focus, societal or institutional cynicism, employee cynicism, organizational change cynicism and work/ occupational cynicism. Abraham (2000) reiterated these forms or conceptualizations of cynicism, thus adding credibility to Dean *et al.*'s (1998) review.

Dean *et al.*'s (1998) review of diverse conceptualizations of cynicism serves as a precursor for their discussion and characterization of organizational cynicism. Dean *et al.* (1998, p. 345) define cynicism as "[…] a negative attitude toward one's employing organization comprising three dimensions […]". These three dimensions are: "1) a belief that the organization lacks integrity, 2) negative affect toward the organization, and 3) tendencies to disparage and behave adversely toward the organization […]" (Dean *et al.*, 1998; p. 345). Given the potential implications cynicism has for workers and the workplace, the organizational form of cynicism is the explicit focus of this article. Additionally, as the prevalence of dynamics associated with organizational change are commonly recognized as a key source of cynicism in organizations (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Reichers *et al.*, 1997), literature and findings related to cynicism about organizational change (CAOC) will also be considered in an effort to provide further insight into the potential for "unlearning" techniques. Although attention to organizational cynicism and cynicism related to organizational change are important features of this article, our primary interest is to address manifestations of cynicism (at the individual level) occurring in the workplace. Potentially, this approach may subsume other types of individual-level cynicism in organizations, such as work/occupational cynicism described by Dean *et al.* (1998). With a better grasp of what cynicism is, the literature dealing with causes is discussed next.

Significant sources, causes and antecedents of cynicism

Of the two major schools of thought addressing cynicism, one identifies disposition as the foundation suggesting that cynicism is a general perspective, philosophy or outlook (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989; Vance, 2007). As such, cynicism would be a reflection of how individuals view others or the world (Dean *et al.*, 1998). In contrast, the other major school focuses on the attitudinal perspective. More specifically, cynicism is viewed as an attitude that is negative in nature (Abraham, 2000; Dean *et al.*, 1998; Stanley *et al.*, 2005), directed toward a variety of potential targets or manifested in a number of different forms (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989). Although attitudes could, arguably, have a number of specific causes, in a more general sense, attitudes are learned through experiences (Ahmad, 2012). Dean *et al.* (1998) concur, emphasizing that experiences influence cynicism. It is not particularly surprising, then, that cynicism has also been described as a learned attitude.

"Cynicism is learned through direct experience and through group socialization" (Vance, 2007, p. 564). Indeed, this view is widely held (Frymier, 1997; Wanous *et al.*, 2000). Group socialization is a potential source of cynicism, implying that it is contagious or learned from others. Correspondingly, Kanter and Mirvis (1989, p. 58) state that "cynicism from senior management begets cynicism throughout an

organization". Reichers *et al.* (1997, p. 49) mention that cynicism related to organizational change may "[…] spill over into other aspects of work life". Beyond socialization, personal experiences and emotions are commonly recognized as contributing factors (Dean *et al.*, 1998). Interestingly, it has been suggested that awareness of other employee's experiences may influence cynicism (Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly, 2003). As experience is an important avenue of learning, these observations indirectly corroborate the view that cynicism is learned (Dean *et al.*, 1998).

A particularly powerful experience in organizations is often an employee's perceptions of how closely organizations meet their expectations. Related to expectations, Andersson (1996) posited that failure of organizations to meet employee expectations (reflected in the form of unwritten, psychological contracts) would lead to employee cynicism. Kanter and Mirvis (1989) also note the importance of unmet job expectations as a potential contributor to cynicism. This brings to fore Vance's (2007) discussion of different approaches to studying cynicism. Employees' expectations may be reflected in psychological contracts encompassing expectations about their jobs and workplace, as well as perceived obligations (Makin *et al.*, 1997). Unlike formal contracts, the psychological contract is unwritten and represents the beliefs about reciprocal expectations/obligations of the employee toward the organization and the organization toward the employee (Makin *et al.*, 1997). Makin *et al.* (1997) emphasize on the importance of psychological contracts, noting that violating these contracts could have undesirable outcomes, including, but not limited to, decrements in job satisfaction and a heightened likelihood of organizational departure. Two points are very significant to the argument of this paper:

(1) Employees who perceive that the psychological contract has been breached tend to exhibit higher levels of cynicism (Chrobot-Mason, 2003; Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly, 2003; Pate, 2006).

