Better Ways To Work Together

A Playbook for Understanding and Changing Toxic Workplaces

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Within the National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC), the primary mission of the National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF) is to develop a Government-wide insider threat program for deterring, detecting, and mitigating insider threats, including the safeguarding of classified information from exploitation.

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Point of Contact

Suggested Citation

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Toxic people thrive only in a toxic system… A toxic person's behaviors trigger reactions from others. Soon the triggers and the reactions begin to damage the team or individuals, who may react in ways that actually reinforce toxic behaviors. Simply intervening with the toxic person is not effective because others may have learned new ways of interacting that are largely in response to toxic triggers.

"

— Mitchell E. Kusy and Elizabeth L. Holloway

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Better Ways To Work Together

Counter-insider threat and security professionals increasingly recognize that preventing and managing the risks posed by an organization's trusted insiders requires a different way of thinking. They have come to understand that insider threat incidents always occur in a broader organizational context, and so it makes sense that everyone in the organization has a part to play in securing the workforce and workplace.

Building a safe and secure organizational environment means improving the well-being of organizations and their people. This playbook is part of a series, *Better Ways To Work Together,* designed to support one of the most critical tasks of the counter-insider threat mission. Each playbook addresses a topic that affects the healthy functioning of organizational relationships and shared workspaces. They are designed to help organizations build practical threat prevention initiatives that leaders at all levels can adopt to promote organizational well-being.

This playbook addresses toxicity. Other playbooks in the series will help you understand important topics such as resilience, critical thinking, and organizational culture that are just as critical to building a healthy, effective organization as they are to preventing insider threat incidents. We hope these playbooks will contribute to the efforts of counter-insider threat programs and their partners in building safe, secure, and better workplaces.

Organizational support plays a very important role in reducing the toxicity of workplace environments and mitigating or alleviating workplace stress among employees; it thus contributes to energizing and motivating employees, increasing their work performance and productivity and ultimately improving the likelihood of project success.

— Zilong Wang, et al.

This Playbook

We designed the *Better Ways to Work Together* series to support counter-insider threat programs by offering practical solutions to improve the well-being of organizations and their people. In this playbook, we focus on how to recognize toxic conditions and behaviors in the workplace. It is intended for use by government or private sector counter-insider threat programs to facilitate prevention initiatives that engage leaders throughout their organizations in addressing toxicity and its harmful effects.

Insider threat prevention is most effective when everyone in an organization does their part. Consider using the materials in this playbook in partnership with other stakeholders in your organization, such as human resources, equal employment opportunity, security, or information technology, to raise awareness about the underlying causes of insider threat behavior, including a toxic work environment. For example, selections from the playbook could be used in leadership training programs, security awareness campaigns, or even in team building exercises.

With that in mind, we designed the materials to be accessible to a general audience—no previous knowledge of insider threat prevention is needed to make use of this playbook. The material can be used effectively by managers or individuals who want practical ideas for contributing to the well-being of their organization.

This playbook is organized into four parts.

Part 1 describes the learning objectives; breaks down the shared responsibilities of organizations and individuals to keep workplaces safe, healthy, and productive; and itemizes the best practices for organizations to use to address toxicity.

Part 2 provides group training exercises based on those best practices.

Part 3 presents a helpful infographic that summarizes key takeaways about toxicity in the workplace.

Part 4 provides a library of helpful and practical resources that promote a better understanding of toxicity in organizations and broader communities; and resources for individuals who seek to better understand their own behavior, their role in their organization, and toxic conditions that might exist in their workplace.

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The company had fired five people in the space of three months, and complaints had been received about the founders being bullies. A general culture of fear was spread throughout the staff to ensure that they didn't say a word out of place or leave. Due to this fear, I started working longer hours to try and get more work, because I was afraid of being fired. I became so exhausted that I was producing 50% less work than the typical 9am-6pm day. This led to me cancelling on plans with friends, because my confidence was so low, and weekends were spent in bed with a cloudy head, and feelings of utter despair. The nail in the coffin for me was when I started drinking neat gin at 8am due to the utter dread I had about getting on the tube and heading to work.

"

— Taran Bassi, from *5 People Share Their Shocking Experiences of Being in a Toxic Work Environment*

Part 1: Understanding and Changing Toxic Workplaces

Organizational Learning Objectives

Organizations define and reinforce the behavioral norms and practices that ultimately create a positive or negative culture. A written vision statement and a code of conduct are good, but organizations and leaders at all levels must embody the values identified therein. Leaders and employees must speak up when someone violates established standards, and the organizational culture must encourage collective responsibility. This playbook is designed to help you improve the culture of your organization and help you

- Support open communication and encourage the reporting of concerns,
- Understand the importance of workforce education that includes skill building, not just training for compliance, and

- Develop standards and practices that promote healthy group relationships and outcomes.

Individual Learning Objectives

It is easy to find advice on the internet regarding when and how to leave toxic organizations. We omitted such information because we hope this playbook will be a resource for preventing and rooting out toxicity so everyone can flourish in their respective organizations.

People are key to successful organizations, whether they are an organization's executive-level senior leaders, mid-level managers or first-line supervisors, or staff or volunteers. Engaged employees, business partners, and the broader community can all have an effect on an organization's work. This playbook is designed to help individuals who seek to become a better member of their organization and improve its culture. This playbook will help you

- Understand terms and concepts related to toxic behavior and work conditions.

- Be empowered to advocate for standards and practices that promote healthy group relationships and outcomes.

- Be able to apply tools to build and sustain healthy organizations and communities.

- Learn to participate constructively as a member of healthy organizations and communities.

Toxicity Is an Organizational Problem

Just like pollution in the physical environment, working in a toxic environment can do real harm to our physical and psychological well-being. Toxicity can take many forms, including bullying and harassment by coworkers or supervisors, and unrealistic, excessively stressful, or even unethical expectations embedded in an organization's culture. Toxicity can originate from almost any position at any level of an organization. Sometimes, the source of toxicity can be just one person—the "bad apple." Just as often, toxic behavior is an indicator of an unhealthy organization in which its members become passive or active enablers of a toxic organizational culture (Trevino and Youngblood, 1990).

For individuals, experiencing a toxic workplace can cause stress and anxiety, which can undermine work performance. At worst, such experiences may contribute to serious and persistent mental health issues (Wang et al., 2008).

Toxic behaviors also undermine the organization. They can damage retention, reputation, engagement, and other factors that help an organization thrive and grow. In many cases, workplace toxicity is a contributing factor to insider threat incidents, including workplace violence (Calhoun and Weston, 2003, Shaw and Sellers, 2015, Interagency Security Committee, 2019).

Organizational Responsibilities

"Communication is a critical piece to resolving a toxic work environment. It's crucial that everyone feels heard. Not to mention, employees need to feel comfortable voicing their concerns."

— Heidi Lynne Kurter

U.S. law requires private companies to provide a safe workplace. Specifically, the General Duty Clause, Section 5(a)(1) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, requires employers "to provide their employees with a place of employment that is 'free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm'" (Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA], n.d.). Although OSHA regulations do not directly address workplace violence or stressful conditions such as toxicity or bullying, the OSHA website advises:

> An employer that has experienced acts of workplace violence, or becomes aware of threats, intimidation, or other indicators showing that the potential for violence in the workplace exists, would be on notice of the risk of workplace violence and should implement a workplace violence prevention program combined with engineering controls, administrative controls, and training.

