



What is a toxic workplace?

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Although there have been toxic workplaces since people starting working, it is only recently that it has been given focused attention. Generally speaking, in the past, if you had a toxic workplace not many people felt they could say anything about it, and many felt you just put up with it or left to find another workplace. In the past employers and organisations had a lot of power. If you didn't like where you worked, you could leave and go somewhere else.

With the rise of the knowledge worker and the importance of talent, this has changed. Decades ago, at the beginning of the last century, work was a bit like a production line. Each person learned their job and had to keep doing the same thing over and over again. As the world has changed a great deal, and continues to keep changing at a faster and faster pace, the employee who is able to keep learning, to innovate, to be self-directed, and to notice problems and fix them, has become more and more important. In the early 1900's there was not much focus on hiring of talent. Today, talent management has become an important part of the way an organisation manages its workforce. The recognition that some employees can add a tremendous amount of value to the company is recognised. The special talents, experience, and competencies of employees is recognised, and organisations realise that without some of their people they would not function that well. Not every employee is easily replaceable. Society has also changed in that it is less hierarchical and special skills are often seen as more important than years of experience. And so increasingly the well-being of the employee has risen in importance. Organisations are still, mostly focused on profit and returns, however, the realisation now is that they need certain skills to achieve this, and they need to make sure that people with those skills find the workplace a good one to work in so they will stay.

So, what is a toxic workplace? I am not talking about a toxic boss or toxic colleagues. You get those too. I am specifically talking about a workplace that is toxic. And that means it is not just one or more individuals who are toxic. It means the whole culture of the workplace is such that it is toxic. Generally, a toxic workplace is one that is psychologically and physically unsafe for employees. Most of us know what a physically unsafe workplace is. It is one where your physical health is at risk, where your physical well-being is not taken into account. More and more though, toxic environments are being called out for the absence of psychological safety.

So, what is a toxic workplace, or one that is psychologically unsafe for employees?

- It is an environment where employees feel unfairly punished, rejected, guilty and humiliated.
- Common behaviours can include bullying, yelling, manipulating and belittling. It also includes what has come to be termed microaggressions. Passive-aggressive behaviour and stonewalling are common. Employees are ignored, meetings are cancelled, messages and emails are not replied to. Communication is limited and blame is rife. Schedules are unpredictable and frequently changed at the last minute. Conditions are cutthroat and the bosses are continually threatening to fire employees.
- It is a work environment where employees are afraid to speak their mind. Even good ideas are not aired because employees are afraid of retaliation. Employees are lied to. False promises are made to employees.
- It is a workplace where there is no room for mistakes or errors. Everyone makes mistakes as that is part of how we learn. If everyone is too scared to do anything for fear of it not meeting standards, then nothing new will be tried and people will not operate at their highest potential.
- There is role confusion. And together with role confusion there is lack of urgency to sort it out. People are not sure where their job starts and ends. People are given tasks that have in the past been carried out by other employees. It is all very confusing and makes the workplace a very uncertain place.
- There are no boundaries around work and everyone is expected to work crazy hours and push themselves until they reach burnout.
- People don't trust one another and treat one another with contempt.
- Such work environments tend to be characterised by employees with fatigue and frequent illnesses such as cold or flu or gastrointestinal problems.
- There is little to no enthusiasm for work and many employees battle to get up in the morning and motivate themselves to come to work. There is high turnover. There are cliques, lots of gossip and exclusion is rife.

In order for a workplace to be toxic this sort of behaviour must be the norm; it must be part of the culture. It cannot just be one person who is toxic. Then that person is toxic, but the workplace as a whole might be quite nice. So, a toxic workplace is more than the behaviour or one or two individuals.

If you are in a toxic workplace and you are not learning any new skills and the organisation is not one in which you feel you will benefit from staying at, then most probably you do want to look around and find a better workplace. If you are learning critical skills and you want the work experience you are gaining, but the workplace is toxic, then it may be worth staying until you have acquired the skills and experience you want. However, you will need to manage yourself in order to make sure you can deal with the consequences and impact of working in a toxic environment. This may include seeking professional help.