(2) Cynicism developed through a perceived breach of a psychological contract by one employer can be carried over to a new employer (Pugh *et al.*, 2003).

Cynicism has even been attributed to the magnitude of strategic organizational change employees have experienced (Swaim, 1999). Furthermore, individuals' prior experiences with how organizations have dealt with change may contribute to subsequent cynicism toward change (Reichers *et al.*, 1997). Experiences, coupled with beliefs, provide an important combination of factors influencing cynicism. Dean *et al.* (1998, p. 345) suggest that "the first dimension of organizational cynicism is the belief that the organization lacks integrity". According to Krech and Crutchfield (1948, p. 152), "all attitudes incorporate relevant beliefs about the object of the attitude […]". Beliefs embody opinions, faith and knowledge (Krech and Crutchfield, 1948). For example, Reichers *et al.* (1997) observed that lack of respect toward a supervisor was linked to employee cynicism. At the organizational level, cynicism embodies suspicion about the motives of others (Vance, 2007), which can seriously undermine support for change initiatives.

In addition to experience and beliefs, numerous other factors have been cited in the literature as contributors to cynicism. Within the context of an individual's job, work demands contribute to cynicism (Richardson *et al.*, 2006). Lack of resources have also been linked to cynicism (Bakker *et al.*, 2003; Richardson *et al.*, 2006). In his discussion of job burnout, Angerer (2003) sees cynicism as a reaction to stress. Others identify

cynicism as a key factor in burnout (Bakker *et al.*, 2003; Maslach and Jackson, 1981). For example, in their study of nurses in the context of downsizing, Greenglass and Burke (2000) found a measure of cynicism helpful in assessing burnout. Greenglass and Burke (2000) found that work load impacted cynicism, self-efficacy was negatively related to cynicism and nurses' coping methods impacted reported levels of cynicism. Specifically, escape coping, and avoidance, correlated with higher levels of cynicism. In contrast, control coping, which is a comparatively more engaged, proactive method of coping, correlated with lower levels of cynicism (Greenglass and Burke, 2000). In another study, Becker *et al.* (2005) found that measures of leader–member exchange correlated with the cynicism dimension of burnout. Specifically, the greater the rate of exchange, the lower the levels of reported cynicism.

Andersson and Bateman's (1997) study identified employee perceptions of excessive executive pay, the announcement of harsh layoffs and poor organization performance as factors contributing to employee cynicism levels. In a broader sense, Bernerth *et al.* (2007) found a negative relationship between cynicism levels and perceptions of interactional justice and distributive justice, whereas Evans *et al.* (2011) reported a negative relationship between perceptions of corporate citizenship and cynicism. A final example worth noting is cynicism is listed among possible consequences of lack of control over key factors related to an individual's job (Angerer, 2003). With a better understanding of the causes of cynicism, a list of harmful symptoms identified in the literature is provided next.

Significant negative symptoms related to cynicism

Numerous organizational symptoms are connected with the malady of cynicism. An exhaustive treatment does not fit within the scope of this article. However, a short list of symptoms mentioned in the literature is provided to reinforce the importance of addressing organizational cynicism:

- lower supervisor commitment to subordinates (Atwater *et al.*, 2000);
- less effective feedback programs (Atwater *et al.*, 2000; Smith and Fortunato, 2008);
- greater resistance to organizational change (Reichers *et al.*, 1997; Stanley *et al.*, 2005);
- lower commitment to the organization (Wanous *et al.*, 2000);
- less inclination to identify with an organization (Bedeian, 2007);
- higher number of grievances (Wanous *et al.*, 2000);
- lower engagement in organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB's) (Evans *et al.*, 2011; Jordan *et al.*, 2007);
- lower levels of trust (Andersson and Bateman, 1997);
- lower job satisfaction (Evans *et al.*, 2011; Fichter, 2011; Vance, 2007);
- lower satisfaction with their employer (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989);
- higher levels of job-related stress (Vance, 2007);
- higher levels of burnout (Lee and Shin, 2005); and
- higher levels of those intending to turnover (Lee and Shin, 2005).

