How to Cleanse a Toxic Workplace

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Introduction

Just about any HR or talent management professional who has been in the field for a few years has a supply of war stories about employees and supervisors whose presence and/or leadership style can crush a work environment in no time flat. Employees have their fair share of war stories too. For this reason, there has been increased attention in the government sector on senior leaders whose style and behavior are outside the boundaries of what is considered acceptable. The government is not alone in this; in the private sector, these types of leaders can also create environments that crush morale, destroy employee trust, and ultimately degrade productivity.

One survey cited by Rachel Feintzeig of *The Wall Street Journal* (in *The Build Network*, 2013) noted that 96 percent of employees say they have been treated rudely at the office and 50 percent of employees responding to a survey by Georgetown University and the Thunderbird School of Global Management say they are treated rudely at work at least once a week. This kind of incivility can actually push people out the door; 26 percent of survey respondents said they had quit a job because of the lack of civility.

If not addressed, a workplace marked by incivility can quickly become a toxic workplace, an environment in which employees feel unvalued, and not respected (Lavender and Cavaiola, 2014). In truly toxic workplaces, according to Lavender and Cavaiola, people are treated abusively, bullied, harassed, and feel threatened or intimidated. Toxic workplaces lower employee retention and productivity, raise stress, increase health care costs, and can lower workplace safety. In the worst case scenario, a toxic workplace can transcend into a hostile work environment.

This white paper:

- Provides information on how to identify a toxic workplace;

- Identifies the types of toxic worker behavior, including abusive supervision and workplace bullying;

- Discusses how toxic workplaces affect employees at all levels;

- Offers a 3 prong approach on how to prevent toxic behaviors in the workplace, and;

- Describes how toxic workplaces can become hostile work environments.

When a Workplace Becomes Toxic: The Warning Signs

T oxic workplaces are more prevalent than one would think. A 2009 survey of more than 400 leaders conducted by Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway, authors of *Toxic Workplace! Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power* (Jossey-Bass), found that 94 percent of respondents said they had worked with a toxic person. While the behaviors did not necessarily rise to the level of bullying or harassment, the toxic behaviors lowered employee productivity and retention, health, and well-being (Slayter, 2009).

Types of toxic behaviors include tearing others down, passive aggressive leadership, destructive gossip, devious politics, and a lot of negativity (Anderson, 2013). Baird Brightman, a behavioral scientist at Harvard University, notes in an article for *Fast Company* that the six most toxic behaviors include:

1. **Aggressiveness.** Aggressive employees can undermine safety and lower productivity because they make the people around them go into a "flight or fight" mode.

2. **Narcissism.** Narcissistic employees have an excessive focus on themselves that interferes with the development of a positive and flexible culture.

3. **Lack of credibility.** This occurs when employees don't do what they say they will do, leading to distrust from others.

4. **Passivity.** This is the opposite of initiative. Passive employees fail to take the ownership needed for optimal performance.

Employer Liability for Harassment

"The employer is automatically liable for harassment by a supervisor that results in a negative employment action such as termination, failure to promote or hire, and loss of wages. If the supervisor's harassment results in a hostile work environment, the employer can avoid liability only if it can prove that: 1) it reasonably tried to prevent and promptly correct the harassing behavior; and 2) the employee unreasonably failed to take advantage of any preventive or corrective opportunities provided by the employer."

(Source: The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's website.)

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5. **Disorganization.** Disorganized employees lack the focus, structure, and discipline needed to get the job done.

6. **Resistance to change.** Rigid and resistant employees will quickly become obsolete in the ever changing workplace—and possibly take others down with them (Brightman, 2013).

These behaviors—individually or combined—can create a toxic workplace environment. It can be difficult, however, for employees who witness or are the victim of toxic behavior to identify it when in the middle of it. Miriam Salpeter, a business consultant, offers some warning signs that HR and talent managers can use to help employees recognize if they are working in a toxic environment:

- The boss is a known bully. His or her bullying behavior may include sexual harassment, practical jokes, picking on the same person frequently, racist, sexist, or homophobic comments, public humiliation, and intimidation.

- Co-workers frequently gang up on each other because there are no consequences for bad behavior.

- Bosses or co-workers frequently take credit for the work of others.

- Employees are insubordinate. If there are no consequences for bad behavior, it is easy for employees to flaunt rules and become rebellious and arrogant.

- Office gossip and false accusations run rampant. If making up stories and false accusations against others are the norm, the environment is toxic.

- The boss is ineffective or absentee. If subordinates lack respect for the boss because he/she is ineffective—or if subordinates look forward to the boss's absence so they can play—it may be a sign of toxicity in the department.

- Everyone operates under different rules. This occurs when a supervisor fails to apply the rules evenly to everyone in the same role. This leaves employees confused and often at odds with one another.

