Cleaning Up Toxic Workplaces

Disgruntled employees. Low morale. Infighting. Wasted time and low productivity. High turnover. These are not the qualities that one strives to create when running a business. These are qualities of a toxic workplace. So why do toxic environments develop? Can they be prevented or reversed once started? What are the warning signs that a workplace is starting to spoil? Understanding what contributes to the development of toxic workplaces gives one more control over creating a healthy and productive place to work. Unfortunately, unhealthy workplaces are not uncommon, but, fortunately, management research can help.

Toxic workplaces develop slowly over time, usually to the surprise of those in charge who are unaware until it is too late. A few hallmarks of a toxic workplace are a lack of satisfaction among employees, increase in sick days taken, high turnover, lack of cooperation, increased conflicts, low productivity, social isolation, increase in gossiping, and talented employees seeking other opportunities. Knowing the regrettable end result, we can reverse-engineer it to find out what contributes to these outcomes and identify ways of avoiding toxicity while promoting healthy workplaces.

The development of toxic workplaces is a complex topic. We will discuss several contributing factors and suggestions for how to address concerning characteristics in the workplace culture. This list is not exhaustive by any means.

CONCERNS FOR MANAGEMENT

Supervisor fears. A supervisor's common concern can develop into a fear (e.g., fear of mistakes, liability, lack of discipline, inadequate revenue, a bad reputation, or lack of respect from employees). These fears can then become the driving force behind management decisions rather than an understanding of effective management techniques. These fears might lead a supervisor to be hypercritical of errors while ignoring accomplishments. Such a response might reduce mistakes in the short run, but it will restrict the associate's development and make him or her dependent on constant feedback.

Tips: Be aware of your sources of fear. Whenever responding to a fear-inducing situation, ask yourself what influence fear is having on your reaction. Consider other responses you might choose if you were filled with confidence instead.

Employee fears. Managers should also be cognizant that the employees harbor their own fears that can increase anxiety, internal conflict, and dissatisfaction, thereby increasing the toxicity of the workplace. Employees fear they will lose jobs, lose status within the organization, lose wage increases they deserve, lose key benefits, or lose autonomy. Ideally, the employee is forthright about their fears, and the manager can respond in a way that reduces the fear. However, not all employees are comfortable sharing their fears with managers. Nonetheless, just as managers should seek to become more mindful of how fear affects their own decisions, they should consider how employees may react to a management decision and seek to address fears up front.

Tips: Take time to know the people you supervise and understand their hopes and fears related to the job. Seek to build a system of open communication, allowing individuals to express their concerns honestly.

Inexperienced leaders. When a law practice expands, individuals who have never managed others are suddenly in the position of supervising employees. In reality, most first-time supervisors are put into management positions with no management experience or training. When this happens, the new manager typically relies on knowledge of his or her previous supervisors and a trial-and-error system. Depending on what management techniques that manager previously has been subjected to, this could result in anything from a competent and compassionate style to an inadvertently abusive style of leadership.
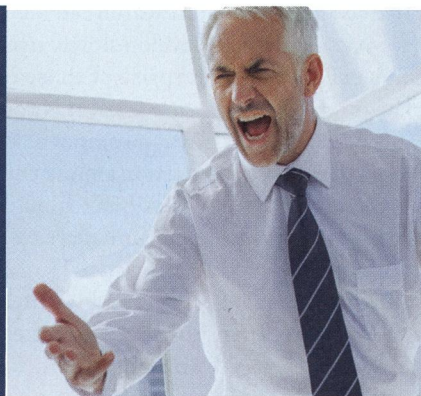
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By Shawn Healy and Rodney S. Dowell

Tips: Seek mentorship from others who have been in leadership longer and who are actually skilled in managing others. Consistently ask for feedback from employees about how you can improve your management style. Fight the temptation to blindly mimic your former supervisors. Pursue continuing education on developing a successful law firm and effective management and communication techniques. View your leadership in the same way you view your legal career: You don't know it all from the beginning, you learn as you go, and you can learn from your successes and failures.