Call for remedies

Considering the wide variety of serious symptoms noted above, it is not surprising that organizations attempt to reduce cynicism, a deeply manifested organizational phenomenon. However, as cynicism is complex, with multiple dimensions or facets, it is no wonder that a single intervention is not sufficient to adequately address it. Stanley *et al.* (2005) state that "[…] overcoming cynicism will take time, and might require special strategies" (p. 457). In the literature, a few remedies are presented. For the sake of illustration, three of these methods are discussed in the next section.

Methods for minimizing, reducing or preventing cynicism

One of the contributions of this paper is drawing attention to the discrepancy between the serious need for remedies compared to the dearth of effective treatments for the malady of cynicism. Three remedies flow logically from causes of cynicism identified in the literature.

First – address management credibility

Kanter and Mirvis (1989, p. 206) state: "the primary challenge, then, is to […] manage our way back to credibility". Simply stated, credibility embodies leaders "doing what they say they will do" by ensuring that their action/behavior is consistent with their words (Kouzes and Posner, 2005, p. 361). Importantly, Kouzes and Posner (1990) noted in an earlier article that credibility can be transitory and can also be easily damaged. Reichers *et al.* (1997) emphasize on the importance of improved credibility for mitigating CAOC. Credibility is also recognized as a central element, particularly of leadership character (Caldwell *et al.*, 2012). In fact, Kouzes and Posner (2005, p. 360) argue that "credibility is the foundation of leadership". Given this importance, it should come as no surprise that leadership will also be addressed in later this section.

Second – address employee control concerns

Employees value a sense of control over key aspects or characteristics of their jobs (Angerer, 2003). Helping employees understand factors/characteristics of their jobs that are within their control should help combat cynicism. Kanter and Mirvis (1989) and Ferres and Connell (2004) emphasize on permitting employees to be more actively engaged in work decisions. Providing information to employees and involving them in planning and implementing change are recommended by Reichers *et al.* (1997) and Wanous *et al.* (2000). However, Stanley *et al.* (2005) raise an important point that sharing information, alone, may not be adequate for addressing cynicism toward change, as the "motives" (p. 457) should also be considered. Key considerations are providing employees with accurate and timely information about the overall status and candid updates on effectiveness of organizational initiatives, even if mistakes have been made or the initiative is failing to meet established expectations. Simply acknowledging that mistakes have been made could diminish cynicism toward change (Reichers *et al.*, 1997).

Third – address leadership

The earlier section on credibility noted Kouzes and Posner's (2005) assertion that credibility served a foundational role in leadership. Consequently, there is merit in discussing leadership in the context of addressing cynicism. The link between credibility and leadership is reinforced by some of the central elements of authentic leadership theories. For example, Avolio and Gardner (2005) summarize numerous

components of authentic leadership including the importance of leaders having an awareness of self, including their values. Logically, credibility would then flow from leaders behaving in a manner consistent with those values. Although leadership may not be regarded as a "special strategy" for addressing cynicism, there is evidence that certain types of leadership have an impact on cynicism. For example, Avey *et al.* (2008a, 2008b) observed a relationship between transformational leadership and cynicism. Similarly, a longitudinal study by Bommer *et al.* (2005) indicated that transformational leadership behaviors contributed to lower levels of CAOC. The capability of transformational leadership to impede cynicism could be driven, in part, by the practice of leaders sharing information or knowledge. This is important to consider here, as promulgating an atmosphere where knowledge is created and shared is central to transformational leadership (Bryant, 2003). The findings related to transformational leadership are promising, but the ability of leaders to influence factors related to cynicism is limited (Ferres and Connell, 2004).

The three general remedies discussed above follow logically from what is known about sources of cynicism. However, although the literature suggests that a portion of cynicism is learned, no currently proposed remedies flow logically from that important source. Thus, the primary purpose of this paper is to explore an additional remedy, one that is logically related to learned cynicism.

Unlearning cynicism
A practical perspective
This section highlights relevant perspectives related to unlearning. Although problems may have similar effects on individuals, specific remedies could be attempted through a variety of initiatives. For example, volition can impact beliefs, where individuals choose to modify their own beliefs (Krech and Crutchfield, 1948). Likewise, individuals may also deliberately engage in "unlearning" activities (Hedberg, 1981; Huber, 1996). Unlearning may not be immediate but may more accurately be described as a process (Hedberg, 1981). If individuals are seeking to unlearn cynicism, the time required could be a function of multiple factors, including the source of the cynicism, as well as the length of time the individual has held the cynical attitude(s). This argument appears congruent with the sentiment that knowledge or perspectives held over longer periods of time could be comparatively more challenging to "unlearn" (Becker *et al.*, 2006).