- Supervisors don't communicate expectations well or at all. If supervisors cannot communicate their expectations, employees are left at a real disadvantage. They will be unable to establish priorities that are consistent with the supervisor's (unarticulated) expectations and may frequently fail to meet goals.

It is interesting to note that leadership—or the lack of it—lays at the core of each warning sign. When a toxic workplace develops on a peer-to-peer level, it is the lack of leadership that allows it to fester. All too often, however, toxic workplaces are created from the top down when managers or supervisors are the root of the problem. One study found that 37 percent of workers said they had been bullied at work and that the majority of those bullies (72 percent) were bosses (Siegel, 2011).

Toxic Leaders and Abusive Supervision

Although some experts define abusive supervision and bullying differently - abusive supervision lacks physical contact which bullying includes - the emotional and mental effects suffered by recipients of both remain the same. Abusive supervision and bullying (i.e., toxic behavior) can take many forms. These can include ridiculing subordinates in public, taking credit for work done by a subordinate, the inappropriate assigning of blame, rudeness, and angry outbursts (Siegel, 2011). It may also include verbal abuse (which can also be peer-to-peer focused) that is intended to be hurtful or demeaning and can include name calling, insults, and racial, gender, religious, or ethnic slurs. Verbal abuse may also focus on a person's character, motivation, or physical appearance. These verbal attacks can escalate to the point that under the law, it may be considered a hostile working environment. Abusive behavior by a supervisor or peer-to-peer may also include sexual or other types of harassment (such as gender, race, or religious) that may create a hostile working environment (Lavender and Cavaiola, 2014).

Workplace bullying includes all of that abusive behavior and more. Bullies may go a step further and intimidate victims, including threatening to file false reports against them, threatening to have them fired, and threatening their livelihoods (for example, threatening to give them bad references so they cannot find another job) (Lavender and Cavaiola, 2014). Bullies may also physically intimidate their victims and/or actively sabotage their victim's work or reputation (Shavin, 2014).

Workplace bullies are more prevalent than one would think. A 2014 survey by VitalSmarts, a corporate training and leadership development firm, found that 96 percent of respondents said they had experienced bullying in the workplace. Eighty-nine percent of those bullies had been bullying for more than a year, and 54 percent had been bullying for five or more years. The survey also found that 80 percent of bullies in the workplace affect five or more people. The survey further found that 62 percent of respondents had witnessed bullies sabotage other people's work or reputations; 52 percent had witnessed bullies browbeating, threatening, and intimidating others, and; four percent had witnessed bullies physically intimidate or assault another person (Shavin, 2014).

How Toxic Workplaces Affect Employees

Abusive supervision lowers employee performance, increases deviant behavior, heightens tension and emotional exhaustion, lowers self-esteem, and lowers job satisfaction (Siegel, 2011). Other outcomes of abusive supervision includes increased intention to quit, decreased organizational commitment, and increased psychological distress (Tepper, 2007).

These effects associated with abusive supervision and bullying are not limited to the bully's victims. A University of British Columbia study found that employees who witnessed the bullying had similarly high turnover intentions as the victims themselves. The authors concluded that those who were not directly bullied may be even more inclined to leave their jobs because their more positive treatment led to a sense of moral unease (Korn, 2014). Employees who experience bullying—whether first or second-hand—and who work in toxic environments report higher levels of anxiety and depression and take more sick leave than workers in healthy work environments (Richardson, 2014).

Unfortunately, toxic behavior like bullying behavior appears to pay off in the workplace. A study by Darren C. Treadway of the University of Buffalo's School of Management found that many bullies receive positive performance evaluations from supervisors and achieve high levels of career success. Treadway concluded that bullies succeed because they can charm supervisors and manipulate others to get ahead, even while they abuse co-workers and subordinates (Hazlewood, 2013).

Why Toxic Workplaces Happen

There are several theories about why abusive supervision occurs. Tepper et al (in Tepper, 2007), for example, found that abusive supervisors were prone to hostility because they had been mistreated as well and were therefore more likely to be abusive to their subordinates. Displaced aggression may be another cause of abusive supervision. This occurs when a supervisor has experienced a breach in the psychological contract –the mutual (but sometime unspoken) beliefs, perceptions, and informal obligations between an employee and employer. Sometimes when this breach occurs, supervisors can become more abusive to subordinates (Hoobler and Brass in Tepper, 2007). For example, part of the psychological contract may be the expectation of career advancement for good work and tenure. If this is not realized, the supervisor may become angry at the perceived breach of psychological contract with his/her employer and take his or her anger out on a subordinate.

For the victims of toxic workplaces, however, why a person becomes toxic is not at the foremost in their minds. It is all about the toxic person's behavior. Workplaces become toxic when people—usually those in positions of authority—abuse power, are narcissistic, paranoid, unfair, and greedy. These negative behaviors adversely affect everyone around them and spur more toxic behavior among peers (Durre, 2010).

