

How to recognize a toxic work environment

Have you ever found yourself sitting in the parking lot dreading going to work? Does thinking about work make you physically ill? Did you ever consider quitting a job you once enjoyed? You may have experienced a toxic work environment. The problem is prevalent, with more people dealing with it than you think. Since most of us spend about half of our waking hours at work, there's plenty of time for workplace dysfunction to emerge.

Striking a balance between the people who work and the people who pay for that work can be tough. Those who offer money for someone else's labor may see themselves as benefactors, doing laborers a favor by giving them money. Coworkers throughout the office can also be a problem, as some have cutthroat mentalities when it comes to making themselves indispensable. Some employees may feel the need to overwork to meet production standards, leading to burnout, poor physical health, and depression.

What should employers do?

First of all, toxic work environments have plagued the workforce for ages. Some lawyers practice nothing but employment law for this reason. Labor unions constantly introduce bills to congress in hopes of enacting positive change. Laws like the EEOC were passed precisely to make life better for underrepresented workers. Laws often change in favor of workers.

There are plenty of great jobs where respect, courtesy, work-life balance, and fairness are given to employees. Toxic work cultures, on the other hand, often occur in young companies where fair employment practices aren't yet established (though not exclusively). They may say, "we just do things this way," even when it makes for a hostile work environment where workers feel targeted and attacked.

The more studies show about various toxic behaviors—nepotism, gossip, overworking, discrimination, harassment—the clearer it becomes how those behaviors hurt the company's bottom line. Consequences include high employee turnover, a lack of communication, and a level of stress that affects everyone's productivity. So if you've ever heard that "life's not fair" when complaining about your toxic workplace environment, you can proudly answer that such unfairness actually results in worse revenues.

How bad cultures hurt productivity

We humans are simple creatures. All we want is to do a good job and make others happy. Unfortunately, some toxic people take advantage of this desire by pushing us to our wit's end and demanding endlessly more. They often have expectations that are completely unrealistic, urging employees to "tough it out" or "work harder" without considering how they don't have any way of meeting their goals.

Let's be clear: this isn't normal.

[Numerous studies show](#) how toxic workplaces negatively affect productivity, leading to disunity, depression, stress, and burnout, all of which spread like wildfire until people start leaving in droves. They would rather work anywhere else than spend another day feeling unsafe at work. And this is the problem: contrary to "tough love" ideologies that encourage rigid compliance, pushing employees into an unhealthy mental state doesn't actually get results.

There are plenty of ways to challenge people that don't hurt their self-worth and self-esteem. Yes, creating a healthy workplace may require a little imagination to incentivize people to do better, but it almost always gets far better results.

Few people want to commit 8 hours a day (minimum) away from home and family to spend their energies on someone else's project. Yes, they earn money as a result, but if it's just a means to an end—if they are an easily replaceable cog in a machine—they'll probably leave to find work elsewhere.

Creating a healthy, positive work environment takes effort from executives, management, human resources, coworkers, and administrators. But by failing to do so, you may drive your best workers off to find greener pastures.

What are the signs of a toxic work environment?

Most US-based workers hear that they have things pretty good. The standard workweek is only 40 hours across 5 days, plus they usually receive some amount of paid time off and even a benefits package if they're lucky. Isn't this enough to make them feel valued? Not quite.

While fair compensation is important, one cannot overstate the importance of a healthy work environment. After all, this is where their time is actually spent. A healthy work environment is what makes employees feel good about the work they do, both in real-world value and in the eyes of their superiors. [Studies show](#) that employees who feel recognized do better work, which means that eliminating stressors and promoting self-care is good for the bottom line.

Toxic work environments, meanwhile, overlook the value of employee well-being, substituting pizza parties for raises or tone-deaf executive memos for real interaction. Team members often feel that their best isn't good enough, sometimes to the point that they project that mentality onto others and create a chain reaction of negative attitudes.

When employees feel good about their jobs, companies see lower turnover and less absenteeism. When they don't, the entire workplace can suffer from a depressing gloom that leads to all kinds of nasty behaviors.

So what does workplace toxicity look like? Ugly.

Overworked employees

Probably the most common toxic work trait is the company culture where managers and executives demand that employees give 110 percent at all times. It's one thing to hear this from a childhood soccer coach, but for day-in, day-out performance, 110 percent simply isn't realistic. We each have good days and bad days, and employers need to respect those limits.



In a full-time job, we are constantly finishing one task only to receive another from the queue. There's no end in sight—it's not worth rushing what has no possibility of ending. Just because a sales team aggressively sells a product doesn't mean workers are suddenly granted superhuman abilities. They need time to do the job, which means that no company goal is realistic until it realistically accounts for the time it takes to make it happen. If your delivery team is constantly hard-pressed to meet goals—or berated for not meeting them—you suffer from poor leadership, not a lack of ambition.

This problem can be especially bad for salaried employees whose offer letters specified that “some overtime will be required.” Far too many employees stay at work til midnight every other week deploying software updates they were told wouldn't happen often. It's not what they signed up for, and eventually, those extra requirements will bite you in the butt.

