

## COVERSTORY

IS YOUR WORKPLACE

# TOXIC?

The warning signs of trouble; the remedies to turn it around

By ADINA GENN

Emails sent out by a higher-up at all hours of the night, demanding answers. Employees undermined at office meetings.

Profanity-peppered texts, replated with ultimatums.

These are just some of the telltale symptoms of a toxic workplace, where favoritism, gossip, unrealistic deadlines and poor communication thrive and threaten a business.

If the symptoms sound familiar, your organization may have some work to do in order to turn your culture around. Otherwise, experts say, when negativity permeates, an organization risks cutting into productivity and its bottom line. Employees may look for new jobs, and if word gets out, recruitment can become a challenge, not to mention expensive.

Left unchecked, "it can escalate to physical violence," said Gerald Waters, of counsel at the labor and employment practice group at Meltzer, Lippe, Goldstein & Breitstone, a law firm in Mineola. Besides injuries, the outcome can put organizations at "financial risk of litigation" even if what's transpiring at work ultimately stems from two people not liking each other and "has nothing to do with protective status."

It's best to eradicate toxicity at the root. And that work starts at the top.

"Companies can at the highest level set the tone for what's appropriate," said Tara Daub, a litigation attorney in Nixon Peabody's labor and employment group in Jericho.

"When higher level managers act professional and treat others with respect, that's going to filter down to



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mid-level managers and rank and file employees," she added.

Toxic workers can cost an employer as much as \$12,500 in terms of turnover costs, and that figure doesn't even take into consideration any subsequent costs surrounding lawsuits, penalties or decreased employee morale, according to Harvard Business School.

Organizations may want to lean on their human resource experts when remedying a culture or cultivating the right kind of culture by incorporating best hiring practices establishing a code of conduct and proper policies. And employees, too, can integrate strategies so that they can cope at the office.

## Leadership skills

There are a host of reasons why an office can turn toxic.

At some companies, the right people might not be in positions to lead. Maybe they're not equipped to manage.

"Some are not good at communication," said Kevin Morse, a human resources specialist with Alcott HR, a human resources outsourcing firm and a certified professional employer organization, with offices in Farmingdale.

Others "are not good listeners or play favorites," Morse added.

These kinds of actions, he said, can lead to a lack of trust between employee and manager.

But this is where HR expertise can help.

"Training for managers is often very useful," Daub said. "Sometimes managers can really benefit from learning from a good trainer the positive ways to encourage employees to do better as opposed to a negative approach."

"Leaders have to be consistent," Morse noted. Organizations should "remove the roadblocks so people do their jobs effectively."

And the right people should be in place. For example, Morse said, an accounting manager who is not good at accounting may not command the respect of other accountants, who won't take that person seriously.

Codes of conduct and policies in employee handbooks can go a long way. Organizations can implement policies that promote treating employees properly and specify that harmful behavior is subject to discipline. In addition, Waters said, preventative policies, along with training "allows people to be knowledgeable about what they should be doing and where they can go if there are problems."

## The gossip, the rumors

Gossip and rumor mills can detract from the workplace, experts said.

"When there are cliques and drama, employees can become 'unproductive,' with workers determining who's in favor and who's not. 'It becomes ugly," Morse said.

Organizations can tone down the gossip by creating a constructive culture.

People respond to the boss walking around the office with smiles, congratulating a worker "who knocked it out of the park" and encouraging that person to "keep up the good work," Waters said. And despite debate as to whether society should give out awards for participation, "most people would not object" to that kind of positivity at work, Waters said.



Photo courtesy of Alcott HR

**KEVIN MORSE:** "Some are not good at communication."

And that can shift the emphasis back to work, experts said.

"Allowing employees to focus on their work so that they are not being distracted with a lot of personal drama in the workplace is something employees value," Daub said.

## Survival skills for co-workers

Employees who find themselves in a toxic workplace can implement strategies to get through the rough spots.

Look for likeminded co-workers who can empathize and brainstorm for solutions, Morse said.

And, he added, make a list of things

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you'd like to accomplish that day. "It's important to feel productive and know you're not contributing" to a negative environment, Morse added.

Have an outlet after work — whether it's dog walking, exercise or some other outside activity to help shed the negativity, Morse said.

Try to pick up a new skillset, even if it's from a person who contributes to a damaging culture. Morse recalled working with a negative person who "liked to teach things" and found that he "got something positive out of the environment," an experience that helped turned the relationship around and make him more valuable in the workplace.

Be ready to make the next move — to another department or even organization — and keep in mind that any new skillsets makes you more employable, Morse said.



Photo courtesy of Nixon Peabody

**TARA DAUB:** "Companies can at the highest level set the tone for what's appropriate."

## New hires

With the right people and policies in place, an organization should have the makings for a positive work environment. And this can start with the hiring process. So be sure to ask the kinds of questions that get at the heart of building a strong culture.

Morse recommends asking about a candidate's previous work culture, and if that person believes past employers lived up to their core values.

"If the person drones on about what was bad, you're probably talking to someone who views things negatively naturally and you don't want them to be a part of the team," he said.

Ask if the person prefers working independently or collaboratively, Morse said, to gain further insight as to how that person might fit in your organization.

And when hiring, don't look for someone that "checks all the boxes." Waters points out that skillsets might be easy to find on paper. But in a face-to-face interview, it might be evident "that something might not click."

Maybe the person is late for the meeting — or doesn't show interest during the conversation. Here's where outside perspective can help. Ask others in the organization to meet the person, and get their take.

Ultimately, Waters said, keep in mind that "you want teammates that are going to add to the environment, not take from it."



Photo courtesy of Meltzer, Lippe, Goldstein &amp; Breitstone

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