A Fear-Based Workplace
by Ken Embley, CPPA

A colleague of mine called my attention to an article published in the July Bloomberg Businessweek® by Liz Ryan. The article, Ten Signs You Work in a Fear-Based Workplace, is making quite a splash on the internet (Google the title to see what I mean). Now, I honestly do not know if there is supportive research to legitimize the Ten Signs but 40 years of practice tells me if you can find these signs in the workplace—there is danger—pay attention and be prepare to take action!

Below is a list of Liz Ryan’s Ten Signs..., and my thoughts about each.

- **Appearances are everything.** Fear rules when appearance is more important than the work product. When persons who worship the routine and never “rock the boat” are thought of as solid and reliable people who add value to the workplace, fear rules. Fear rules when a demonstration of your personal commitment to the success of the workplace means being at your desk before the boss arrives and long after his or her departure. Fear rules when the perception of quality is far more important than the actual quality of work.

- **Everyone is talking about who’s rising and who’s falling.** Fear rules when there is frequent discussion about how the boss values so and so. There is a preoccupation with discussions as to: who likes who (romance and otherwise), who are the office favorites, and who is doing what to “kiss-up” to the boss. Fear rules when there are discussions with cronies about the people who fall in and out of favor. It is important to know whose stock is going up or down.

- **Distrust reigns.** Fear rules when you must “watch your back.” You know that if you stumble across a promising idea, you keep it to yourself until the time is right and time is right when you figure out how to work things in your favor. Fear rules when the game is, the boss drops hints and staff scrambles to get into the best position to take ownership and “make hay” with the idea.

- **Numbers rule.** Fear rules when measurement of success is found only in the numbers. Now be careful here, good performance management considers all types of metrics—but—better performance management also embraces the use of qualitative measures (some mockingly call these “soft measures”). Qualitative measures help to develop people skills. Qualitative measures open discussions about the impact people have on others (customers, clients, peers, stakeholders...).

- **And rules number in the thousands.** Fear rules when policies, procedures, written rules and proper practices serve to control the interactions of people. The writings determine when to be to work or take a break, where to eat lunch, the size of work space and who has a window space and anything else worker drones should consider as they make their way through the routine.

- **Management considers lateral communication suspect.** Fear rules when it is a critical skill to know who said what—when—where—why? Management asks: “Why are you talking to so-and-so?” Management insists that people use the chain of command. It is common practice to enter someone’s office, quietly close the door behind them and whisper something like “I saw Jack talking to Jill about carrying a pail of water.” A common way to begin a sentence is “By the way, I thought you should know...”
• **Information is hoarded.** Fear rules when the thinking is that information is power so play it wisely (hold information close to the vest). An admired skill is an ability to obtain information. The prevailing philosophy is—it is not what you know, it is who you know that counts (people with information). Misinformation garners keen interest and destructive gossip reigns king throughout in the workplace.

A side note of interest about gossip (from the *Harvard Business Review*, September 2010 and the article *Defend Your Research: It’s Not "Unprofessional” to Gossip at Work*). “Gossip often consists of hearsay, half-truths, and innuendo, and can absorb large amounts of your staff’s time.” Can it really be valuable? Giuseppe "Joe" Labianca in this article argues yes—well—maybe. “Gossip can be very helpful to people in organizations, especially when the flow of information from the top gets choked off, as often happens when companies are in crisis or undergoing change. If a few people know what’s really going on, gossip becomes the means of spreading that information to everyone else. What’s more, research shows that gossip often reduces individuals’ anxiety and helps them cope with uncertainty.”

Unless I am missing something, Mr. Labianca is saying that gossip can be good as long as the workplace is really broke (so broke that hearsay, half-truths, and innuendo is better than no information at all). My guess is, if you find gossip to be a significant means to distribute information in your workplace, you can bet that you have a fear-based workplace.

• **Brownnosers rule.** Fear rules when those who have access to information get promoted and the best assignments are for those who know how to say “yes” at the right time, share interests with, belong to the same church as, speak the language (figuratively and literally), dresses the same as—you guessed it—the boss.

• **"The Office" evokes sad chuckles, rather than laughs.** You can only manage a chuckle when watching NBC’s hit show *The Office* because what the actors depict hits too close to home. People who laugh at such antics can because they do not have to experience them day in and day out.

• **Management leads by fear.** People work under the cloud of fear when reaction is the name of the game. Management reacts—when someone does something wrong. The question seems to always be: What when wrong? Fear rules when performance is evaluated—but not developed. Fear rules when taking time to plan, gain commitment, seek agreement, build community, clarify vision and other similar strategies are considered academic exercises—the “pie in the sky” stuff that real workplaces do not have the time to do. Fear rules when folks follow only because they need a paycheck.

Bloomberg Businessweek® asked readers (11,436 responses as of September 1, 2010) “How many [of the Ten Signs] apply to your workplace?” The unscientific survey results are:

- 17% —none, and I am grateful
- 20% —1 to 5
- 16% —6 to 8
- 5% —9, although I may be forgetting one
- 18% —every one of them
- 9% —I could give you a list of 25 at my workplace
- 12% —I am too scared to answer this poll, they might be monitoring my internet use
- 3% —my home is a fear-based workplace

How would people at your workplace respond?