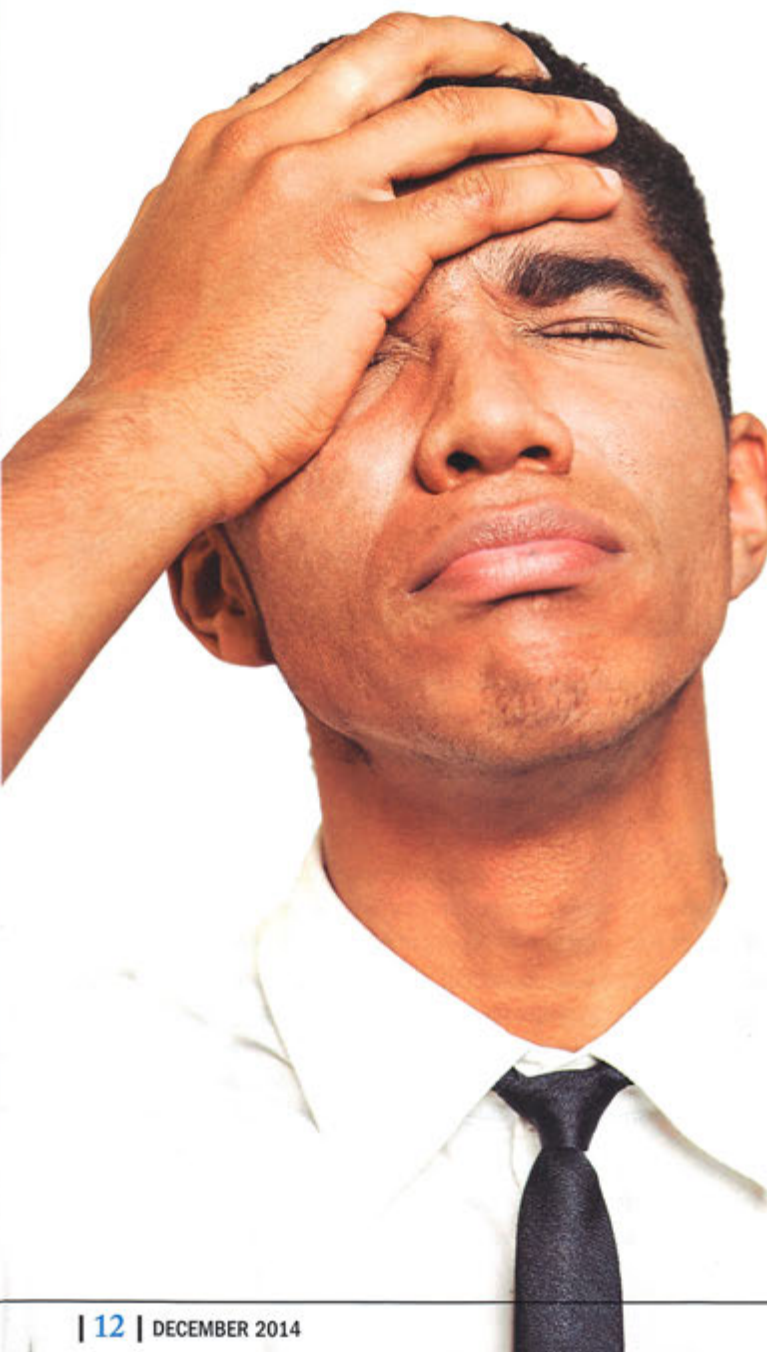


CALLING OUT Toxic Employees Leads to CLEANING UP Toxic Workplaces

By Mauricio Velásquez, MBA



Having worked as a diversity consultant, sexual harassment prevention trainer, executive coach and expert witness for 25 years, I can definitively state that toxic employees try to take over and create toxic workplaces. Also, much of my work points to the phenomenon being on the rise.

Toxic employees are difficult, negative, unhappy, whiny and always the first to complain. They do not keep their toxic comments and opinions to themselves; they want everyone around them to be just as miserable as them because misery loves company. Toxic employees also often flirt with violating policies and procedures, while performing just a little above the level that would merit termination. Many “usual suspects” are lifelong employees who have gone RIP – retired in place – or ROJ – retired on the job. When toxic employees do accomplish more than minimally required, though, watch out. They feel even more emboldened to suck the air out of the room.

