

Why Your Workplace Feels Like School (And Why That's Costing You More Than You Think)

Ever felt your stomach drop when your manager calls an unexpected meeting? Found yourself staying silent when you disagree, even though you know you're right? Noticed the same small group always gets the best projects while others are left out?

You're not imagining it. Many workplaces unconsciously replicate the social and power dynamics of school. And while this might seem like a minor irritation, the psychological and business costs are profound.



The Hidden Cost of Classroom Culture

When organisations operate like schools, the damage runs deep. Innovation stalls because people are too anxious to challenge ideas. Talent hemorrhages as employees feel infantilised and undervalued. Psychological safety erodes, replaced by a culture of compliance and silent resentment.

The financial implications are equally stark: according to Gallup research, disengaged employees cost organisations billions annually in lost productivity. Much of this

disengagement stems from workplace cultures where people feel they can't speak up, can't be themselves, and can't trust the social dynamics around them.

But here's what's even more concerning: most organisations don't realise they're creating these dynamics. The patterns are so normalised, so deeply embedded in how we've always done things, that they become invisible. Until someone burns out. Until a talented person leaves. Until a crisis exposes the cracks.

Understanding the Pattern: Why Smart Adults Act Like Schoolchildren

Through the lens of Transactional Analysis (TA), we can see how workplace relationships often default to outdated scripts. Managers unconsciously adopt a "Parent" state, delivering instructions and corrections like teachers. Employees respond from their "Child" state, seeking approval, avoiding conflict, or quietly rebelling.

This isn't about individual failings. It's about inherited patterns that nobody consciously chose. Research from conformity studies by Solomon Asch showed that people will knowingly give wrong answers just to fit in with group consensus. Because being wrong together feels safer than being right alone.

In workplace terms, this plays out as silence during meetings when bad decisions are being made. It shows up as cliques that exclude newcomers. It manifests as "banter" that crosses lines, but nobody calls it out because the boss is laughing too.

Stanley Milgram's obedience research demonstrated that ordinary people will act against their own ethics when authority figures give the order. The Stanford Prison Experiment revealed how quickly people conform to roles when hierarchy is present. These aren't just historical psychology experiments, they're blueprints for what happens in organisations every single day.

The Drama Triangle often emerges: people slip into roles of Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer, creating emotional churn that distracts from meaningful work. Someone feels victimised, enlists allies, labels someone else the villain, and the cycle perpetuates. Meanwhile, the actual work suffers.

What This Costs Your Organisation

Innovation dies.

When people fear speaking up or standing out, breakthrough ideas stay locked inside. The best solutions come from cognitive diversity and constructive challenge, but school-like dynamics reward conformity.

Talent leaves.

High performers don't stay in environments where they feel diminished. They leave for organisations where they can operate as autonomous adults, not anxious pupils.

Psychological harm compounds.

Anxiety, imposter syndrome, and burnout don't emerge in a vacuum. They're often the result of environments where people constantly question their worth, fear judgment, and suppress their authentic responses.

Ethical risks multiply.

When people learn that challenging authority or disrupting group consensus isn't safe, they stop speaking up about serious issues: harassment, discrimination, unethical practices, or flawed strategies that could damage the organisation.

Breaking Free: The Path to Adult Workplaces

Awareness is the essential first step, but it's not sufficient on its own. Organisations need structured interventions that help people recognise and shift these ingrained patterns.

The Role of Coaching in Transformation

This is where coaching becomes transformational, particularly **group coaching**.

Individual coaching helps people identify their personal "life scripts": the patterns formed in childhood that they unconsciously replay at work. Are you always the people-pleaser? The one who takes the blame? The one who stays quiet to avoid conflict?

Coaching creates the space to notice these patterns and, crucially, to develop new, more effective ways of showing up.