As a considerable number of scholars believe that cynicism is learned, might it be possible for organizations, leaders and employees to initiate efforts to "unlearn" cynicism? Hedberg (1981) notes that "problems" commonly serve as a source, catalyst or precursor to organizational unlearning. At a minimum, why not consider initiatives to unlearn specific facets of cynicism? Indirect support for such an approach is found in the assertion that something learned can be unlearned (Altorfer, 1992; Gardner, 1993). Although attitudes tend to be stable, Krech and Crutchfield (1948) suggest that individual attitudes and beliefs can, indeed, be changed.

Prior to outlining possible methods to help individuals "unlearn" cynicism, we mention six important caveats. First, this article does not recommend unlearning as a replacement for other effective methods that reduce or curtail cynicism. Instead, "unlearning" is discussed as a supplemental tool. Second, our use of the term "unlearning" is general and practical. Therefore, "unlearning" should not be confused with more technical uses of the term in contemporary literature. In this article,

"unlearning" broadly signifies attempts to remedy "learned" facets of cynicism. Third, it is beyond the scope of this article to address the variety of definitions, technical forms and conceptualizations of unlearning portrayed in the literature. Nevertheless, it is noted that there are multiple perspectives on "unlearning." Some are associated with organizational unlearning (Tsang and Zahra, 2008); others focus on more procedural types of knowledge, routines and workplace skills (Becker *et al.*, 2006). Fourth, although we acknowledge the dispositional dimension of cynicism, we do not address it in the proposed perceptual framework. Fifth, as the perceptual framework is intentionally practical, we also acknowledge that there could be dynamics or theories of attitudes not incorporated into the framework. In fact, the literature and theories on attitudes are so voluminous that space limitations preclude exhaustive coverage. Finally, although there may be a relationship between individual and organizational unlearning, it is instructive to consider Hedberg's (1981, p. 19) view that "very little is known about how organizational unlearning differs from that of individuals". Consequently, this article focuses on unlearning at the individual level.

A practical description

Newstrom (1983) offers a practical description of "unlearning:" "[…] the process of reducing or eliminating preexisting knowledge or habits that would otherwise represent formidable barriers to new learning" (p. 36). Although addressing the element of disregarding knowledge is an objective of unlearning (Hedberg, 1981), completely unlearning prior knowledge may not be plausible (Newstrom, 1983).

Unlearning cynicism: a perceptual framework

Gardner (1993) mentions beliefs in her advice to graduates encouraging them to unlearn cynicism. From a conceptual perspective, Dean *et al.* (1998) provide insight into the attitudinal components of organizational cynicism. Consistent with contemporary theories about attitudes, they identify beliefs, affect and behavior as the salient elements. Their schema is similar to Fishbein and Ajzen's (1972) frequently cited work. Using Dean *et al.*'s framework, in conjunction with Lewin's (1947) concepts, particularly the three-phase change model of unfreezing, moving and freezing (or refreezing), provides a useful framework on how unlearning may operate in helping to remedy organizational cynicism.

The first element of organizational cynicism, "belief", embodies individual perceptions of deficient organizational integrity. Fishbein and Ajzen (1972) note that beliefs influence attitudes. The belief dimension of cynicism is corroborated by Stanley *et al.*'s (2005, p. 452) assertion "[…] that the defining characteristic of cynicism was the disbelief in the motives of others". Another facet of belief is knowledge (Krech and Crutchfield, 1948). Adapting Lewin's (1947) concept of quasi-equilibrium and force fields, individual cynicism reflecting beliefs and concomitant knowledge could be regarded as somewhat stable. Furthermore, beliefs, coupled with knowledge based on organizational experiences or other potential antecedents, could result in undesirable levels of cynicism. Heightened levels of cynicism, somewhat immobilized by the current beliefs and knowledge, could be viewed as relatively frozen. Thus, attempts to reduce this cynicism would, necessarily, need to be directed toward what Lewin (1947, p. 35) termed "unfreezing". Consequently, "unlearning" should address both those beliefs and knowledge.

