

Workplace Trauma Is Real

Mitch Causey

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I got my work permit when I was 15; I'm 28 now. In that time, I've experienced all types of leaders and organizations. I've seen people reorganize entire departments just to give themselves better titles. I've seen people fired for personal issues, sexism, and paranoia. I've seen people cheat on their spouses to get ahead. I've worked with people who threatened their teams instead of supporting them.

If you've experienced emotionally abusive practices at work, I hope you know that it doesn't have to be that way. I also hope you know that you're not abnormal for being affected by it.

When I joined Lessonly, I knew I wouldn't have to deal with workplace trauma, because I knew Max (our CEO) and Conner (our COO) so well beforehand. Still, I worried that the organizational and leadership behaviors I'd experienced in the past might be inevitable. I wondered whether you had to be a jerk to get a leg up in this world, and I dreaded that I would one day succumb to jerk behavior just to climb that next rung.

Said another way, I had doubt. I doubted that our culture was *actually* as amazing as it felt. I doubted that the people I was working with genuinely had the integrity I thought they did. And I doubted that we could forever avoid making foolish decisions solely for personal gain or ego.

I have zero doubt now.

My hope is that by being honest about my trauma you might deal with and overcome yours faster than I did, allowing yourself to reduce your recovery time and enjoy a healthy culture around you faster.

Workplace trauma is real.

Workplace trauma happens when you work in a toxic environment where the negative aspects of a company's culture overcome the positive ones. Toxicity is in the eye of the beholder: We all have different expectations when we approach our work. Toxic doesn't necessarily mean something extreme happened, and it definitely isn't basic pettiness (i.e., you just don't get along with someone).

Simple acts can cause trauma. Someone may consistently marginalize you or your work in a manner that's not constructive. Or maybe you witness two married coworkers engage in an affair. Such an experience, while not involving you directly, can be emotionally disturbing. Again, it depends on your worldview and your expectations, but it's important to recognize that bad things can happen in a work environment.

What's most important is how you deal with the bad stuff.

If you are currently immersed in an uncomfortable, unhealthy, or unsafe culture, I urge you to fix it or leave. Sometimes the reward just doesn't outweigh the effort, and it's time to move on. If you do make the choice to change environments, I recommend looking for these characteristics in the people you are evaluating:

- respect
- integrity
- growth
- candor
- passion
- work ethic
- healthy competition
- drive
- compassion
- flexibility
- second chances

Notice, I said *people*. I didn't say rules, procedures, benefits packages, or geography. It's all about the people you surround yourself with. Connect with as many of them as you can, on as intimate of a level as you can, to uncover the truth of their culture—before you decide to join their organization.

Speed up the recovery process.

If you've experienced trauma in the past but are fortunate to now be in a healthier environment, don't take your past experiences out on your new coworkers. Figure out how to process your past, let it go, and move on. Most importantly, enjoy the lack of toxins in your new circumstance.

I find the exercise of writing my thoughts down can cleanse and clarify my mind. Grab a pen and paper, or your nearest computer, and clearly articulate your thoughts regarding your past experiences. Think through these questions:

- What did I hate about my old culture?
- What did I love about it?
- What did I learn not to do?
- What did I learn to do?
- Who do I need to forgive?
- Who do I need to apologize to?
- What do I love about my new culture?
- Am I going to let my past define me, or am I going to choose a positive future?

If you spend 30 minutes journaling through those prompts, I promise you'll feel better and will be able to contribute with greater impact than ever before. As my pastor always says, "Only hurt people hurt people." Make time to heal, and please let me know if I can help.

Here's to your recovery!

[Mitch Causey](#), Contributor

Director of Marketing at Lessonly, Writer, Educator

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