

Mistaking Cynicism for Intelligence

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There's a pattern I've started to notice more and more in organisations.

Some of the most technically capable people, the ones the business almost protects, are also the ones who quietly erode it.

They're smart. Experienced. Often right, at least in part. But they carry a consistent negativity that seeps into conversations, meetings, and ultimately into the culture. Leaders feel it, but they hesitate to act because of the individual's capability or institutional knowledge.

So, the behaviour gets tolerated.

In trying to coach around this, I've found a distinction that really helps. It's the difference between scepticism and cynicism. At face value, they can look almost identical. Both question. Both challenge. Both resist blind agreement. But underneath, they are fundamentally different.

A **sceptic** delays judgement. They are willing to say, "I'm not convinced yet, let's test this." Their intent is to get to the truth. They engage. They listen. They debate. They are open to being wrong. And because of that, scepticism strengthens decision making. It raises the quality of thinking in a team. It prevents groupthink without poisoning the environment.

A **cynic**, on the other hand, has already decided. Before the conversation even begins, the answer is no. The posture is not curiosity, it is dismissal. Not inquiry, but doubt disguised as insight. And over time, that posture becomes deeply ingrained. In my experience, it often has roots somewhere deeper, sometimes in upbringing, sometimes in long exposure to broken systems or toxic environments.

What makes this tricky is that cynics often believe they are adding value. And when challenged, they will say exactly that. "I'm paid to have a view." "I'm just being realistic."

There is a simple way to tell the difference. - Push back.

*A **sceptic leans in**.* They engage with your argument. They refine their position. The conversation continues.

*A **cynic withdraws**.* You'll hear things like, "Fine, I'll just keep quiet," or "I'll just do what I'm told." It's an abdication, not a debate. The moment their view is challenged, the intent to contribute disappears, because the real goal was never to explore the issue, it was to assert a position.

And that's where the damage lies.

Unchecked cynicism doesn't just challenge ideas, it undermines confidence. It creates hesitation. It slowly shifts a team from building something together to defending positions against each other.

It's corrosive.

The uncomfortable truth is that cynicism is becoming more common, and in some circles, almost fashionable. It gets mistaken for intelligence or experience. But in reality, it is one of the fastest ways to stall progress in a team or organisation.

So, what do you do with it?

First, you call it.

Not aggressively, but clearly. Help people see the difference. Ask simple, disarming questions like, "Have you already made up your mind on this?" or "What evidence would change your view?"

Second, you don't walk past it.

Cynicism, left unchecked, spreads. It needs consistent, calm interruption. Not once off, but every time it shows up.

And third, you recognise what you're dealing with.

Scepticism is a thinking style. Cynicism is often a pattern of behaviour that runs deeper. It takes patience to shift, and in some cases, it may not fully shift at all.

But the standard still matters.

If you are trying to build a high performing, thinking organisation, you need challenge. You need debate. You need people who are willing to say, "I'm not convinced."

What you don't need is a default posture of "this won't work," dressed up as wisdom. Because one builds - The other slowly breaks.