The first step might be to identify signs, symptoms or levels of cynicism. This could be accomplished informally through frequently interacting with employees to gauge the presence of cynicism. More formal efforts might include administering ongoing employee surveys measuring factors such as job satisfaction, or cynicism, to identify trends meriting further attention. Once the presence of cynicism is identified, additional insight would be required to identify specific experiences, events or issues that contributed to the cynicism.

In discussing the second element of organizational cynicism, "affective", Dean *et al.* (1998) acknowledge the role of emotions. Thus, efforts to enhance individuals' awareness of and ability to manage their emotions could promote unlearning. Emotional intelligence is a term commonly used to describe this awareness of emotions (Goleman, 1995). Ferres and Connell (2004), for example, emphasize on the value of emotional intelligence for leaders in the context of organizational change. To minimize organizational cynicism regarding change, Reichers *et al.* (1997) cite the potential value of allowing individuals to openly express their feelings. Promoting emotional intelligence and allowing individuals to express their feelings might also contribute to unfreezing by creating an enhanced awareness of cynical attitudes and beliefs. This increased awareness, could, in turn, be valuable to organizational leaders who may have been unaware of the cynicism and also to individuals who may not have been fully aware of their own cynical attitudes or beliefs. The increased awareness, then, may constitute a transition to Lewin's (1947) second stage, "moving". Thus, movement toward "unlearning" cynicism might be generated by providing a platform for leaders to adjust organizational practices to be more in line with the beliefs and expectations of individuals. Conversely, leaders may need to clarify organizational realities for individuals in an attempt to create individual knowledge, and beliefs, leading to expectations that more closely align with the customary operations of the organization. Last, the enhanced awareness of cynical beliefs by individuals may prompt them to undertake introspection, re-evaluating knowledge and beliefs, leading to intentional efforts to personally address cynicism.

According to Dean *et al.*'s (1998, p. 346) third element, "behavior", organizational cynicism will likely include "[…] strong criticisms of the organization". As behavior is heavily influenced by beliefs and attitudes (Ajzen, 1980), efforts initiated to address the belief and affective dimensions of cynicism will likely have some impact on the resultant behavior. As behavior is more readily observable than beliefs or affect, outlining desirable behavior that is in line with organizational objectives may be an important part of the overall process in "unlearning" cynicism. This could be formalized through job descriptions, performance appraisals and organizational policies, specifying desirable behavior. Informally, desired behavior could be reinforced through modeling and the encouragement of leaders. Indeed, leaders' behavior would send a strong message regarding behavioral expectations of employees and would likely prompt some individuals to adjust their behavior accordingly. Desirable behavior could also be promoted informally through encouragement of leaders and other co-workers, providing verbal accolades and reinforcement coupled with instructive guidance or feedback when behavior falls outside desirable parameters. In addition to contributing to "unlearning" cynicism, ongoing formal and informal efforts to promote desirable behaviors could have positive, long-term implications for the organization. These activities appear to align with Lewin's (1947) concept of refreezing.

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Examples of deploying unlearning

Having outlined a framework for "unlearning" cynicism, two examples are offered on how unlearning might be deployed to reduce organizational cynicism. These examples are illustrative, not exhaustive, and could be combined with elements from other strategies that have proven effective in reducing cynicism.

Promoting unlearning through new experiences

As cynicism may be learned through personal experiences, new experiences that counter those original experiences may be necessary to facilitate unlearning. Accordingly, efforts to create beliefs that contribute to perceptions of integrity through experiences that meet individual expectations may lay a foundation for promoting the unlearning of cynicism.

The personal perceptions about how well organizations have met individual expectations represent a dominant element in dynamic work place experiences. As previously noted, the informal manifestation of these expectations can be reflected in a psychological contract signifying worker perceptions of mutual exchange agreements between the individual and the organization (Rousseau, 1989). As psychological contracts tend to be inherently individual (Pate, 2006), any efforts to promote the unlearning of cynicism must also be individual in scope. This may require leaders and managers to interact more directly with individuals to better understand employee perceptions and expectations. First, just reaching out to employees may have positive implications for cynicism (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989). In some cases, a better understanding could prompt leaders to enact workplace changes that more closely mesh with worker expectations, thus creating new experiences that are consistent with the psychological contract. These new experiences, which now more closely align with the informal expectations, could contribute to individuals unlearning cynicism. In other cases, this improved understanding of individuals' psychological contracts could identify possible misunderstandings or unrealistic individual expectations. Consequently, leaders would be in a position to better communicate and better educate individuals about the true nature of the work situation, clarifying expectations and prompting the individual to modify their psychological contract to more closely correspond with the realities of exchanges that will emerge within the workplace. These more realistic expectations, in turn, may serve as a new framework used by individuals for evaluating future workplace experiences, thus serving as a catalyst prompting the unlearning process.