To respond to these risks, The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommends organizations adopt the *Total Worker Health®* approach to promoting worker safety, health, and well-being (2016). Rather than simply responding to individual-level risks, organizations should emphasize organizational changes to eliminate working conditions that threaten worker safety and to promote a culture of individual and group well-being.

Figure 1

Hierarchy of Controls Applied to NIOSH Total Worker Health®
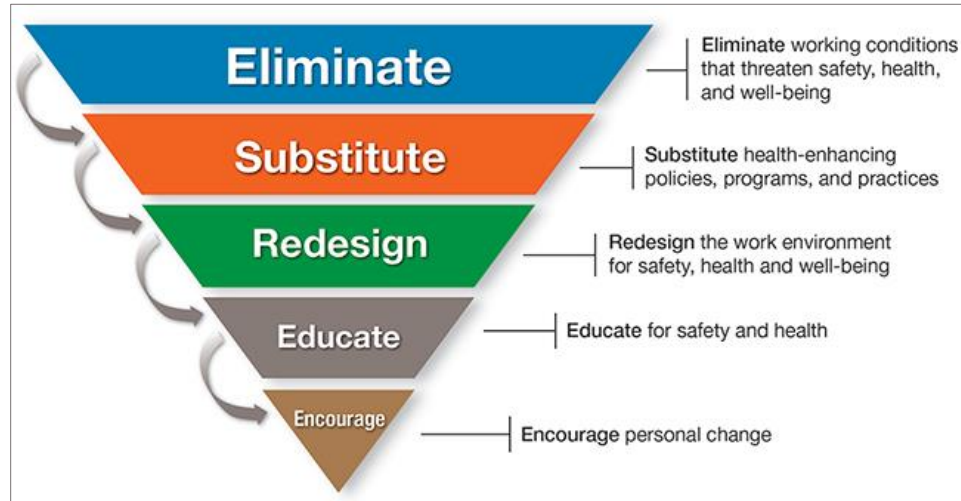
NIOSH (2016).

> "Toxic workplaces also impair the lives of individuals beyond the work realm. Employees report feeling emotionally drained, experience lower well-being, and even increased conflict at home."
>
> — Manuela Priesemuth

For Federal agencies, the Interagency Security Committee (ISC) has published guidelines for workplace violence prevention training. The goal of training is to ensure that employees know how to report incidents of violence, threats, harassment and intimidation, or other disruptive behaviors, and to demonstrate that the agency is committed to taking actions for their prevention (ISC, 2019). See Table 1.

Table 1

Guidelines Based on ISC Workplace Violence Prevention Training

Employee Training	Supervisor Training
■ Overview of the various aspects and types of bullying and violence in the workplace	■ Basic leadership skills, such as setting clear standards, addressing employee problems promptly, performance counseling, and disciplinary procedures
■ Symptoms and behaviors often associated with those who commit aggressive or violent actions	■ Ways to encourage employees to report incidents that made them feel threatened for any reason by anyone inside or outside the organization
■ Security hazards found in the agency's workplace	■ Skills in behaving compassionately and supportively towards employees who report incidents
■ The Department or Agency's workplace violence prevention policies and procedures	■ Skills in taking human resources actions and disciplinary actions
■ Reporting requirements and processes	■ Basic skills in handling crisis situations
■ Specialized training on how to create a positive work environment and develop effective teams	■ Basic emergency procedures
■ Escalation of subtle behaviors that could lead to violence	■ How to ensure that appropriate screening of pre-employment reference is completed
■ Training to improve awareness of cultural differences (e.g., diversity)	■ Bullying
■ Tips for protecting oneself and fellow coworkers from workplace violence	■ Confidentiality procedure awareness
■ Response plans, communication, and alarm procedures	■ How to conduct a peaceful separation from service
■ Active Shooter Response Training – Run, Hide, Fight	

"

Bullying seems to thrive where employees perceive contradictory expectations, demands, and values in their jobs, and where expectations are perceived as unclear or unpredictable.

"

— Denise Salin & Helge Hoel

How Leaders Can Recognize a Toxic Environment

Whether its mission is serving diners at a restaurant or saving lives, an organization cannot tolerate toxic behaviors. Toxic behaviors and their effects can lead to workplace violence, hostile acts, sabotage, accidents, lost productivity, sexual harassment, intellectual property theft, and individual health problems. Just as importantly, toxic work environments indicate an organization is not achieving its mission effectively.

Signs of a toxic culture include the following (Cancialosi, 2020; Ryan, 2016):

- Acts or reports of harassment, abuse, and bullying

- High employee turnover and absenteeism

- Lack of clear purpose and direction

- Risk aversion and fear of failure

- Fear or mistrust of leaders

- Gossip and conflict

- Lack of communication regarding workplace concerns but rampant whispering and rumors

- Micromanagement

- Rivalries and politics among groups

- Isolation, passivity, and lack of enthusiasm

- More focus on punishment than rewards and encouragement.

If these problem signs and behaviors are present in your organization, contact your human resources, EO/EEO, or general counsel office for help with assessment and correction. But there are also actions that leaders at all levels can take to mitigate toxicity in their organizations. The following Best Practices section provides actionable ways to foster a nontoxic organization.

Best Practices for Addressing Toxicity

Strong organizations and communities that recognize toxicity aim to root it out and build safeguards against it. Everyone shares this responsibility. Although toxicity can occur at any level, the most damaging toxicity often comes from leaders and supervisors. Such problematic behavior can include bullying, intimidation, harassment, abuse, distrust, resentment, unethical behaviors, manipulation, mean spiritedness, and discrimination. The six best practices offer resources, insights, strategies and tools to combat workplace toxicity.

1. Organizations Define Their Core Values and Set Expectations of Behavior for Their Members

Background and Justification

An organization's core values are the north star for why it exists and provide a firm foundation for decision making to fulfill the organization's mission and goals. Defining and sharing the organization's core values sets behavioral expectations for everyone in the organization: "Your values and mission are what ultimately drive your team's performance. When your core values are truly ingrained in your way of doing business, every decision will be made with those values in mind. This helps align every decision with your brand and what it hopes to accomplish" (Gleeson, 2021).

If the organization's core values are specific, visible, and public, there should be little room for toxicity to take root or be sustainable. Additionally, every leader and employee should be able to see a reflection of themselves in the organization's core values: "When employees are tasked to uphold company values in business decisions, it makes it easier to trust that they will do what's right for the business. These values almost act as a compass, helping each individual to navigate both clear and murky work challenges" (Lim, 2019).

Best Practice Implementation

To define or redefine your organization's core values:

- Establish a team comprised of trusted leaders and employees from across the organization to discuss and define core values and expectations.
- Seek input from all stakeholders.
- Focus on *how* you want your organization to work, not the "what" and "why."
- Study how your organization works and what it does right and define values that match what you do best.
- Keep it simple; it's easier for people to remember four or five core values rather than a long list.

2. Leaders and Employees Should Follow Core Values Every Day and in Everything the Organization Does

Background and Justification

Instilling core values as guiding principles for every organizational decision provides a measuring stick for everyone's behavior in the organization. Activating core values in an organization means "imposing a set of fundamental, strategically sound beliefs on a broad range of people" (Lencioni, 2002).

Core values should be integrated into every aspect of employees' work: hiring practices, job descriptions, performance reviews, criteria for rewards and promotions, and termination policies. "From the first interview to the last day of work, employees should be constantly reminded that core values form the basis for every decision the company makes" (Lencioni, 2002).

