10 Signs Your Workplace Culture Is TOXIC (And How to Fix It)
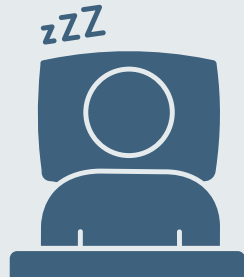
10 Signs Your Workplace Culture Is Toxic (And How to Fix It)

It's a hard thing to admit ... that your work culture may be toxic. But identifying the symptoms and finding the antidotes for them can quickly improve morale, engagement, retention and productivity. Let's get started.

Here are some unique insights into the signs of a toxic workplace and how to remedy them from Ross Kimbarovsky, founder and CEO of crowdspring.

Are your employees tired? Discouraged? Burnt out?

If the answer is yes, you may have a toxic culture at work.

That's a problem. Unhappy workers are less productive, make more mistakes, and are more likely to seek employment elsewhere.

Work culture exists on multiple levels. It isn't just behaviors. It's also an infrastructure of beliefs and values. To create real and lasting change, your business must tackle cultural issues on all levels.

You must act quickly to improve a negative work environment before productivity lags and employees abandon ship.

Here's a step-by-step guide to help you turn around a toxic work culture:

1. Identify problem behaviors

Every company is unique. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for repairing a damaged work culture.

The first step is always to examine your business's culture to identify your specific challenges.

Start by taking a critical look around you. Before you can change for the better, you have to face uncomfortable truths head-on.

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Ten common warning signs a workplace is turning toxic are:

- gossiping and/or social cliques

- aggressive bullying behavior

- poor communication and unclear expectations

- dictatorial management techniques that don't embrace employee feedback

- excessive absenteeism, illness or fatigue

- favoritism and imbalanced working conditions (discriminatory policies/wage gaps)

- workaholic behavior that sacrifices healthy work/life balance

- unrealistic workloads or deadlines

- little (or strained interaction) between employees or employees and management, and

- unsafe or morally questionable working conditions.

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You probably won't find all of these, and you may find problems not listed here. But whatever problems you find – take note. Those issues will inform your plan to rescue your work culture.

2. Evaluate the underlying support network

A toxic culture can't take root without a fertile environment, and its symptoms can't survive without a supportive infrastructure.

So, it's time to dig deeper. What shared values and actions are helping to support those behaviors?

Examine your company's leadership and their values. Then work your way from the top of the ladder to the bottom looking for issues like:

- discriminatory beliefs

- treating employees as assets, not people

- information guarding (poor communication/unclear expectations)

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- aggressive or hostile leadership styles

- belief that employees are lazy, stupid and/or expendable

- resentment of Authority

- contrariness

- lack of accountability

- lack of appreciation for (or recognition of) good work

All of these are problematic and set the foundation for a negative work culture.

3. Plan your repair strategy

With a clear understanding of the illness, you can now strategize your treatment plan.

And remember – change is hard. Don't try to fix everything at once. Prioritize.

Tackle the problem behaviors that have the biggest impact first, and smaller issues will likely begin to right themselves.

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Here are some strategic antidotes to many of the most common workplace problems:

- *Listen to your employees*. Hear their grievances, validate their experiences and make the changes necessary to address their issues. This can come in the form of one-on-one conversations, a town hall meeting with HR, or simple blind surveys. Listen, validate, and work together to find solutions.

- *Assign realistic workloads and deadlines.* This means taking the time to learn what your employees actually do. What are they responsible for, and how long do those tasks take? Remember that there are only 60 minutes in every hour and assign tasks accordingly.

- *Communicate transparently.* Employees can't do their jobs well without understanding the context. Having the information to do one's job reduces confusion and frustration, making employees happier and more efficient. Hold weekly meetings, and send frequent memos or a company newsletter. Share the information they need to know.

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- *Acknowledge work well done.* A study by the Boston Consulting Group reports "appreciation for your work" as the most important factor to job happiness. Find ways to show appreciation. Tell employees what they're doing well – they'll feel appreciated (and be more likely to continue doing it). Build a supportive environment by sharing employee successes and make positive encouragement a group activity.

- *Treat all employees by the same rules.* Playing favorites breeds resentment. Examine your company policies – do they unfairly benefit one group over others? Be open to feedback; employees may see problems that you don't. Then even the playing field, and require all employees to follow the rules.

- *Foster emotional intelligence.* The BCG Study included good relationships with colleagues and superiors among the top five elements leading to job satisfaction. Banish bullying, disrespect and dismissive behavior. Prioritize emotional intelligence. Provide resources to help employees expand their emotional intelligence. Improved emotional intelligence can cure a number of ills.

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While these are all great suggestions for every company, be mindful of your business' challenges, and choose your action items accordingly.

4. Implement your plan

John Kotter of Kotter International asserts that leaders are catalysts for workplace change. If you're in charge, you have a powerful platform for motivating change. But, be prepared to live the changes you want to see if you want anyone to take those changes seriously.

Making change easy, rewarding and socially acceptable are the keys to success. Humans have a strong drive to be a part of the group. Normalize the behaviors you seek by asking the social influencers in your business to promote those behaviors, too.

Make it easy for your employees to implement positive changes by removing barriers to success. This, again, will require that you listen to your employees to know what those barriers are.

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Finally, help your employees see how the changes you're proposing will reward them with a more positive workplace.

5. Reflect and adapt

Give your new policies and practices time to take root. Change won't happen overnight.

After a few months, take stock. What has changed? What hasn't?

Meet with the influencers you enlisted to help with your implementation.

Reflect on how things have gone. Different perspectives can offer useful insight.

Assess your progress, and adapt your efforts as needed. Keep the lines of communication open.

Cultural change is a big undertaking; but well worth the effort. Perseverance will lead you to success.

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