Promoting unlearning cynicism through positive psychology

Kanter and Mirvis' (1989) well-respected book on cynicism created early support for the potential value of adopting a positive approach to contend with organizational cynicism. Specifically, they advocate that organizations should focus on inherent strengths, endeavoring to promote a culture within the organization that repels cynicism. There also appears to be recent support for the sentiment or value of positive psychology in the context of the work environment (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Following the logic outlined by Kanter and Mirvis (1989), it seems that first, and foremost, the foundation of this culture should be predicated on a vision that affirms and energizes employees. Leaders in organizations serve a critical purpose in creating requisite cultures (Bryant, 2003). Noting cynicism related to leadership in organizations, Caldwell *et al.* (2012)

argued for a new form of leadership, which is highly consistent with the ideals of positive psychology. It was synthesized from six other progressive forms of leadership, including transformational leadership (Caldwell *et al.*, 2012). Specifically identified characteristics are trust, ethical conduct and building healthy relationships (Caldwell *et al.*, 2012). To establish a culture resistant to cynicism, leaders allow employees greater control over key aspects of their work lives while ensuring that enacted values (what we say is important) match closely with espoused values (our actual behavior or what we do) (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989). This could be enhanced further by developing a culture that exemplifies the principles of McGregor's (1960) Theory Y approach to managing employees (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989). McGregor (1960) places emphasis on establishing an environment where the needs and goals of employees are in alignment with the goals of the organization. The Theory Y philosophy incorporates a relatively positive viewpoint that employees are self-motivated, tend to seek responsibility and do not (necessarily) dislike work (McGregor, 1960). This comparatively positive methodology appears to be consistent with key principles of positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship summarized by Roberts (2006) and Lewis (2011).

Potential value in adopting a positive perspective can also be found in several studies. Avey *et al.* (2008a, 2008b) found a negative relationship between positive emotions and cynicism. Similarly, Avey *et al.* (2010) reported a negative relationship between psychological capital (i.e. optimism, efficacy, resilience and hope) and organizational cynicism. An earlier study reported that positive affect, reflected in more positive feelings and emotions, was linked to "flourishing" (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005, p. 678). Flourishing is living "[…] within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience". Further, transformational leadership is also negatively related to cynicism (Avey *et al.*, 2008a, 2008b). Seo *et al.* (2012) found that transformational leadership had a positive impact on positive affect of employees. Thus, rooting leaders' perspectives and behaviors in positive psychology would promote unlearning of cynicism at an individual level, consequentially reducing organizational cynicism.

Conclusion and recommendations for future research

Cynicism, regarded as multi-dimensional, adversely impacts the health and vitality of organizations. Based on a review of the cynicism literature, this article draws attention to the wide array of serious symptoms associated with organizational cynicism and the need for additional remedies. Of the major sources of cynicism identified in the literature, attitudes, particularly learned attitudes, have not been fully explored for potential remedies. To address that potential gap, this article offers a theoretical framework for using "unlearning" of attitudes to reduce organizational cynicism. Finally, based on logical inferences from the cynicism literature, two approaches illustrating "unlearning" as a method for reducing organizational cynicism are suggested.

The "unlearning" intervention is directed toward organizational leaders, managers and scholars interested in better understanding and more effectively addressing the malady of cynicism. Effort was made to avoid being overly prescriptive, rather to be more reflective and descriptive, of general approaches to "unlearning". To enhance the potential usefulness of this approach, additional ideas and further exploration are encouraged. Hopefully, others will find some value to the unlearning perspective

outlined in this article, prompting them to build on, enhance, modify and adapt the proposed framework in ways that better fit specific contexts or needs of various organizations. Scholars are also encouraged to develop improved frameworks, models and theories. Ultimately, empirical studies should be conducted to assess, quantitatively, the efficacy of "unlearning" as one method to reduce organizational cynicism and promote organizational health.

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