Leaders should also publicly recognize individuals when they specifically demonstrate the organization's core values: "Reward the desired behavior, and you'll typically get more of it" (Gleeson, 2021). Placing sustained emphasis on positive behavior on everyone, from senior leaders to new employees, takes commitment yet can build a powerful, transformative organizational culture.

Best Practice Implementation

To weave the organization's core values into every work-related process of managers and employees, leaders should

- Prioritize core values related to hiring, onboarding, training, planning, decision making, and evaluation.
- Recognize employees who exemplify specific core values in their work during staff and organizational meetings.
- Make the core values visible every day rather than hide them in the employee manual.
- Talk about the core values often.
- Use the core values to structure performance reviews.

3. Create an Environment Where People Feel Comfortable Reporting Toxic Encounters

Background and Justification

The biggest reason employees do not speak up about negative behavior in coworkers and leadership is the fear of repercussion or retaliation from the abuser or even the organization. To counter this fear and build trust with the workforce, leaders themselves should speak up about eliminating workplace toxicity in all-hands meetings and other communications. More importantly, they should model

appropriate behaviors and take action when they recognize toxicity.

Organizations should also provide training for everyone on how to recognize and respond to toxic behaviors. Organizations should develop confidential reporting mechanisms for employees to speak up about harassment and bullying. Taking such clear action demonstrates to employees that leaders value them and their well-being (Zundel, 2018; Walsh, 2021).

Best Practice Implementation

To encourage employees to report toxic behavior, leaders should

- Review and improve the organization's existing reporting mechanisms.
- Train employees to identify signs of toxicity or misconduct and respond appropriately.
- Show gratitude when employees speak up. Take these conversations seriously. Ask employees what the organization could do better. Take notes and report back to them on intended actions.
- Encourage everyone in the organization to seek feedback from their leaders, peers, and subordinates.
- Make open dialogue a work objective. Value discussion that welcomes differing points of view.

4. Build an Inclusive Culture by Discouraging Cliques and In/Out Groups

Background and Justification

Workplace cliques are tightknit groups of coworkers who socialize in and outside the organization and exclude others who do not share their thinking. A workplace clique culture can promote a toxic environment by omitting certain employees from emails, meetings, decisions, or social gatherings. "It may be obvious or very subtle, but it may also be a form of scapegoating – sacrificing the wellbeing of one person to appease the egos of others. This exclusion can be deeply psychologically harmful to people and is a kind of bullying" (Kurter, 2021).

Work friendships and a feeling of belonging are healthy human traits, but in/out cliques are harmful: "While being a member of the in group can provide short-term satisfaction and advantageous connections, the best workers and leaders will ultimately be those who can work and empathize with many different types of people" (Smith, 2013).

Best Practice Implementation

To discourage cliques among coworkers, leaders should adopt a purposeful inclusive leadership mindset that "assures that all team members feel they are treated respectfully and fairly, are valued and sense that they belong, and are confident and

inspired" (Bourke & Titus, 2019). Strategies to achieve this include the following:

- Devote time and attention equally across the organization and between remote and on-site employees.
- Spend time getting to know employees on an individual level to build trust.
- Plan team events and workshops to encourage new relationships.
- Vary team assignments to promote diverse working relationships,
- Immediately address toxic conversations, gossip, shunning and other behaviors that can isolate others.
- Flag clique behavior, encourage inclusivity, and reinforce company values and behavior standards.

5. Recognize and Promote Emotional Intelligence Throughout the Organization

Background and Justification

Emotional intelligence is an important skill for people to understand one another and to cultivate positive work and personal relationships. Emotional intelligence is "the ability to accurately perceive your own and others' emotions; to understand the signals that emotions send about relationships; and to manage your own and others' emotions" (*Harvard Business Review*, 2004). People with low emotional intelligence are often the most toxic because they tend to lack self-awareness, empathy, and an understanding of others (Kurter, 2021).

Developing higher emotional intelligence is valuable for everyone in the organization and particularly for leaders, who set the benchmark of good behavior for their employees. "Leaders with high emotional self-awareness, self-control, empathy and positive outlook also have high resilience and focus. Besides, they are adaptable and achievement-oriented with accurate organizational awareness" (Lundberg, 2021).

Best Practice Implementation

To help managers and employees develop their emotional intelligence, leaders should

- Provide organization-wide training that helps everyone develop the skills of self-awareness, assertive communication, stress management, and appropriate responses (instead of reactions) to conflict.
- Model emotional intelligence by talking with employees, making them feel valued and communicating empathy.
- Employ active listening and assure speakers they have been heard.
- Be more self-aware and better understand your own personal emotions and the effects those emotions have on others.

- Address problems and problem employees directly and quickly to resolve the situation.

6. Take Decisive Action to Mitigate Toxic Behaviors in the Organization

Background and Justification

A toxic work culture caused by gossip, bullying, negativity, and low employee morale can damage an organization. "It suffocates creativity, stifles growth and is downright miserable to be in . . . Often, it can even cost you some of your most valuable team members" (Leighton, 2021). Leaders can help mitigate toxicity by demonstrating their commitment to cultivating a healthy organizational climate and consistently enforcing policies against toxic behavior.

When harmful behaviors are identified at any level of the organization, leaders should develop a clear mitigation plan to address and improve the problem employee's behavior or terminate their employment. Because toxic managers and employees are often unaware of how their behavior harms coworkers and the organization, confronting them with anonymous feedback from multiple colleagues can be effective. A well-administered peer review model, such as a 360-degree review, can provide a range of feedback and help the employee understand the effects of their toxic behavior (Di Fiore & Souza, 2021).

Mitigation plans can help organizations retain valuable employees and salvage careers. Leaders should give employees exhibiting toxic behaviors direct feedback based on their work, not emotions. "Objectively explain the behavior and its effects, using specific, concrete examples . . . Also discuss what kind of behavior you'd like to see instead and develop an improvement plan with the employee" (Gallo, 2016).

After these intervention efforts, if the employee's toxic behavior does not change, they should be terminated. "Good leaders listen first how their team feels about this toxic colleague and how this person pictures him/herself. Then they take the lead and re-shape the environment. If nothing works, leaders have the duty to protect their team and make toxic members leave the party" (Forbes Coaches Council, 2016).

Best Practice Implementation

To help mitigate toxic behavior, leaders should

- Create an anonymous reporting mechanism for employees to feel safe reporting toxic behavior.
- Institute 360-degree reviews as part of employee performance evaluations.
- Give direct feedback to the manager or employee exhibiting toxic behavior and develop a performance improvement plan to help them mitigate negative behavior.

- ■ Provide EAP resources to help workers facing personal challenges.

- ■ Be prepared to fire a manager or employee if their toxic behavior does not change.

Part 2: Training Scenarios

Section	Page

This section presents three training scenarios that realistically represent how workplaces struggle with toxic conditions and behaviors. They are not intended to provide guidance on specific laws or regulations governing the workplace. Instead, each scenario should serve as a starting point for thinking about how toxic conditions or behaviors impact the workplace and how organizations can more effectively navigate such situations. Consider using these scenarios as part of a counter-insider threat awareness campaign, as part of leadership training, or as a team-building exercise. These scenarios can be used flexibly based or to meet an organization's needs or training schedule—use one scenario in a single training session or use them all in an multi-session course.

