

16 signs of a toxic work environment (and how to address it)

Negativity on the job leads to critical issues for leadership and their staff members.

Enabling a toxic environment in the workplace may result in the tarnishing of the professional reputations of the parties involved or the company's downfall. Still, many managers choose to turn a blind eye, and subordinates are too intimidated to bring the office drama to their leader's attention.

To help supervisors and their direct reports nip their concerns in the bud, 16 [Fast Company Executive Board](#) panelists provide key signs of a toxic environment and share some practical advice for management to consider as they try to clean up the workplace.

1. TURNOVER

The most obvious symptom of a toxic work environment is turnover. It's conventional wisdom that "people don't leave their job, they leave their boss," and toxic bosses create toxic environments that drive people away. Of course, it's better to catch problems before they get to that level, so keep communication open and make sure your team knows they can talk to you first. – [Marc Blinder, Aikon](#)

2. A CULTURE OF CRONYISM

While going with what you know might seem "safe," a culture of cronyism is toxic. Hiring from the same pool of friends, former colleagues, and the alumni network—bypassing high performers to promote friends or former colleagues into higher-level roles, or showing favoritism for some while moving targets for others is a no-no. Positive cultures seek out diverse perspectives, fostering equitable practices and openness – [Val Vacante, LiveArea, a Merkle Company](#)

3. STRUCTURAL FEAR OF RETRIBUTION

Toxicity in the workplace needs to be fixed from a cultural point of view. If you suspect there's a problem, there probably is and it will need fixing fast. Leaders need to find time to chat with staff and not wait to be told. The organizational structure should allow open and honest communication without fear of retribution or of tarnished reputations. Ask and ask often! – [Philip Stoten, SCOOP](#)

4. GOSSIP

Employees will often complain to their peers rather than solve the issue through proper channels. Many people have come to believe that this kind of office gossip is inevitable in a work environment, but it isn't. Gossip is what happens when team members are not talking with each other directly about issues or elevating concerns and having them addressed. When people don't feel seen and heard, their dissatisfaction leaks out in complaints to their colleagues. – [Scott Baradell, Idea Grove](#)

5. TROUBLING BEHAVIORS OR BODY LANGUAGE

Body language indicates fear. Do people smile? Laugh? Engage informally? Do people ask questions for clarification? Do they challenge decisions? Any of these and other small behaviors can all be signals of a toxic environment. How can we ferret this out when many people continue to work remotely? – [Amy Radin, Pragmatic Innovation Partners LLC](#)

6. RESERVED TEAM MEMBERS

Pay attention to nonexpressive team members. One very frequent symptom that you can observe when you are experiencing a toxic environment is a prolonged period of silence. Healthy teams express themselves; they argue, they talk, they question, they challenge, and they participate. If none of these things are happening there is a big alert of a toxic environment leader. – [Fernando Anzures, EXMA Global](#)

7. NO TRUST BETWEEN COLLEAGUES

Be on the lookout for the absence of trust between employees. This can translate into disrespect between team members, dysfunctional teamwork, and a lack of commitment to achieve shared goals. In high-trust cultures, employees are comfortable being vulnerable with one another, asking for help when needed without concealing their weaknesses, and providing constructive feedback that helps the team succeed. – [Andreea Vanacker, SPARKX5](#)

8. A LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN LEADERSHIP

Gossip can be a death knell to an unsuspecting company. It destroys faith in management and demolishes trust in other colleagues. It also undermines the confidence of the organization, drives a wedge between team members, and creates a toxic environment. Gossip is bad, and every leader should be keenly aware of it. Leaders must address the source and solve the underlying problem that it stems from. – [Lonnie Buchanan, Veracity Solutions](#)

9. INFLEXIBLE COMMUNICATION

For any team to thrive, open communication is key. Leaders must avoid being selective communicators. It's an unrealistic expectation for leaders to communicate one way and expect employees to adapt to their style. Instead, use adaptable and diverse communication platforms to accommodate how employees address you, either verbally or in writing, in an effort to seamlessly connect with them. – [Irfan Khan, CLOUDSUFI](#)

10. DISENGAGED EMPLOYEES

Employee disengagement is a key sign of a cultural divide within the organization and should prompt leaders to reach out to team members. I also suggest scheduling weekly 1:1 meetings with more senior team members and monthly 1:1 meetings with more junior members. Spend time getting to know the individual personally and allow the conversation to naturally flow into business matters and any challenges. – [Amanda Dorenberg, COMMB](#)

11. NO TIME TO REFLECT

Team members aren't openly coaching one another or running regular retrospectives, post-mortems, or after-action reviews when things don't work out as planned. A good team takes the time to reflect. If they're skipping reflection, I know we've got toxicity to sniff out. – [Meagan Bowman](#), [STOPWATCH](#)

12. TENSION IN THE OFFICE

A silent office can often be a sign of a toxic workplace. Sometimes a quiet office is required, but not all the time. If nobody is smiling, or people are keeping their heads down and saying everything is fine with no real constructive feedback or comments, something is probably off. You can just feel the tension and elephant in the room which both need to be addressed immediately. – [Eric Schurke](#), [Money Penny](#)

13. NONVERBAL FEEDBACK

Look for nonverbal behavior to tell you what is really going on. Eye rolls, people not talking when you ask a sincere open-ended question, or the meeting after the meeting are just a few of the danger signs. If people don't speak up to leadership when you think they should, then you might have a toxicity problem. – [Steve Dion](#), [Dion Leadership](#)

14. FEAR OF SPEAKING CANDIDLY

If what is said publicly in meetings is generally different from what is shared privately between colleagues, this is a clear indicator of a low-trust toxic culture that is lacking in psychological safety. – [Marc Inzelstein](#), [Indiggo – Return on Leadership](#)

15. HESITANCY TO ASK CHALLENGING QUESTIONS

If people are not asking questions of their superiors, then you have (perhaps unwittingly) created an organization governed by fear. If your team is guided by fear, they will be hesitant to try anything new and all creativity and progress will grind to a halt. – [Alex Husted](#), [HELPSY](#)

16. UNCERTAIN WORK RESPONSIBILITIES AND BOUNDARIES

Toxicity becomes possible when employees do not understand where each person's area of responsibility is. Uncertain boundaries lead to chaos. You need to start with structuring by clearly and transparently defining areas of responsibility, policies, and processes. Next is the internal culture. The owners, and the entire management team themselves, should be a model of ethical behavior for the team. – [Yura Lazebnikov](#), [TECHIIA holding](#)