Group coaching is especially powerful for shifting workplace dynamics because it addresses the relational patterns directly. In a facilitated group setting, people can:

- Practice Adult-to-Adult communication in real time
- Notice and name dynamics as they arise (like the Drama Triangle) in a safe environment
- Experiment with new behaviours, like speaking up or setting boundaries
- Experience authentic connection without the performance anxiety of hierarchy
- Develop collective psychological safety, not just individual confidence

Group coaching essentially becomes a "rehearsal space" for a healthier workplace culture. When teams go through this process together, they develop shared language, mutual understanding, and permission to call out unhelpful dynamics before they become entrenched.

Therapy for Deeper Patterns

For some individuals, workplace struggles are rooted in deeper psychological wounds: trauma responses, attachment patterns, or chronic learned helplessness. In these cases, **therapeutic support** provides the foundation for lasting change.

Therapy (particularly approaches informed by TA, psychodynamic work, or trauma-informed practice) helps people understand not just what patterns they're repeating, but why. It offers healing for the parts of us that still carry school-age fear, shame, or the need to perform for acceptance.

When organisations normalise therapy and mental health support, they send a powerful message: your wellbeing matters, and working on yourself isn't a weakness, it's a professional strength.

Practical Steps: From Awareness to Action

For Individuals:

- Notice your patterns. Do you overadapt? Avoid conflict? Seek constant approval? These are clues to your script.
- Name your authentic feelings. If you're smiling but seething, or silent but bursting with ideas, that's a signal.
- Seek support. Whether through coaching, therapy, or trusted colleagues, talking about these dynamics reduces their power.

For Leaders:

- Model Adult behaviour. Share your uncertainties. Ask genuine questions. Admit when you're wrong.
- Create psychological safety intentionally. This means explicitly inviting dissent, validating contributions, and holding people accountable for exclusionary behaviour.
- Invest in relational intelligence. Train your leadership teams in TA, emotional intelligence, and facilitation skills that flatten hierarchy in meetings.

For Organisations:

- Implement group coaching programmes for intact teams or cross-functional cohorts.
- Establish genuine feedback systems where people can name dynamics without fear of retaliation.
- Recognise and reward Adult behaviour: collaborative problem-solving, healthy boundary-setting, and constructive challenge.
- Make therapy accessible and destigmatised through employee assistance programmes and mental health resources.

The Workplace You Deserve

You don't have to keep replaying your school years at work. Organisations that break free from these inherited dynamics don't just become more pleasant places to work, they become more innovative, more resilient, and more successful.

When people can bring their authentic selves, ask questions without fear, and engage in genuine Adult-to-Adult dialogue, something remarkable happens: creativity flourishes, problems get solved faster, and people actually want to come to work.

The school-like workplace isn't inevitable. It's just what we've inherited. And with the right awareness, tools, and support, we can graduate into something far better.

If your organisation is ready to move beyond schoolyard dynamics, We would love to help. We work with individuals, teams, and organisations through coaching and consulting to create psychologically healthy, Adult workplaces where everyone can thrive.

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Key Takeaways

- **Many workplaces still mirror school dynamics.**
Authority, approval-seeking, and cliques stifle authenticity and innovation.
- **Psychological safety**
suffers when people fear speaking up, leading to disengagement, burnout, and ethical blind spots.
- **Old behaviour patterns persist**

managers act like “Parents,” employees like “Children,” repeating learned scripts from childhood.

- **Coaching and therapy help break the cycle**
by building Adult-to-Adult communication, self-awareness, and healthier relationships.
- **Adult workplaces outperform**
when people feel safe, heard, and respected, creativity, trust, and performance thrive.

Further Reading

Transactional Analysis:

- Berne, E. (1964). *Games People Play*
- Stewart, I. & Joines, V. (1987). *TA Today*

Conformity & Obedience:

- Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity
- Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral Study of Obedience

Psychological Safety:

- Edmondson, A. (2019). *The Fearless Organization*
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1975). *Helplessness*

Power Dynamics:

- Zimbardo, P. G. (1973). Stanford Prison Experiment