

## What Causes Toxic Workplaces

**Author: Loshen Naidu . November 2021**

My career has given me some truly memorable experiences, across multiple countries, cultures, industries, and food-types!

I have enjoyed traditional Bedouin hospitality hosted in a tent in the desert, enjoyed Italian-style Trippa in GE's staff cafeteria in Firenze, sampled Egyptian Moulokhieh while on an offshore drilling rig, and relished meat grilled on a shovel over an open fire somewhere in Kwa-Zulu Natal, or KZN.

Sure, working with diverse people is more than just loads of different culinary experiences - I just have a thing for food!

The manner in which my previous colleagues and bosses have behaved in relation to me has also been as diverse as my dining experiences – some good, some not-so-good.

Well, not entirely true. In fact, I would say that none of my dining experiences have been unpleasant, not even a serving of goat's kidney after the animal had been roasted whole – I found this quite tasty. (I do hail from the Kingdom of the Zulu, granted.)

There is just something special about breaking bread with people who are different and sampling their own cuisines. No matter how foreign their eating habits may be to me, it is always a special experience.

Equally special are those experiences with people I have met during my career journey when they have acted in accordance with their own customs and beliefs.

I used to work in a department led by one of the most senior people within the organization. He also served on many influential state / governmental committees in an advisory capacity so was one of the most powerful people I knew at that time. It was well-known among all my colleagues that when this

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man called us after work hours, even if just 15 minutes after quitting time, he would apologize sincerely for a couple of minutes before getting to the reason for his call.

His apologies were not acted out, but were sincere, and fully in line with his cultural norms. He treated all his people, regardless of their place in the hierarchy, with genuine respect and humility. And he did not have to – his power was such that he could have demanded we took his calls even if made at 2 am in the morning! Which by the way, one of my other ex-CEOs used to do.

Another lasting impression that this man made on his team was the sheer relentlessness of the working sessions that we had with him. There were always updated meetings or emails or calls, even if just for 5 minutes, or two lines of text, he insisted on his team being well-informed, and on knowing the Why as well as the What. He also insisted that we passed this on within our own smaller teams so that everyone was appropriately informed and aware.

Now I have read far too many articles and books about bad management traits, spewing forth about what bad leaders do wrong.

I simplistically narrow these down to two fatal flaws, contrasted by the man I described above. These bad behaviors, when entrenched and exhibited by the top people in an organization, cause truly rotten work environments.

When Leaders show disrespect towards their people, they command no respect from them either, and a culture of disguised disrespect grows and festers. Pretty soon, all semblance of normal respectful behavior may even go out the window. I heard a story about an office worker who answered a call from a colleague in a different country on a Sunday morning. When asked whether it was a convenient time to discuss next quarter's budget presentation, the worker bee said he was on his way to church. The other colleague went on regardless for an hour. That's an extreme example, but no less irritating than colleagues who invade public spaces to hold meetings, or eat fermented fish-based meals after blowing them up in the microwave, or turn up the volume when activating the speakerphone, or drinking the last sip of water without replacing the dispenser. It's all about a lack of respect for others, and for themselves.

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Nobody respects a Leader who screams and shouts to get their point across, rather these Leaders become “things to be tolerated.” “That’s just how they are.” “Just say nothing for 5 minutes, he will eventually shut up and calm down.” “She woke up on the wrong side of the bed today.”

People who get yelled and shouted at are going to kick the proverbial cat and pass this down the chains. Likewise, a Leader who walks around totally aloof without even acknowledging the people around them, should not get surprised when the same people mimic their own bad behavior in dealing with their teams. People will imitate their Fearless Leaders so these Leaders should pay close attention to setting good examples.

Next, when Leaders work and manage in secrecy, taking decisions without involving or informing people as appropriate, this fosters distrust and resentment. People may not necessarily agree with a decision (this is shared with deep emotion from a weathered C&B guy) but they will even grudgingly accept it so long as they understand the underlying influencers of the decision. Management by decree is only an option when there is a foundation of loyalty and, yes, RESPECT.

I am of a people who respect our elders so much, we avoid eye contact when addressing them, lest we suggest that we are their peers. In turn these elders continually have to earn our respect. Once gone, very hard is it to recover. I was walking down the street a few years back with an old friend when we bumped into one of our old schoolteachers. We still addressed her as “Madam”, 20 years after she lost the right to call us her students. This embarrassed her greatly but we just couldn’t stop. Respect works that way.

Now I have been around senior executives almost all my career covering Exec C&B, so am no rose-tinted glasses type of guy. I know that the influencing factors for certain decisions just cannot be shared, since they may be too sensitive.

What is toxic however is the sneaky type of backroom maneuvering that takes place to satisfy desired outcomes. In other words, Leaders gaming the system. This creates significant levels of toxicity because within the organization, the Leaders have no opposition nor police. Only THEY can cut corners and bend policy – regular employees just have to grin and swallow. Or not grin and not be able to report to the Board. In any event, Board of Director oversight is for strategic issues only, so business Leaders have no real controls imposed on them should they all start singing from the same tune book.

So these are the two most dangerous Leadership behaviors that have the highest likelihood of creating a toxic workplace. Consultants buzz around talking about corporate values and vital behaviors and ram these through the organization on shiny posters and slide decks, but truth be told, they just need to focus on one group, the top leadership team and let nature do the rest. The rest of the organization will mimic and ape their Leaders.

And before embarking on a year-long series of workshops to identify the specific values or behaviors, stop. There's no need.

There are only two – Sincere Respect, and Clear Communication.

The rest all fall into place when business leaders treat their people with respect, and when they talk to them honestly about work issues.

I should know - I was fortunate enough to have worked for a few such Leaders in my lifetime. And ever grateful to them.

*The post "What Causes Toxic Workplaces" was first published by Loshen Naidu [here](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140806145926-46835981-what-causes-toxic-workplaces/)*

## About Loshen Naidu

- **HOW I USE REWARD TO CREATE VALUE:** I make rewards simple, by breaking down plans and schemes so that people can understand the link between work effort and reward outcomes. When understood, people are more likely to accept both good and bad company times.
- **MY EXPERTISE:** Over 25 years invested as a reward specialist, starting in South Africa, continuing in Qatar, then Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, and back to South Africa. I have worked as a consultant with Big 5 firms and led the Africa reward practice for 1. My employment also spans companies listed on the JSE and NYSE, large state-owned entities, and a sovereign wealth fund.
- **MY OUTLOOK:** I bring a balance between creativity/innovation, and compliance/governance to reward. At all times, I try to remove obstacles to a good understanding of reward. My posts

reflect my personal opinions.

- **INDUSTRY EXPERTISE:** Energy | Mining | Resources | Telecommunications | Advisory | Oil & Gas | Technology | ICT | Gold Mining | Professional Services | Consulting
- **GLOBAL EXPOSURE:** South Africa | Dubai | Abu Dhabi | United Arab Emirates | Qatar | Doha | Saudi Arabia | Oman | Bahrain | Kuwait | Lebanon | Jordan | Palestine | Pakistan | Peru | Chile | Ghana | Nigeria | Cameroon | Sierra Leone | Ivory Coast | Liberia | Republic of Congo | Democratic Republic of Congo | Sudan | South Sudan | Syria | Uganda | Rwanda | Zambia | Australia | Philippines | UK | Netherlands
- **MY SKILLS:** Board of Directors | Remuneration Committees | Annual remuneration reporting and disclosure | Executive remuneration | Long-term incentives | Short-term incentives | Performance-based incentives | Share schemes | Guaranteed pay | Reward communication | Job grading & sizing | Employee benefits | Reward strategy | Benchmarking

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