

Toxic work culture: Everything you need to know

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Workplace culture dictates how employees behave, make decisions, and interact with each other in the office. *Toxic work culture* is one where the workplace is characterised by constant arguments, and unhappy employees, to the point that productivity and the well-being of the people in the office are affected. *Toxic workplace culture* is often considered the result of toxic employers or *toxic employees* who frustrate others in the workplace, to divert attention away from their performance shortfalls and misdeeds. According to research by Backstrom et. al. (2016), *toxic work culture* can lead to increased depression, substance use, and health issues.

In a Harvard Business School study, it was found that almost half of employees who experienced a *toxic workplace culture*, reduced their effort and made a conscious choice to spend less time at work. It was also found that 38 percent deliberately decreased the quality of their work. (Levin, 2018). Adverse workplaces are detrimental to employee morale and mental health, but they are surprisingly common. Below are some of the signs of *toxic work culture*:

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Low morale at work

One key indicator of a *toxic workplace culture* is when employees exhibit signs of low morale. A positive attitude and high morale to accomplish tasks are contagious. When people smile, speak politely to each other, it quickly catches on and shows in how productive and happy at work everyone is. However when there seems to be a black cloud always hanging over the office, consistent low energy and joylessness at work, this could be a good indicator of *toxic work culture*.

There is a lack of communication

A key sign of *toxic work culture* is that communication normally flows one way; as directives from the higher-ups to the employees. Employees are afraid to ask questions either because they will be singled out for not understanding quickly enough or nothing will be done. This, amongst many other things, can lead to repetition of work and loss of time. A workplace that operates in this manner is toxic and needs an intervention.

Employees are afraid of the boss

There is a difference between a healthy respect for the boss and downright fear. When no one but the boss speaks in a meeting when people avoid going down the corridor where they might bump into the boss, there is a problem with the culture and it needs to be addressed immediately. The boss sets the tone for the workplace culture and their management and interaction style can either lead to a *toxic work*

culture or one where employees are happy.

Insistence on policies over people

Policies are put in place to support people but an organization that constantly puts policies ahead of people can breed a *toxic work culture*. Whether you like it or not people make mistakes, even the best employees will not be able to do everything right all the time so you need to make space for that. You are in a *toxic work culture* if management follows every infraction or deviation from the policy with punishment because this usually leads to employees constantly being stressed and afraid to take risks.

Dealing with a *toxic work culture*

Psychological detachment

Psychological detachment means to avoid work-related thoughts or emotions. By encouraging a healthy work environment, you can help your employees prevent burnout and turnovers. Additionally, it will help organizations grow happily, where toxic workplace behaviours are discouraged. Detachment can be encouraged through activities such as:

- Vacations
- Weekend getaways
- Social times with family and friends
- Exercise or other hobbies

Relaxation

Another way to handle the stress of a toxic work environment is by practising relaxation during non-work time. When people try to relax, they often report feeling healthier and suffering less from stress and exhaustion. Relaxation can be a significant moderator of the relationship between negative work thoughts and insomnia symptoms. Some activities that promote recovery and relaxation include:

Meditation

Yoga

Talking a walk

Listening to music

Volunteering

Spending time with friends and family

Formulating an exit strategy

If you find yourself in a concerning health condition even after trying psychological detachment and relaxation techniques, then it might be time to leave your job. A search for a new, more fulfilling job can make you happier and motivated in life. Be sure to let others know that you're open to new opportunities for work. When the day comes, hand in your resignation proudly, knowing that you did your best and deserve more.

References

Eva Torkelson, Kristoffer Holm, Martin Bäckström & Elinor Schad (2016) *Factors contributing to the perpetration of workplace incivility: the importance of organizational aspects and experiencing incivility from others*, *Work & Stress*, 30:2, 115-131, DOI: 10.1080/02678373.2016.1175524

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