Micromanagement is the best example of a response driven by fear.

Inaccurate assumptions. Our assumptions are formed from lessons we were taught, direct experiences, and examples in the media. When inaccurate assumptions guide our actions, the results can be the development of a toxic environment, or our inability to reduce the toxicity. New managers may mirror the poor management style they experienced and assume, "This is what I put up with, and I turned out okay." Or a manager may assume that a toxic environment is caused by an individual and a policy but never dig into the group mentality to truly understand the issues. At best, operating on assumptions represents a use of anecdotal evidence of some relevance, but at worst it represents a lazy response that can be used to justify poor management.

Tips: Do not underestimate the effect that past managers and employees have on present behavior. Even if you wish not to repeat certain behavior, the fact that you were exposed to it repeatedly means that you are likely to repeat it.

Challenge your assumptions and look for data that is not anecdotal to your personal experience. Think about what assumptions employees may be making in their interactions with you.

Unqualified promotion to management. The health of the workplace is reduced by the promotion of the wrong person into a management position. This is also common in law firms where new attorneys are expected to manage secretaries, legal assistants, and, as they mature, junior attorneys, without any training or mentoring in that role. Further, there is no clear correlation between being a great lawyer and a great manager. This is simply rewarding an individual for his or her success by being promoted into a position that requires skills that he or she may not possess. The associate who is skilled at making compelling arguments in court might lack the ability to effectively manage personality conflicts among employees or develop a team. This typically results in employees feeling mismanaged and the new manager feeling dissatisfied in the new role.

Tips: If you are responsible for promotions into management positions, consider whether that employee has the necessary leadership skills. Does he or she want to be in management, or is there a more effective way to recognize his or her successes? Further, when you have identified potential leaders, give them smaller roles to learn leadership skills, invest in leadership training, and provide mentoring.

Lack of self-care. Managers who are not aware of their own needs, and do not engage in adequate self-care, often pass their tension and stress down to their subordinates. Managers who are struggling to cope with their various stresses do not project stability or security. This is not to say that managers need to project perfection—quite the contrary. Managers who practice and promote regular, quality self-care will not only be healthier themselves, but they will have healthier employees.

Tips: Be aware of the stressors in your life. Establish and utilize a healthy support system (including mentors, colleagues, friends, and mental health professionals) to deal with everyday stressors as well as crises. Don't pretend to be perfect. Encourage your employees to prioritize their own self-care; they will be happier, healthier, and more productive as a result.

Double standards. It is not uncommon for those in management positions to think "I've made it, now I get to do X." "X" usually represents something that is acceptable for managers to do that would not be permissible for other employees to do. Despite what managers say or write into policies, the most significant influence on employees is what the manager does. Actions do speak louder than words. Employees see the standard a manager sets and use it as a guide. Employees also notice when other employees are treated preferentially in ways that are seen as unfair.

Tips: Reject the idea that management means it is acceptable to have double standards. Identify what it is that you want your subordinates to do and be the model for that standard. In addition, hold each employee to the same standard of behavior, and reward employees equally for the same behavior.

Micromanagement. Toxic environments can also grow from a manager's perceived lack of trust in the employees, demonstrated by micromanagement. This is the best example of fear being at the heart of a response. A manager who micromanages fears that tasks will not be completed correctly or adequately without his or her direct intervention. When this occurs, employees are implicitly told that they are not trusted or viewed as competent. Micromanagement erodes trust between the employee and

the manager and demoralizes staff. In addition to this, because the manager's expectations of the employee are so low, eventually the employee loses the desire to perform at a high level.

Tips: Learn to delegate, mentor, and communicate your expectations clearly. Have high expectations of employees and have confidence that they will be able to improve and meet these expectations. Teach these skills throughout the leadership chain. Finally, address your fear of mistakes and promote resilience, not perfection, in yourself and others.