Before using these scenarios or answering the team-building questions at the end, participants should familiarize themselves with the best practices presented in the previous section. Email or print the best practices for participants as read-ahead material. The best practices provide the concepts and tools needed to interpret the scenarios. Participants can refer to the best practices, other playbook materials, and their own experience as the group considers each scenario.

For suggestions on how to facilitate group discussions on potentially sensitive topics, consider reviewing *The Leader's Conversation* by the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (2021). It provides strategies for conducting discussions in a safe environment to encourage participants to hear others' perspectives. This may be especially helpful if your organization uses these scenarios as part of its response to correct toxic work conditions or behaviors.

https://www.defenseculture.mil/Human-Relations-Toolkit/Key-Topics/#leaders-conversations

Scenario One: Work Assignments at a Construction and Engineering Firm

Tony is the long-time director of a Midwestern regional office of a large construction and engineering company with sites across the United States. His office focuses on large municipal transportation projects and employs 120 workers. Approximately 30% of Tony's employees are women who hold professional positions in engineering, operations management, IT, and proposal development for multimillion-dollar bids.

Although the Code of Conduct of Tony's organization includes strong antidiscrimination and harassment policies, Tony and the senior managers at the regional office have a track record of giving promotions and high-profile career opportunities to male engineers and construction operations site managers. Tony likes to say he is "old school." In private conversations, Tony says that men are more dependable—they do not disappear to have kids, and most women lack what it takes to be an effective leader in this industry. In the past 10 years, Tony has promoted only one senior female engineer, Natasha, to a leadership position because the corporate office directed that he do so. Six months after her promotion, Natasha resigned because of her colleagues'

misogynistic comments and moved to a larger city with more executive opportunities in the industry.

This stagnation of career paths for women has contributed to the regional office's boys' club atmosphere. Female employees fear retaliation for complaining to managers. Four female employees—two engineers, Charlotte and Anna; a senior administrative assistant, Jill; and an IT systems administrator, Casey—have become friends and meet periodically after work to commiserate about work challenges. For example, they complained that a male associate with little onsite experience became manager of a new bridge project. When Charlotte and Anna asked Tony why he had not considered either of them for the project, Tony told them the male colleague was better suited to work onsite with the guys on construction crews. Tony said he was "just looking out" for his female engineers and protecting them from potential disrespect or catcalls from construction workers.

Recently, rumors of budget cuts and layoffs have swirled around the office because of supply chain problems with construction materials. Many of the female employees in the regional office feel vulnerable to losing their jobs, and productivity is diminishing. Charlotte, Anna, Jill, and Casey frequently discuss how they can protect themselves and have even joked about retaliating against the company in the threat of layoffs. Jill reached out to the former executive, Natasha, for guidance. Natasha advised the group either to resign and find a healthier company to work for or talk to the corporate office about the gender discrimination led by Tony and his senior leadership team.

The four women considered what Natasha said and decided to take both actions. A few days later, Charlotte, Anna, Jill, and Casey resigned, submitting similar letters to Tony with copies emailed to Human Resources in the corporate office. They detailed numerous examples of the misogynistic atmosphere, the comments about women, and the history of promotions and high-profile projects given primarily to men in the office.

The women's resignation letter got the attention of executives in the corporate office who sent a Human Resources director to Tony's regional office to find out more about the ongoing problems and speak with everyone involved.

Team-Building Discussion: Working in small groups, discuss and make notes on your answers to the following questions. Be prepared to report your answers to the class when the facilitator calls time.

- How does this situation at the engineering and construction company indicate a toxic workplace? What harm is being caused to the female employees and the organization? If no changes are made, what harm might happen in the future?

- Did the women do the right thing? Why or why not?

- How should the company's Human Resources staff and managers handle this situation? How can they reduce toxicity in the office and rebuild employee trust? Using the Best Practices guide in this playbook, identify which specific steps they

should take.

Scenario Two: Hybrid Work and Loss of Trust at an Accounting Firm

A well-established accounting firm in Alexandria, Virginia, which has been in business since 1971, has a large auditing department comprising 38 employees who specialize in auditing services for Government agencies and defense contractors. Many workers have been with the firm for 10 to 20 years and have experienced a few lean years when salaries and annual performance raises were frozen because of budget constraints. The firm is now growing and hiring new talent at all experience levels. Seasoned employees have discovered that the firm is offering new workers a competitive sign-on bonus and salaries commensurate with or higher than what long-time employees make. Employees shared a screenshot of an employee salary list, which showed considerable variations in salaries for the Auditor 1, 2, and 3 job categories. Ramona, an Auditor 3 with 17 years of experience, saw that she makes $5,000 per year less than Michael, who was recently hired as an Auditor 2 with a master's degree and no job experience. Ramona had to train Michael on the software and audit procedures for Federal clients and took on extra work while the position was vacant for 3 months.

Approximately 8 months ago, senior managers gave all employees in the Auditing Department the option to work on a hybrid schedule, working 2 days in the office and 3 days remotely. About half of the workers took advantage of the new schedule and felt they were more productive on the days they could avoid commuting and devote more time to focus on complex tasks.

However, the organization's culture had previously centered on in-person meetings and relationships, and onsite workers still benefit from frequent contact with managers and executives, many of whom continue to work in the office full time. In Zoom meetings, the hybrid employees do not have as much input on projects and other work discussions as do their in-person counterparts.

Between the salary compression of long-time employees and the uneven treatment that hybrid workers feel in relation to their onsite coworkers, tensions are rising between employees and managers, and productivity is beginning to decline across the Auditing Department.

Last month, after employees received the results of their annual performance reviews, office-wide distrust and complaints erupted over what many considered to be unethical salary discrepancies, unfair career advancement opportunities, and tone-deaf leadership from mid-level and senior managers. Several seasoned Auditing Department employees filed complaints with Human Resources and leveraged their long relationships with other managers and leaders in the firm to demand fair treatment in their department. The director of Human Resources has been called in to meet with employees and managers to try to resolve this dispute.

Team-Building Discussion: Working in small groups, discuss and make notes on your answers to the following questions. Be prepared to report your answers to the class when the facilitator calls time.

- How do Ramona's experience and alleged disadvantage of hybrid workers in the Auditing department indicate a toxic workplace? If nothing is done about these problems, what do you think will happen in the future?

- What should Ramona and others who feel unfairly treated do in this situation?

- How should the director of Human Resources handle this situation? What is the role of mid-level and senior managers to solve these problems? Using the Best Practices guide in this playbook, identify which specific steps they should take.

Scenario Three: Demanding Work at a Blockchain Startup

A small startup tech company in northern California specializes in developing digital identity verification using blockchain technology. The company has a staff of 30 developers and engineers who work long hours remotely and on site. They create and support user-friendly mobile applications for individual consumers and companies to verify user credentials. Two years ago, the two cofounders of the company, Pam and Malik, stepped away from day-to-day operations and hired Marc as the Chief Executive Officer to run the business. Marc is hyper-focused on expanding the business to new markets and passionately communicates his vision for providing every customer with secure ownership of their digital identity.

Although employees are excited about the company's mission, many are beginning to tire of the frequent sprint sessions to develop new products and the tight deadlines for software updates. Kumar is a new software engineer who has worked for the company for 3 months. During a one-on-one meeting regarding Kumar's career path, Marc complained about the incompetence of some of Kumar's coworkers. Marc stated that their work was becoming subpar and that they did not fully buy into Marc's vision for the company's future. "These guys just don't have the fire and drive to succeed like I can see in you," Marc told Kumar. "If you keep working hard and support where I want to take this company, I see a lucrative future for you."