How to Prevent Toxic Behaviors in the Workplace

B aird Brightman offers a three-pronged approach to preventing the development of a toxic workplace (Brightman, 2013):

1. Primary prevention

2. Secondary prevention

3. Tertiary prevention

The best way to stop the development of a toxic workplace is to prevent it from occurring in the first place (primary prevention). HR and talent management professionals can use the selection process to identify people who are toxic. Brightman suggests that professionals in the talent management community use approaches like self-assessments and 360-degree observer ratings to detect toxic behaviors. These approaches work better at identifying toxic behaviors than interviews or reference checks.

The secondary prevention phase helps detect toxic behaviors early on in an employee's tenure with the organization and can minimize toxic behavior. Brightman suggests that leaders direct their HR and talent managers to use education and coaching about toxic behavior during the first few weeks of employment.

Coaching can also be used to help employees identify toxic personality types that may be entrenched in their organizations and the actions they can take to defuse them. Here are some of the toxic personality types noted earlier and coaching tips on how to neutralize them:

- **Backstabbers:** Employees can be coached to be careful of their body language around a backstabber. They should avoid the tendency to nod in agreement when they talk because it signals to the backstabber tacit agreement with the backstabber's behavior (Simonds, 2013).

- **Credit-takers:** If there is a credit-taker in the office, employees and managers should be coached to speak up and give credit where it is rightfully due before the credit-taker has a chance to (Simonds, 2013).

- **Bullies:** Employees should be coached to document all offensive behavior. Accountability is key in preventing bullying, and it involves more than the victim. The

victim should document the incident and report it, but employees should be coached that if they witness bullying, they should document and report it as well. If the bully is not the boss, the boss should also document and report on it, and formal discipline should occur ((Simonds, 2013 and Shavin, 2014).

- **Hyper-sensitives:** When managing or addressing a hypersensitive personality type, employees and supervisors should be coached to be respectful when delivering constructive criticism and to make sure it is delivered privately. Constructive criticism should focus on the problem and possible solution (Simonds, 2013).

- **Know-it-alls:** Employees and managers should be coached that when dealing with this toxic personality type, they should acknowledge and compliment the person on his/her depth of knowledge, but they should also politely but firmly let the person know that they are aware of the know-it-all behavior (Simonds, 2013).

- **Hyper-criticals:** Employees and managers should be coached to handle the hyper-critical employees by thanking them for expressing their opinion. And then they should walk away (Simonds, 2013).

Even with extensive screening and coaching, it is sometimes not possible to eliminate a person's toxic behavioral tendencies. When that happens, it is time to consider tertiary prevention—dismissal. HR and talent management professionals should coach supervisors and employees about how to document the steps that have been taken to address the toxic behavior and the communication that has occurred to try to improve the toxic person's behavior so the dismissal process can be as smooth as possible (Brightman, 2010).

Leaders ultimately bear the responsibility of establishing an environment free from toxic behaviors. Although terminating an employment relationship is never a desired outcome, it may be necessary. Documenting behavior and incidents, counseling on the need to change behavior, and eventually firing the employee may be necessary to eliminate the toxic buildup. When leaders take action and let their employees know these behaviors will not be tolerated, the change to a positive environment can be drastic. On the other hand, if the leadership of the organization is the root cause, employees must be bold enough to address and seek recourse through HR and talent managers. Toxic workplaces drain employees and lower productivity. If these behaviors are not checked, the workplace can easily drift into a hostile workplace environment with very real legal implications.

The Toxic Workplace Checklist

Everyone has days when they cringe at routine workplace hassles and stressful working environments—even in the best workplaces. These hassles, though, won't stress employees to the point of illness. Linnda Durre, author of Surviving the Toxic Workplace, notes that toxic working environments usually have one or more types of the following dysfunctions:

Unfairness

- People are doing the work of two or three employees with little to no recognition or appreciation.
- Co-workers take credit for other's work.
- Some workers get away with behaviors that others do not.
- Bosses or team members deflect responsibility or assign blame for failure to others.

Immoral and Illegal Activities

- Co-workers ask others to cover or lie for them.
- Employees are asked to falsify data, reports, or documents.
- A co-worker uses sexual favors to get ahead at work.
- Someone is having an affair and asks a co-worker to cover for him/her.

Abusive Bosses and Poisonous Co-workers

- Employees are sexually harassed.
- Co-workers miss deadlines, affecting others' productivity.
- A co-worker or boss routinely tells lewd, racist, or sexist jokes.
- Bosses and peers rely on fear and intimidation.

Physical Danger

- Employees are at risk because of unsafe working conditions.
- Employees have been threatened or assaulted.