Recognition and blame. A workplace can quickly become toxic when employees realize that their supervisor or a peer is seeking to receive the recognition for the successes of the firm while assigning blame to others for the mistakes. Everyone wants to be recognized for doing a good job, even managers. But the best recognition comes from others, unsolicited.

Tips: Try not taking credit for successes. Instead, give credit to others. When mistakes are made, share the blame and join with others to offer solutions. Find even the smallest reasons to show appreciation and recognize the efforts of others. Seek to recognize team achievement rather than individual achievements when appropriate.

Competition over cooperation. Counter to the common belief that a competitive workplace will sharpen employee talent and promote performance, research demonstrates that cooperative workplaces are more productive and happier. Few acts are better at creating a toxic environment then pitting employees against each other (for financial reward or verbal recognition). Competitive workplaces limit performance, increase animosity, increase isolation, and demonstrate that management cares more about profits than people. The most satisfied and best performing teams are the ones that have the most cooperative culture.

Tips: Find ways to encourage cooperation among team members for a company victory. Celebrate victories large and small. Make sure all team members get the credit. Think about how to create shared performance rewards (a win-win) and avoid zero-sum scenarios.

Hear no evil, see no evil. Inaction is an action. A supervisor who fails to correct a problem has implicitly endorsed this problematic behavior. Whether it is behavior that is directed at an employee (e.g., sexist, racially offensive, manipulative, or disrespectful interactions), requests that violate the ethics or values of the profession (asking employees to act unethically or turn a blind eye to ethical concerns), or the simple failure to correct an employee breach of common rules, the culture of the workplace is influenced by what the managers say, do, and fail to do.

Tips: Managers must set the standard for a safe, ethical, and respectful workplace by addressing bad behavior in a timely manner. Managers should learn and practice conflict resolution skills to increase confidence in their own ability to confront difficult issues.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES

The suggestions thus far have been aimed at those in some supervisory role—the quickest change happens from the top down. This is in no way meant to imply that bottom-up change is not also possible. In fact, non-supervising employees can have a significant effect on the workplace culture. The influence that each employee has on the workplace culture is significant. Here are some suggestions for non-supervising employees.

Be the change you seek. If your workplace culture is starting to spoil, identify specific changes that you would like to see among your colleagues. Start small, be consistent, and demonstrate these changes in your behavior toward others. The effect on others might not be noticed immediately (change is difficult), but over time your consistency will have an effect.

Raise concerns and offer solutions. When you notice a problem, bring your concern to a supervisor along with potential solutions or what you need from him or her. This accomplishes multiple things: (1) bringing issues to a supervisor lets him or her know that the problem is noticed by others and validates its seriousness (just in case the supervisor has noticed it but minimized its effect); (2) if brought up in a productive way, this can communicate to your supervisor that you are invested in the success of the firm and in his or her success as a manager; and (3) providing potential solutions both helps the manager identify options and gives the manager a concrete way to help the situation. Most people want to help others, and if they are given a concrete way to help, they are more likely to act.

CONCLUSION

The more that managers and employees see their workplace as an environment they can influence, as opposed to an environment they must tolerate, the greater the change that can occur. Above all else, always remember that while you cannot control what other people do, you do have control over what you do. Use your energy there. Others may follow your lead. ∎

Shawn Healy (shawn@lclma.org), PhD, is a licensed clinical psychologist and a member of the clinical staff at Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers in Boston, Massachusetts, where he provides individual clinical consultations and facilitates groups for law students, lawyers, and judges. He regularly publishes on all manner of mental health topics germane to the legal community. He frequently presents on stress and time management, vicarious trauma, and ways of coping with the various demands of the legal profession.

Rodney S. Dowell (rodney@masslomap.org), Esq., founded Law Management Innovation, LLC, in 2016 to provide consulting and facilitation services for attorneys and firms seeking to respond to internal and external challenges. He brings 25 years of experience in the legal industry, as a litigator, law firm practice management advisor, and trained mediator to help firms prepare for the future. He is also a senior fellow at the Boston-based Conservation Law Foundation, a leading environmental nonprofit in New England.