Kumar left that meeting feeling excited about his prospects yet discouraged about company morale. Later, during a Zoom meeting with the three coworkers whom Marc disparaged, Kumar listened to them vent their frustration regarding an upcoming product sprint. Gus said, "Fourteen hours a day for the next 3 days to correct a minor problem on the app. And we do them almost every week to solve one problem or another. We aren't a fledgling startup anymore. I love Marc, but I also love my wife and baby, and I barely see them during the week."

A few weeks later, Marc returned to the office following a quarterly meeting with the company's cofounders and other members of the board of directors. He called the onsite staff together and streamed a live video feed to remote workers. He told

employees that although the investors were satisfied with the company's most recent earnings, he was not. Marc grew more and more agitated as he vented about the company's alleged slow growth and told employees they were not doing enough to help him succeed. "What do I pay you for? Not one of you works as hard as I do. If profits aren't up in 3 months, there'll be layoffs," Marc said.

In the following 3 months, Kumar's initial excitement about his job turned into fatigue as the product sprints grew longer and client deliverable deadlines became shorter. Kumar's coworker Gus and three others resigned to work at more established blockchain firms with seasoned leadership. Marc's rants and threats regarding employee productivity became frequent, and an employee leaked a Zoom recording of one of his tirades to the company's cofounders. The board of directors immediately called Marc in for an emergency meeting to assess the situation and resolve the problem of the company's negative culture.

Team-Building Discussion: Working in small groups, discuss and make notes on your answers to the following questions. Be prepared to report your answers to the class when the facilitator calls time.

- How does Marc's behavior indicate the startup company has become a toxic workplace? If no action is taken, what harm may happen to the company and its employees?

- What should Kumar, Gus, and the other employees do?

- What should the founders, Pam and Malik, do in this situation? Should Marc continue as CEO? What steps should the founders take to help employees destress and rebuild the enthusiasm they once had? Using the Best Practices guide in this playbook, identify which specific steps they should take.

" **Toxic leadership could be described as a silent killer as it can be said to position leaders as invulnerable and to sabotage, block, and penalise those who question such omnipotence. A combination of toxic leaders, vulnerable and demeaned followers, and conducive contexts results in an unhealthy 'toxic triangle' threatening the health and vitality of those within its bounds.** "

— Michael Walton

Part 3: Toxicity Infographic

The infographic presented on the following pages illustrates the consequences of toxicity and some best practices that can be used to mitigate its effects in the workplace. Use the infographic as part of a counter-insider threat awareness campaign, leadership training, or to start a discussion about toxicity in your organization. Consider printing the infographic and posting it to an employee bulletin board, or including it in training slides or your organization's newsletter. The Toxicity Infographic is available in digital and printable poster formats.

https://opa.mil/research-analysis/personnel-security/insider-threat/better-ways-to-work-together/

Overcoming Workplace Toxicity

30% of adult Americans report suffering abusive conduct at work (an estimated 48.6 million).

19% report witnessing abusive conduct at work (an estimated 30.6 million).

43% of remote workers report being bullied at work.[1]

We Can Stop Bullying

"Bystander intervention techniques can be a powerful tool that both leaders and employees can use to address actions that are not aligned with values—and in doing so, contribute to a positive workplace culture.[2]"

1 in 5 employees have left their company due to workplace culture.[2]

76% of workers say their manager sets the culture of their workplace.

58% of those who left say their manager is the main reason.[3]

$223 billion cost of employee turnover from 2014-2019[4]

2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019

How are companies planning to address toxicity?[4]

Train leaders to be **better listeners.** — 58%

Create a **sense of belonging** among employees. — 54%

Focus on initiatives that enhance **employee well-being.** — 54%

Offer more training on **creating a positive corporate culture.** — 49%

Offer more training focused on **team building.** — 44%

(scale: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100)
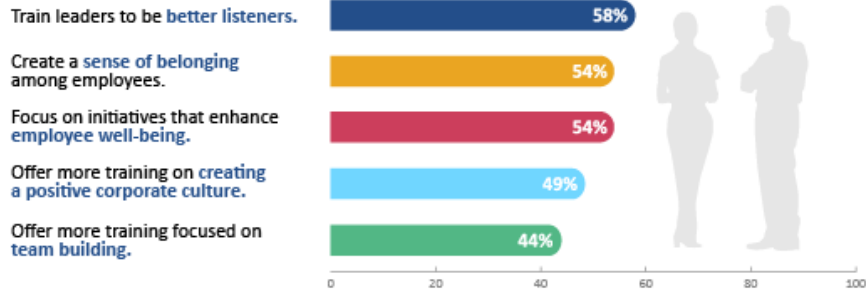
Training Best Practices

Teach more than compliance to legal standards.

+

Promote and communicate organizational values.

+

Teach employees and leaders to demonstrate respect and civility.

+

Teach bystander intervention skills.[2]

Good relationships with managers = more job satisfaction for employees.

Show empathy, compassion, and vulnerability.

Express gratitude and make people feel valued.

Give positive feedback to promote employee confidence and promote positive behavior.

Be aware of your employees' self-care needs.*

[1] Workplace Bullying Institute. (2021). 2021 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey. https://workplacebullying.org/2021-wbi-survey/#
[2] Mirza, B. (2019, September 25). The high cost of a toxic workplace culture. SHRM. https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/toxic-workplace-culture-report.aspx
[3] Atias, T., & Scheninger, B. (2020, September 22). The boss factor: Making the world a better place through workplace relationships. McKinsey & Co. https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-boss-factor-making-the-world-a-better-place-through-workplace-relationships
[4] EVERFI & HR Research Institute. (2021). Preventing toxic workplaces. (2021). https://everfi.com/white-papers/workplace-training/preventing-toxic-workplaces/

OPA | PERSEREC — the ThreatLab — Integrating Research Into Practice

OPA Report No. 2022-076 PERSEREC-PA-22-03

"People don't leave jobs; they leave toxic work cultures."

— Amina Aitsi-Selmi, MD, Ph.D

Part 4: Resource Library

Overcoming Toxicity in Organizations

The following resources are provided to help leaders at all levels learn about various kinds of toxicity and apply useful strategies to mitigate toxicity throughout their organization. These resources support and expand on key concepts presented in previous parts of this playbook. They can be used for self study or group training, published on your organization's intranet or in employee newsletters, or highlighted in awareness campaigns. The materials are intended to be accessible to broad audiences with different levels of expertise. Text in *italics* is quoted from the resource.

Toxic Leadership

From the article, *Identifying Toxic Leadership and Building Worker Resilience*:

This article seeks to help managers understand how organizational conditions can lead some leaders to become toxic. Toxic leaders work for themselves or against the goals of their organizations, resulting in a dysfunctional environment. Workers and managers can defend themselves and their organizations against toxic leaders, and authentic leaders can build a culture of high morale and improve organizational resilience.

Winn, G. L., & Dykes, A. C. (2019). Identifying toxic leadership and building worker resilience. *Professional Safety*, *64*(03), 38-45. https://aeasseincludes.assp.org/professionalsafety/pastissues/064/03/F2_0319.pdf

Toxic Managers Can Improve With Supportive Organizational Norms

From the article, *Time's Up for Toxic Workplaces*:

Supervisors experience a loss in social worth after abusing subordinates, which means that they generally feel less valued and appreciated at work. This reduced sense of worth, in turn, seemed to hurt managers' performance behaviors, as employees increasingly reported that their supervisors were unable to complete assigned work duties or tasks that were expected of them.

