

Toxic Employees, Toxic Workplaces

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Toxic employees are trying to “take over” and create toxic workplaces. As a diversity trainer, sexual harassment prevention trainer, consultant, executive coach, and expert witness, for twenty five years now, so much of my work points to one emerging phenomenon – toxic employees, toxic workplaces, are on the rise!

Toxic employees are **taking up way too much of our time**, distracting us from our mission, our work and quite frankly not allowing us to focus on the good work we do and the grooming of our high performing talented professionals. Ask any manager, any human resource professional - what keeps you up at night? They will tell you it is the people that “work or game or try to undermine the system.” No wonder this was such a well-received workshop at the IPMA National Conference in Philadelphia recently.

Toxic employees often flirt with violating policies and procedures but work “just a little above the level of being terminated.” **Often toxic employees are not stellar** performers but when they are – good luck, they feel even more emboldened to suck the light out of the room. Toxic employees are difficult, negative, unhappy, whiners, complainers, but they do not keep their toxic comments and opinions to themselves – they want everyone around them to be just as miserable as them. They want to create a toxic workplace. Why? Because **misery loves company!** The violence we see in the workplace is a manifestation of this toxicity – the worst example, of course. Now, why today, are there so many toxic employees and toxic workplaces? There are several contributing factors.

I think there are **too many people** in supervision and management that **are conflict avoiders** – hoping the toxic person and the conflict they create, if ignored – will just go away, that the conflict will subside. Wrong! The conflict only festers and the toxic person only “gets stronger” because they feel your silence (as a manager or as a human resource professional) is interpreted as tacit support, agreement, or worse yet – complacency. I call this “**feeding the monster**” and the toxic person only gets more confident.

Managers often **do not want to take the time to document** and “write this toxic person up for insubordination.” I say “**get out of management, you are not a manager!**” Verbal warnings, written warnings, impact on work flow and output – document all of it. Economy is slow to improve and these toxic employees are trapped in their job and cannot leave. How many of these “toxic usual suspects” are a short time away from retiring? (RIP – retired in place or ROJ – retired on the job).

So what do we do? Create an **environment of mutual respect and accountability**. In other words – define boundaries and when these boundaries are crossed, lay out the consequences. Define the behaviors that are “contra-mission and unproductive” and put the list up on a public wall somewhere. I call this list my **NEVERS LIST** – behaviors we (all employees) agree we never want to see again. These behaviors undermine morale, efficacy, and kill our mission. You focus on behaviors, not people, separate the person from the behavior and only focus on this set of toxic behaviors that are bringing everyone down. There is also a list of **PREFERS** posted – behaviors that all employees agree are preferable and contribute to a positive, highly engaged, and productive workplace.

NEVERS

Negative
Divisive
Undermine Mission
Disrespectful
Can violate law
Devalue differences
Dishonor core values

PREFERS

Positive
Unify
Support Mission
Respectful
Supported by law
Value differences
Honor Core Values

The final piece to the puzzle is accountability. Usually DTG helps identify a set of workplace core values and the top core value is mutual respect. I tell participants in my workshop every day – “We all have a shared responsibility to ensure ‘our workplace’ is respectful, professional, engaged and high performing.” No such thing as “I am innocent bystander or not my fight.” Again – we are all in this together. Whenever you see a NEVER behavior exhibited, say something (everybody steps up):

- “Ouch”
- “Come on now”
- “Really?”.... (my kids employ this technique)
- “We have a set of core values that we all agreed to live by”
- Repeat the comment you just witnessed (sometimes hearing someone else say it out loud helps)

You might be saying – this looks like common sense, do you know how many people do not have common sense? We should always praise and support the PREFERS. We teach more sophisticated techniques but those are presented in our training workshops.

The power here is in the fact that everyone steps up and says something. Bullying would stop, toxicity would be thwarted and we all could get back to work focusing on our work, our mission, and things that really matter. Behind all of this work is trust. Do your

employees trust their supervisor or manager? Do they trust your leadership? I work in toxic employees and toxic workplaces inevitably gets us involved in “trust work.” How hard do we work for someone we don’t trust? Trust is behind toxic employees and workplaces.

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