

Toxic Culture Warning Signs Checklist

A toxic culture quietly undermines productivity, trust, and morale. It can emerge slowly through poor leadership habits, unclear values, or ignored behaviours. Recognising the warning signs early allows leaders to act before damage becomes systemic.

This checklist highlights common symptoms of a toxic workplace. Tick any statements that apply to your organisation. The more boxes ticked, the greater the risk that cultural toxicity is affecting performance and engagement.

1. Leadership Behaviour

- ☐ Leaders act inconsistently or show favouritism.
 - ☐ Managers ignore poor behaviour from high performers.
 - ☐ Leadership decisions lack transparency or fairness.
 - ☐ Employees fear speaking up or challenging management.
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2. Communication

- ☐ Information is withheld or filtered for control.
 - ☐ Rumours and gossip replace clear communication.
 - ☐ Important news is shared late or through informal channels.
 - ☐ Feedback is discouraged, ignored, or punished.
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3. Accountability

- ☐ Mistakes are hidden rather than addressed.
 - ☐ Blame-shifting is common when problems arise.
 - ☐ Underperformance is tolerated in some areas but not others.
 - ☐ Responsibility is unclear or constantly avoided.
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4. Trust & Morale

- ☐ Employees question leadership honesty or motives.
- ☐ People avoid sharing opinions for fear of backlash.
- ☐ Teams operate in survival mode rather than collaboration.
- ☐ Morale is consistently low with little visible effort to improve it.

5. Behaviour & Respect

- ☐ Disrespectful or bullying behaviour goes unchallenged.
 - ☐ Managers raise voices, belittle staff, or use sarcasm inappropriately.
 - ☐ People are criticised publicly instead of coached privately.
 - ☐ Team members regularly undermine one another.
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6. Values & Ethics

- ☐ Stated values are ignored in practice.
 - ☐ Decisions prioritise profit or politics over ethics.
 - ☐ Shortcuts or questionable behaviour are tolerated.
 - ☐ Employees no longer believe in the organisation's stated values.
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7. Workload & Pressure

- ☐ Excessive workloads are normalised.
 - ☐ Employees feel guilty taking breaks or time off.
 - ☐ Burnout is common and rarely addressed.
 - ☐ Unrealistic deadlines lead to constant stress.
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8. Recognition & Reward

- ☐ Effort and contribution go unnoticed.
 - ☐ Favouritism influences promotions and rewards.
 - ☐ Feedback focuses on faults rather than achievements.
 - ☐ Recognition feels forced, inconsistent, or insincere.
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9. Turnover & Retention

- ☐ High-performing employees frequently leave.
- ☐ Exit interviews highlight similar cultural issues.
- ☐ New hires struggle to integrate or quickly disengage.
- ☐ The organisation struggles to attract quality talent.

10. Psychological Safety

- ☐ People are reluctant to share new ideas.
 - ☐ Feedback from staff rarely reaches decision-makers.
 - ☐ Mistakes result in punishment rather than learning.
 - ☐ Employees hide problems until they escalate.
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How to Interpret Your Results

- Count the total number of boxes ticked across all sections.
 - **0–10 ticks:** Low risk - culture is generally healthy.
 - **11–20 ticks:** Moderate risk - some negative patterns need attention.
 - **21–30 ticks:** High risk - culture may be damaging trust and performance.
 - **31+ ticks:** Critical - urgent action required to rebuild culture and leadership trust.
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Next Steps

Discuss results openly with senior leaders and employees. Identify patterns rather than isolated incidents. Prioritise quick, visible fixes in leadership behaviour, communication, and accountability. A toxic culture rarely repairs itself, consistent, transparent action is the only remedy.

Notes