But, at the same time, we also found that some managers (those who did not have psychopathic tendencies) ended up halting mistreatment towards employees. Thus, abusive bosses significantly improved their bad behavior when they cared about their level of social worth and the general well-being of employees.

Priesemuth, M. (2020, June 19). Time's up for toxic workplaces. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2020/06/times-up-for-toxic-workplaces

Organizational Factors on the Critical Pathway to Insider Threat

From the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's *Insider Threat Mitigation Guide*:

There is a broad perception that insider threats are primarily, or even entirely, driven by individual predispositions, stressors, and choices. What is frequently missed is the relationship between individual behaviors and the environment that influences them.

The social context of insider threats means that environmental factors can escalate or mitigate stressors that can contribute to behavioral changes and an individual's progression from trusted insider to insider threat. Organizational policies and cultural practices can play a significant role in creating or managing an insider threat … Of most concern are those issues that become part of the person of concern's justification to commit an insider act and those that prevent the organization from responding definitively to a threat. Inappropriate organizational responses can often provide the tipping point or 'last straw' to motivate an insider threat to act.

Examples of organizational factors that can exacerbate insider threats include

- Toxic leadership or high-stress environment
- Lack of candor or transparency between leaders and team members
- Inconsistent enforcement of policy or tolerance of poor performance
- Inaction following the notification of a grievance, threat, or risk
- Overly aggressive reaction following notification of a grievance, threat, or risk

Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. (2020, November). *Insider threat mitigation guide*. https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Insider%20Threat%20Mitigation%20Guide_Final_508.pdf

Eliminating the "Passion Killers" in Toxic Leadership

From the article, *Passion: An Added Value. The Role of Passion in the Healthy Workplace*:

This article details the importance of employees having "harmonious passion" in their work, which is categorized by "passion thrillers" in leadership that

- Promotes employee engagement
- Communicates its vision
- Values people for who and what they are
- Inspires trust, worker satisfaction, respect, and dignity
- Helps build individual self-esteem
- Celebrates team success

● Values emotional intelligence in the organization

In contrast, "passion killers" are leaders who damage interpersonal relationships and harm the reputation and success of the organization. They can affect employee "output, performance, morale and motivation infecting the whole workplace... If not addressed, they can threaten the very survival of the organization."

Bowen, P.W. (2020). Passion: an added value. The role of passion in the healthy workplace. *International Journal of Academic Management Science Researc*h, *4*(12), 4-22. http://ijeais.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/IJAMSR201202.pdf

Dismantling Toxic Cliques at Work

From the article, *4 Tips to Turn Toxic Cliques into Collaborative and Inclusive Teams*:

Very few workplace cliques consist of employees who are high performers. The reason is due to the members focusing more on the clique than on the company. The energy they put into negative behaviors and communications take away from them being productive and engaged in their job.

This article suggests four tactics to promote a culture of inclusiveness and collaboration:

● Dismantle toxic cliques

● Eliminate negative behaviors

● Bend inflexible rules

● Banish poisonous conversations

Kurter, H. L. (2019, March 28). *4 tactics to turn toxic cliques into collaborative and inclusive teams*. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/heidilynnekurter/2019/03/28/4-tactics-to-turn-toxic-cliques-into-collaborative-and-inclusive-teams/?sh=7c5ad1c32bb7

More Strategies to Eliminate Toxic Cliques at Work

From the article, *Dissolving Office Cliques*:

Office cliques can alienate employees and undermine an organization's mission. To dissolve toxic cliques, managers should institute the following strategies:

● Recognize cliques. *Have an open communication policy allowing individuals to approach managers about issues such as feeling alienated due to an office clique without fear of retaliation.*

● Institute new policies. *Focus on policies that punish employees for starting rumors, harassing other employees, or exhibiting discriminatory behavior.*

● Avoid placing blame. *Do not call out members of a clique by name or accuse them of causing a change in policies or procedures.*

● Hold workshops. *Workshops on conflict-resolution strategies and communication skills to give employees more productive ways to interact with one another.*

- Create team tasks. *Vary who you assign to teams and give all employees a chance to work with one another.*

Zeiger, S. (n.d.). *Dissolving office cliques*. Chron.
https://smallbusiness.chron.com/dissolving-office-cliques-35062.html

Taking a Lesson from the Chicago Theatre Standards on Communication, Safety, Respect, and Accountability

From the website, NotInOurHouse.org from the Chicago Theatre Community:

The Chicago Theatre Standards document is a set of self-governing rules for members of the theater community to eliminate sexual harassment and other toxic behavior in all levels of theatrical production. The document could be adapted for use in many organizations; it includes a sample first-rehearsal script to be read aloud, which lays out professional expectations and standards and identifies three people available for reporting concerns.

The document also describes the "Oops and Ouch" program to handle negative comments or actions in real time.

We'd like to recommend a system of 'Ouch' and 'Oops.' For instance: Speaker A is trying too hard to be funny and makes a thoughtless remark. Speaker B says 'Ouch!' This cues Speaker A to realize that the funny remark was potentially hurtful. Speaker A says 'Oops' to indicate recognition and regret. Then there's a Pause.

It's up to the Ouch-caller whether this moment requires some conversation. So maybe there's a conversation – or maybe the Ouch caller says 'Cool, let's move on.' But the decision to move on must come from the Ouch caller. Please note that anyone in the room can call 'Ouch.' It does not have to come from the person who is the focus of the potentially hurtful remark.

Theater Arts Guild. (2017, December). *Chicago theatre standards*. NotInOurHouse.org.
https://theaterartsguild.org/about/chicago-theatre-standards/

Organizational Justice

From the CDSE Job Aid, *Workplace Environment and Organizational Justice*

Organizational justice research, which focuses on the role of fairness as a consideration in the workplace, has demonstrated that fair treatment has important effect on individual employee attitudes, such as satisfaction, absenteeism, and commitment. In many studies, it has been suggested that fairness affects several employee attitudes and behaviors such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, sabotage, turnover intention, stress, organizational citizenship behavior, job performance, and trust.

Center for Development of Security Excellence. (n.d.). *Insider threat - job aid: Workplace Environment and Organizational Justice*.

https://www.cdse.edu/Portals/124/Documents/jobaids/insider/org-justice.pdf?ver=ESMX_4_ucWpCU58LPoOMAQ%3d%3d

The New World Combining Remote and Onsite Work

From the article, *9 out of 10 Organizations Are Switching to Hybrid Working, According to a McKinsey Survey*:

In the postpandemic future of work, nine out of ten organizations will be combining remote and on-site working, according to a new McKinsey survey of 100 executives across industries and geographies. The survey confirms that productivity and customer satisfaction have increased during the pandemic.

Ravid, D., et al. (2021, May 25). *9 out of 10 organizations are switching to hybrid working, according to a McKinsey survey*. World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/05/executives-future-hybrid-work-wfh

The Importance of Quality Relationships at Work

From the article, *The Boss Factor: Making the World a Better Place through Workplace Relationships*:

Businesses looking to make an external social contribution should, paradoxically, look inside: improving workers' job satisfaction could be the single most important thing they do.

