

Dealing with Toxic Employees

Toxic employees can do serious damage to your business.

Everyone would have worked with a difficult co-worker or managed a trying employee at least once in their career. Toxic employees are a bane to the company. They are like a virus that spreads their counterproductive attitudes or actions to other employees.

According to a survey conducted by Christine Pearson and Christine Porath, authors of *The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility is Damaging Your Business and What to Do About it*, 53% of those polled lost work time worrying about the incident and future interactions with the offender. Meanwhile, 46% had considered switching jobs to get away from the offender and 37% reported a weakened sense of commitment to the organization.

Toxic employees are not born, but made

More often than not, employees are made toxic by external factors such as poor management or badly planned work which gives rise to conflict and resentment. A toxic employee can be smart and resourceful, but how he uses, or does not use, his capabilities that become an issue. He is not above workplace games, politicking and encouraging negative alliances.

There are several characteristics of a toxic employee, but an archetypal one is rarely a team player. He often blames others for his mistakes and disclaims accountability. He might even demonstrate his discontent by either doing what is minimally necessary for satisfactory work or pretend to work.

An especially ambitious one is prepared to do whatever it takes to ascend to the top. He would most likely align himself with those he has identified as important or vital – usually someone of superior organisational status or someone who is able to do him favours. He might even sabotage others by backstabbing, badmouthing or withholding information.

Effects of toxicity at the workplace

Managers should never underestimate the cost of a toxic employee.

His harmful behaviour fractures team morale and camaraderie, performance and productivity of other good employees. Working with someone who is uncooperative and disrespectful takes a lot out of people. And when you are understaffed or constantly under pressure, toxic employees become an added strain that would only burn everyone out quicker. Failure to deal with toxicity at the workplace is a sure way to chase away top performers as they would feel compelled to find a better work environment elsewhere.

A manager's credibility is also at stake especially if everyone can see what a problem a toxic employee is but nothing has been done about it. Others would be wondering if one negative employee is worth more than others who are suffering due to his behaviour. This shakes the trust and belief employees have in their leader who is supposed to help them to work to their best advantage. The manager would then have to deal with the low morale such inaction entails.

And low morale among employees would mean the quality of their work would be affected. This would trickle down to the company's bottom line.

Detox

The damaging effect a toxic employee has at the workplace dominates whatever technical expertise he might have. His disruptive behaviour is a menace and should be addressed as soon as it is recognised.

Determine the cause. Investigate the reasons for a person's toxic behaviour – could it be health-related or are there other external factors involved? Uncovering the reason for such behaviour will help you find the appropriate solution.

Intervene. The toxic employee should be informed that his behaviour is unacceptable – whether he is aware of it or not. Present clear information about the company's expectations and consequences of continuing with such behaviour.

Treat and rehabilitate. The toxic employee should be properly counseled and given at sufficient time and opportunity to change his behaviour. Better results might be yielded by involving him in the problem-solving process.

As leaders, managers should attempt every possible way to help and guide toxic employees to be professional and valuable assets to the team. However, in this case, the responsibility lies on the employee to correct his behaviour. If such behaviour persists even after all that effort, then perhaps it is best to let him go.