Just Plain Annoying

- Co-workers interrupt others' work, invade their space, and help themselves to other employees' files.
- Regular gossip, office politics, or spying.

Durre says that any one of these issues indicates a toxic environment, and if several are present in different categories, the workplace may be dangerously poisonous.

(Source: Buhl, n.d.)

When a Toxic Workplace Becomes a Hostile Work Environment

No workplace is perfect, and there will be days in even the best of work environments when employees behave badly. Those isolated incidents might raise employee stress levels for the day, but unless that toxic behavior is sustained, it does not make for a toxic work environment. Toxic behavior that is sustained, and abusive supervision that is bullying or harassing, however, can make the workplace more than toxic. It can make it hostile, and this violates federal law. HR and talent management professionals must work to prevent toxicity in the workplace before it escalates into a hostile work environment.

According to the Hostile Work Environment Guide, a work environment becomes hostile when there is discriminatory conduct or behavior at work that is unwelcome or offensive to an employee or group of employees in a protected class. This means that the employee or employee group must be in a protected class (race, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, sex, and color) and the complaint must pertain to perceived discrimination that targets that class. "For instance, a boss who yells all the time may cause an intimidating or stressful work environment but as long as he does this in a general manner and refrains from making any discriminatory statements about a particular class, then he is not subject to harassment suits. He may be liable for other charges, however, such as intentional infliction of emotional distress." (Hostile Work Environment Guide, n.d.).

To establish a hostile work environment claim, the conduct or behavior must be pervasive and constitute a pattern, rather than consist of one or two isolated incidents. An exception to this is in cases of harassment (see call-out), specifically sexual harassment. Another requirement to establish a hostile work environment claim is that the pattern of behavior must be severe enough to cause disruption beyond a reasonable degree in the work of the targeted employee, such as when the employee feels disturbed because of intimidation or fear of losing his or her job.

Conclusion

Toxic workplaces are less productive, experience higher employee turnover, and negatively affect employee health and welfare. They can also be a small step away from becoming hostile work environments and subject to costly lawsuits.   HR and talent management professionals must work from the selection process on to eliminate toxic behaviors in employees and their supervisors.

EEOC's Definition of Harassment

"Harassment is a form of employment discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment of 1967 (ADEA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).

Harassment is unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability, or genetic information. Harassment becomes unlawful where 1) enduring the offensive conduct becomes a condition of continued employment, or 2) the conduct is severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would consider intimidating, hostile, or abusive. Anti-discrimination laws also prohibit harassment against individuals in retaliation for filing a discrimination charge, testifying, or participating in any way in an investigation, proceeding, or lawsuit under these laws; or opposing employment practices that they reasonably believe discriminate against individuals, in violation of these laws.

Petty slights, annoyances, and isolated incidents (unless extremely serious) will not rise to the level of illegality. To be unlawful, the conduct must create a work environment that would be intimidating, hostile, or offensive to reasonable people.

Offensive conduct may include, but is not limited to, offensive jokes, slurs, epithets or name calling, physical assaults or threats, intimidation, ridicule or mockery, insults or put-downs, offensive objects or pictures, and interference with work performance. Harassment can occur in a variety of circumstances, including, but not limited to the following:

- The harasser can be the victim's supervisor, a supervisor in another area, an agent of the employer, a co-worker, or a non-employee.
- The victim does not have to be the person harassed, but can be anyone affected by the offensive conduct.
- Unlawful harassment may occur without economic injury to, or discharge of, the victim."

(Source: The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's website.)

About UNC Executive Development

Our approach to program design and delivery draws upon the power of real-world, applicable experiences from our faculty and staff, integrated with the knowledge our client partners share about the challenges they face.

We call this approach The Power of Experience. We combine traditional with experiential and unique learning to ensure that all individuals gain relevant new skills that they can easily implement within their own organizations. Through action learning and business simulation activities, we challenge participants to think, reflect and make decisions differently.

Our Approach: The Partnership

Our team customizes each leadership program through a highly collaborative process that involves our clients, program directors, faculty and program managers. We are dedicated to following-up with our clients and individual participants to ensure that their learning experiences have been meaningful and impactful. This integrated approach consistently drives strong outcomes.

Our Approach: The Results

Our executive education programs are designed with results in mind, and we are focused on successfully meeting our clients' business and academic expectations. Below are a few examples of the results our client partners have achieved:

- Leadership refocused with new strategy and cohesive vision
- Strategic plans created for the global marketplace
- Supply chains streamlined

- Products redefined
- New markets targeted
- Cost-saving measures developed
- Silos leveled
- Teams aligned

Participants leave empowered to bring in new ideas, present different ways to grow business and tackle challenges. The result is stronger individuals leading stronger teams and organizations.

Contact Us

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