Allas, T., & Schaninger, B. (2020, September 22). *The boss factor: making the world a better place through workplace relationships*. McKinsey & Co. https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-boss-factor-making-the-world-a-better-place-through-workplace-relationships

Cultivating Employees' Trust in Organizational Leadership

From the article, *Proven Ways to Earn Your Employees' Trust*:

Most people think about [trust] in terms of customers: They have to believe in you and your products and services. But trust within the organization is just as important: Your employees must believe in each other. When they don't, communication, teamwork and performance inevitably suffer.

Trust is essential to boosting employee engagement, motivation, and candor. Employees are more likely to follow through on goals set by a manager they trust and to be more forthcoming about the challenges they see on their level.

O'Hara identifies these strategies to build employee trust

- Creating a personal connection
- Being as transparent and truthful as possible about the health and future goals of the company

- Encouraging instead of giving orders
- Avoiding casting blame for poor outcomes and giving credit to employees for positive outcomes
- Avoiding criticizing and playing favorites
- Showing your competence, updating your skills, and following through on commitments

O'Hara, C. (2014, June 27). Proven ways to earn your employees' trust. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2014/06/proven-ways-to-earn-your-employees-trust

Finding Out How Your New Organization Really Functions

From the article, *Want to Learn How Things Really Work at Your New Job? Talk to the People at the Bottom*:

A common assumption is that people just copy the behavior of the highest-ranking leaders in a group, rather than paying attention to anyone else. That's always rubbed me the wrong way, partly because I hadn't done that as a PhD student within the academic hierarchy. I believed lower-ranked people matter more in our perceptions of social norms.

Waiker, S. (2021, March 10). *Want to learn how things really work at your new job? Talk to people at the bottom*. Stanford Graduate School of Business. https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/want-learn-how-things-really-work-your-new-job

Toxicity in Online Communities

From the peer-reviewed article, *The Impact of Toxic Language on the Health of Reddit Communities*:

There are numerous on-line communities in which people converse about various topics and issues. It is usually necessary to monitor on-line forums to ensure that conversations and content are appropriate. Disturbing trends are starting to emerge, including cyberbullying, cyber threats, on-line harassment, hate speech, and abuse — referred to collectively as 'toxicity.' Researchers have already started investigating automatic and semi-automatic monitoring of social networking sites for aspects of toxicity. We are investigating the relationship between on-line toxicity and forum health. Specifically, we provide results of the evaluation of the impact of toxicity on community health as a function of its size, while correcting for community topic.

Mohan, S., et al. (2017). The impact of toxic language on the health of Reddit communities. *Advances in artificial intelligence, 30th Canadian conference on artificial intelligence 2017*. Edmonton, AB, Canada, May 16–19, 2017, proceedings. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Thalia-Field-2/publication/316940579_Domain_Adaptation_for_Detecting_Mild_Cognitive_Impairm

ent/links/5a45372c458515f6b05477c2/Domain-Adaptation-for-Detecting-Mild-Cognitive-Impairment.pdf#page=65

Strengthening Healthy Organizations Through Core Values

From the article, *Eight Tips for Creating and Applying Your Company's Core Values*:

Core values help guide the decision-making process and influence employee behavior, so it's important to identify values that truly capture the essence of what makes your company unique.

Why is identifying and selecting the right core values important? . . . Fully embracing meaningful core values is the difference between having an engaged, involved team of employees versus a disengaged staff comprised of disillusioned individuals. Though many companies understand how values contribute to an organization's culture, environment and, ultimately, company performance, too many fall short of hitting the mark.

Lyons recommends these strategies for creating or revamping your organizations core values

- Establish a diverse team of respected, engaged, and model employees
- Agree to meet regularly until "we get it right"
- Use surveys to incorporate the voice of your customers and employees
- Answer these questions: As an owner, as a team and as individuals, what characteristics do you attribute to your success? What attributes set us apart from our competition?
- Develop and explore key concepts that direct desired behaviors
- Broadening your outlook. Think in terms of values, concepts, or phrases before condensing to as few words as possible
- Defining ideal behaviors

Lyons, S. (2021, February 2). *Eight tips for creating and applying your company's core values*. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2021/02/02/eight-tips-for-creating-and-applying-your-companys-core-values/?sh=607dad8a1ab9

Calling Out Misconduct

From the article, **Six Tips for Speaking Up Against Bad Behavior**:

When facing an ambiguous situation, our natural tendency is to look to others to figure out what's going on. But here's the problem: If each person is looking to the people around them to act, and no one wants to risk feeling foolish and embarrassed, the problematic comment or behavior may be left unchallenged. And this silence conveys a lack of concern, or even tacit acquiescence, making it far more likely that it will continue.

The good news is we can hone specific skills for challenging bad behavior when we need to. Here are some science-based tips.

Sanderson, C.A. (2020, September 30). Six tips for speaking up against bad behavior. *Greater Good Magazine.* *https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_tips_for_speaking_up_against_bad_behavior*

Helping Employees Voice Their Concerns at Work

From the article, *13 Best Ways to Encourage Employees to Speak Up*:

This article details the importance of giving employees an environment to speak up about their work concerns, particularly in a hybrid work model. The strategies include the following:

- A listening tour. Ask workers fix or six questions at a maximum that seek feedback on what is going well, what is not, and what they can do more or less of.
- Healthy boundaries. Encourage teams to not only encourage their teams to establish healthy and sustainable boundaries but to model them as well.
- Make speaking out worthwhile. When your team sees you taking their concerns seriously, they will share more.
- Input isn't wrong. Thank team members for their input and learn more. Then explore ways to address their ideas.
- Seek feedback. Unconsciously, this showcases humility on the part of the manager and elevates the status of the team member from whom feedback is sought.
- No judgment when listening. Managers need to learn to listen without judgment and to resist the need to have all the answers.
- Push past easy answers. When an employee says, "All good" or "I'm fine," managers should consistently express interest and concern to encourage their team member to say more.
- Make things meaningful. The measure of a successful manager-employee relationship is rooted in effective communication.
- Make people feel safe. When looking to engage with employees, give the way you wish to receive—openly, honestly and respectfully.
- Build trust. Employees will be more vocal about grievances, concerns, struggles, and ideas when they trust their managers.
- Set an example. Voice honest feedback or concerns with workers and demonstrate that all opinions are valued.
- Take complaints seriously. Get curious about the information behind the complaint to learn valuable information about the inside operations of your business.

- Work with HR. Collaborate more closely with your HR leaders so your teams see you together and congruent, making it easier to communicate on a daily and weekly basis.

Forbes Coaches Council. (2020, May 22). *13 ways to encourage employees to speak up*. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2020/05/22/13-best-ways-to-encourage-your-employees-to-speak-up/?sh=29b8edf11f2b

Developing Empathy as a Leader

From the article, *Want to Be a Better Leader? The Trick is to Embrace Empathy (Here's How to Do It):*

This article details the difference between being "nice" and being empathetic to employees. "Empathetic leaders—those who care about people not just as workers, but as human beings—are multidimensional: Caring and adaptable, with the ability to set clear expectations and have tough conversations, and capable of bringing people along in times of change."

There are four ways to develop a more empathetic leadership style:

- Adopting a service leadership mentality
- Cultivating approachability
- Letting every employee know their voice matters and their work makes a difference
- Paying equal attention to your teams and customers or clients.