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The upshot is that toxic employees take up way too much of managers’ time, distracting us from doing our jobs and fulfilling our missions. Quite frankly, their very presence prevents us from focusing on the good work the majority of their co-workers do and from grooming talented, high-performing professionals for career advancement.

Ask any manager or HR professional what keeps him or her up at night, and the response is likely to be some version of “workers who game or try to undermine the system.” And the terrible truth is that a good deal of the violence seen in the workplace is a manifestation of the toxic environment.

NEVERS	PREFERS
Negative	Positive
Divisive	Unify
Undermine mission	Support mission
Disrespectful	Respectful
Can violate law	Supported by law
Devalue differences	Value differences
Dishonor core values	Honor core values

What Causes Toxicity?

Why do so many toxic employees and toxic workplaces persist? There are several contributing factors.

I think too many supervisors and managers are conflict avoiders who hope a toxic person and uneasy situation will just go away if ignored long enough. Taking that approach, which I call this “feeding the monster,” is wrong. Conflict left unaddressed and unresolved only festers, while the toxic person becomes more confident and gains influence over the outcome because he or she interprets silence as complacency, tacit support or, worst of all, explicit agreement.

Underlying everything else described in the second part of this article is trust. Employees must trust their supervisors and managers to take action to protect them from toxic colleagues. At the same time, failing to establish and maintain trust sets the stage for toxicity to develop. To understand this, each reader only needs to ask, “How hard have I worked for someone I did not trust?”

Also, managers often do not want to take the time to write a toxic person up for insubordination or other disruptive and confrontational behavior. To anyone loath to do documentation, I say, “Get out of management. You are not a manager!” Verbal warnings, impact on workflow and output, sending a person home early for a day – document all of it.

Three Steps to Cleansing the Workplace

So what needs to be done? The ultimate answer is to create a culture of mutual respect and accountability. Doing that requires defining boundaries and consequences when boundaries get crossed.

As a first step, write out one list of behaviors that can never be accepted in the workplace and another list of behaviors that are preferred. “Nevers” include any behavior generally understood to be unproductive, threatening or counterproductive without justification – the stuff that undermines morale, impairs efficacy and kills the mission that no one wants to encounter. “Prefers” are behaviors that contribute to a positive, highly engaged, and productive workplace. Solicit suggestions and feedback from all the

employees before finalizing the lists, then post them side-by-side where everyone can see and read them easily. A partial listing could look like the one shown in the figure accompany this article.

The second step is to act on the recognition that the economy is tight and that toxic employees should not remain in their jobs at the expense of productive people. When taking an employment action based on poor performance or toxic behavior, focus only on the actions that are bringing everyone else down.

The final piece to the puzzle is to ensure ongoing accountability among co-workers. When called in for a consult at a toxic workplace, I work with staff to identify a set of core workplace values, making sure that mutual respect tops the list. As I tell participants in my workshops, “We all have a shared responsibility to ensure our workplace is respectful, professional, engaged and high-performing.” No one can be permitted to shirk that obligation by claiming, “I am innocent bystander” or “This is not my fight.” Everyone is in it together.

Step Up, Speak Out

Managers and other employees should always praise and support preferred behaviors. On the other side of the ledger, simple statements indicating that a toxic behavior has been recognized and disapproved can work wonders. I urge every workshop participant to try these responses when first learning how to step up to a never behavior:

- “Ouch!”
- “Come on now.”
- “Really!?”(my kids’ favorite)
- “We have a set of core values that we all agreed to live by.”

Moving past mere recognition, repeating a toxic comment or describing a harmful behavior in detail can help produce a positive change. I also teach more sophisticated techniques.

Readers may be thinking this is all just common sense. But picture how many people you know who have no common sense? The power of the process outlined here lies in the fact that when everyone does the right thing in stepping up and saying something, toxicity dissipates, workplace bullying stops and people can get back to work.

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