Schwantes, M. (2021, July 14). *Want to be a better leader? The trick is to embrace empathy (here's how to do it)*. Inc. https://www.inc.com/marcel-schwantes/want-to-be-a-better-leader-trick-is-to-embrace-empathy-heres-how-to-do-it.html

Improving Communication Skills To Connect With Employees

From the article, *3 Steps to Better Communication*:

This article provides tips for managers on how to communicate with high-potential employees and better retain them by ensuring they feel company management is listening to them:

- Being self-aware. When you understand your own strengths and weaknesses, you can identify the areas where you need to enhance your communication skills.

- Engaging in active listening.
  - Listen to learn rather than to react or respond.
  - Practice curiosity over judgment to better understand the sender's message.
  - Acknowledge and validate by paraphrasing what was said or by mimicking the sender's posture or position and showing the person that you hear him or

her and understand his or her feelings.

- Ask, do not tell. Ask the person three questions before you offer a suggestion.

  - Tell me more

  - Explain what you mean

  - Define that term or concept for me

Patton, E. (2019, April 8). *3 steps to better communication*. SHRM. https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/organizational-and-employee-development/pages/3-steps-to-better-communication.aspx

Superstars Versus Toxic Employees

From the article, *Which Matters More: Hiring Superstars or Removing Toxic Employees? Harvard Research Reveals the Surprising Answer*

This article details a Harvard Business School study that found a superstar, defined as "a top 1% employee," "will save the average company $5,303." However, "avoiding a toxic employee—defined as 'a worker that engages in behavior harmful to an organization, including either its property or people'—will save the average company $12,489."

The article also provides strategies for working hard to identify and recruit superstars and "working even harder" to identify toxic employees.

Haden, J. (2020, October 28). *Which matters more: hiring superstars or removing toxic employees? Harvard research reveals the surprising answer*. Inc. https://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/which-matters-more-hiring-superstars-or-removing-toxic-employees-harvard-research-reveals-surprising-answer.html

"

Toxic leadership necessarily also depends upon the followers, many of whom recognize but tolerate it. Just why so many followers accept, often prefer, and sometimes even create toxic leaders by pushing non-toxic leaders over the line requires an analysis of three key sets of forces: those internal to the individual's psyche, those in the individual's external environment, and those psychosocial forces that arise from the interaction between the individual and his or her social environment.

"

— Jean Lipman-Blumen

Overcoming Toxicity in Individuals

The following resources are provided to help individuals learn more about toxic people and work conditions and apply strategies to reduce toxicity in their professional and personal lives. These resources support and expand on key concepts presented in previous parts of this playbook. They can be used for self study, personal growth, or discussion with colleagues. The materials are intended to be accessible to broad audiences with different levels of expertise.

Dealing With Difficult People at Work

From the article, *Work with a Jerk? Here's How to Survive*:

So, is it us or them? We human beings are not able to see our own weaknesses. The best we can hope for is to have people in our lives who will tell us the truth. I talk about the power of having the right spouse or life partner to tell you the truth. But it can be a mentor, or a friend. Just be quick to label yourself as part of the problem and slow to label others.

Let's assume that we are not the jerk. Is there an acceptable level of nastiness? And if there is, how do we assess it?

Lynch, S. (2017, September 12). *Work with a jerk? Here's how to survive. Stanford graduate school of business*. Insights by Stanford Business. https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/work-jerk-heres-how-survive

Or Maybe It's Me?

From the Threat Lab infographic, *Maybe It's Me*

A trusted reporting and response process is only one piece of a comprehensive Counter-Insider Threat Program. Employees should also feel motivated and be incentivized to monitor and mitigate their own concerning behavior, especially if it interferes with the overall well-being of the organization. "Maybe It's Me" is a visual campaign designed to address this difficult topic in a non-confrontational manner and encourage both self-awareness and self-improvement to benefit individuals and organizations.

The Threat Lab. (2021). *Maybe It's Me* (OPA Report No. 2021-039, PERSEREC-PA-21-07). Defense Personnel and Security Research Center. https://opa.mil/research-analysis/personnel-security/insider-threat/maybe-it-s-me/

Workplace Bullying Institute Research on Toxic Coworkers

From the report, *2021 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey*:

Workplace bullying is repeated mistreatment and a form of "abusive conduct." We asked respondents to consider only the most serious forms of bullying. Bullying is a non-

physical form of workplace violence. Our principal concern is the national prevalence of abusive conduct.

Workplace Bullying Institute. (2021). 2021 WBI U.S. workplace bullying survey (infographic). https://workplacebullying.org/2021-wbi-survey-infographic/

The full 2021 U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey provides a detailed report on toxic working conditions based on surveys completed by 1,215 respondents.

Namie, G. (2021). *2021 WBI U.S. workplace bullying survey*. Workplace Bullying Institute. https://workplacebullying.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2021-Full-Report.pdf

Answering Questions About Transforming a Toxic Workplace

From the *Harvard Business Review* podcast, "Toxic Workplaces":

This podcast answers listeners' questions about how to "transform a toxic culture, whether you're a junior employee, manager, or in charge."

Beard, A., & McGinn, D. (2018-present). Dear HBR: Toxic workplaces [Audio podcast]. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/podcast/2018/05/toxic-workplaces

Dealing With a Toxic Employer

From the flowchart, "Are You Working for a Toxic Boss?":

Sometimes it can be tricky to know if you're working under toxic leadership. That's why we have put together a handy guide to help you identify if you are working for a toxic boss and tips on how to deal with the situation without going crazy.

Koop, A. (2021, May 3). Flowchart: *Are you working for a toxic boss?* Visual capitalist. https://www.visualcapitalist.com/flowchart-are-you-working-for-a-toxic-boss/

Rooting Out Toxic People in Your Life

From the article, *8 Traits the Most Toxic People in Your Life Share*:

Toxic people are draining; encounters leave you emotionally wiped out. Time with them is about taking care of their business, which will leave you feeling frustrated and unfulfilled, if not angry. Don't allow yourself to become depleted as a result of giving and giving and getting nothing in return. At first, you may feel for them and their plight but once you observe that every interaction is negatively charged you may want to limit your contact with them, or maybe even cut ties. Your time and energy are essential for your own life. Don't be overly willing to give them away.

Brenner, A. (2016, August 29). 8 traits the most toxic people in your life share. *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-flux/201608/8-traits-the-most-toxic-people-in-your-life-share

Are We Toxic, Too?

From the article, *Are Toxic People Aware of Their Toxicity?:*

There is a simple explanation for the recent rise of research into dark personality traits and toxic work behaviors, namely the fact that we are all frequently exposed to colleagues and bosses who have detrimental effects on our performance, productivity, and wellbeing.

But what if we are just like them? In other words, what if we impact other people as negatively as those we regard as "toxic" impact us?

Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2021, July 13). *Are toxic people aware of their toxicity?* Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomaspremuzic/2021/07/13/are-toxic-people-aware-of-their-toxicity/?sh=1225b3033352

Answering Questions to Discover if I Am Toxic at Work

From the article, *Am I a Toxic Employee*?

The definition of toxic is exposure to anything poisonous, harmful, or unhealthy. Toxic behavior is behavior that is harmful to others upon exposure. This behavior can be disguised in two forms, blatant and not so obvious. We all know the blatant toxic behaviors at work. These behaviors are moodiness, cynical, overly critical, manipulative, demanding, arrogant, and someone whose actions make you feel worse when you walk away.

The authors present 12 question to discover if you may be the problem at work.

Minor, M. (2020, August 10). *Am I a toxic employee?* Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/mariaminor/2020/08/10/am-i-a-toxic-employee/?sh=6088e6f6596b

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Notes