If each employee's personal life is taking a backseat because they are constantly overworked, it may be a good idea to ask why this is happening. Is this what they signed up for?

It's unusually hard to make friends at work

Work is weird. We spend all this time talking to coworkers, only to clock out and forget about them once we get home. However, workplace relationships are important. To do your best work, you sometimes need help from others, which means making friendships here and there. Toxic employees, however, refuse to be your friend on principle.

It's hard to be sure about what's going on here, but suffice it to say some people are bullies. They let their insecurities drive them to treat coworkers poorly, making it extremely difficult to dig into work for anyone whose job requires some collaboration.

You'd think that anyone who gets their kicks by excluding others wouldn't make it far in a company, but in toxic workplaces, those people sometimes occupy positions of power. If you're stuck working with a toxic boss, it can be a huge headache, and asking to make conditions better is helpful to both the employee and the company.

Professionalism is all about eliminating barriers to productivity. When cliques form that exclude outsiders, feelings get hurt. Once that happens, bringing one's focus back on work can be difficult.

Nepotism & favoritism

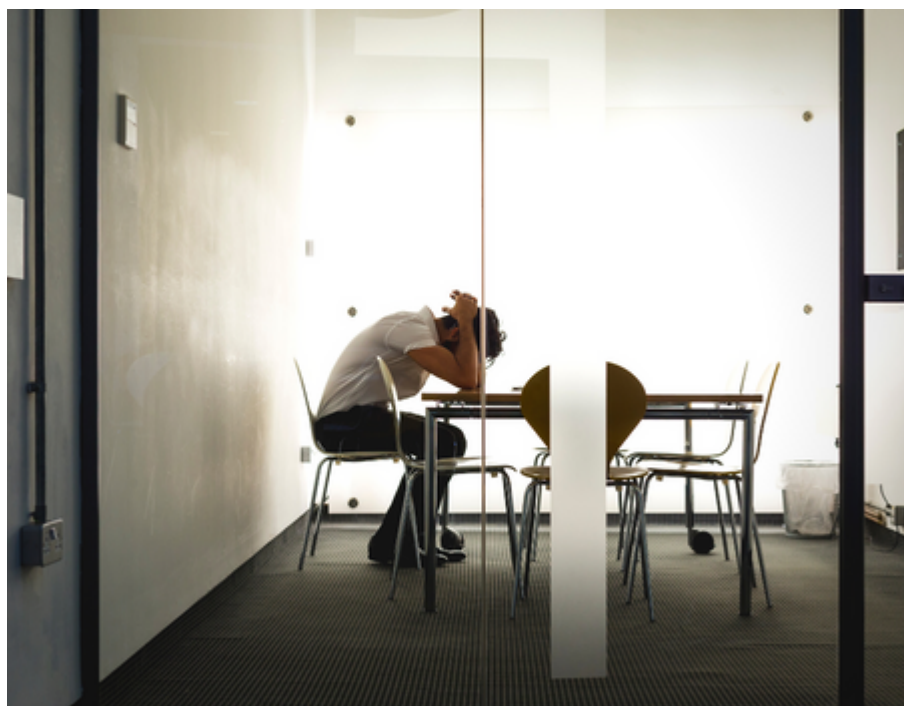
It's not unheard of for companies to have an inner circle where people who get there first have the best opportunities. An employee may have worked their butt off for years, but a VP's wife gets back from maternity leave and suddenly earns a senior position. Nobody likes it, and it's extremely challenging to overcome.

There's nothing illegal about hiring people you already know, but when they don't have the skills or experience to do the job well—certainly not better than someone who put in time to gain knowledge and value—it can make everyone else feel taken for granted. It's frustrating.

Most of us understand that job offers and promotions should be based on merit, not family relations. In healthy work environments, this is true, but in toxic work environments, fear of speaking out against unfairness can lead to further problems.

Sometimes, favoritism has worse consequences, such as when relatives of higher-ups are accused of illegal behavior. Companies have been known to go out of their way to shield loved ones from criminal penalties, often times bordering on illegal maneuvers to protect them. This is not okay. Just because an executive wants to give their family member a job at the company doesn't mean everyone else should have to suffer the consequences.

Everybody's talking about you



Office gossip is one of the most painful traits of a toxic workplace. We're all trying our best out there, and to hear your coworkers talking about you behind your back can be a devastating revelation for even the most self-assured person.

Talking about coworkers is unavoidable. Gossip, however, is different. Unlike regular workplace chatter, gossip is hurtful speech about someone's perceived weaknesses or incompetence, and most of the time it gets back to that person. If you find yourself in a gossip crossfire, the best thing you can do is refuse to take part or change the subject.

Being the subject of gossip can put your psychological safety at risk. Not only does it hurt your feelings, but it impairs your ability to focus on work and get things done. If you keep hearing the same rumors from multiple people, it may be worth your time to speak with a superior and let them know that these conversations are getting out of hand. Confronting these issues is challenging, but suffering in silence is worse.

The red flags of a toxic workplace

Look, it isn't easy to find work these days. It's hard to pass up an opportunity to earn money, even when you don't feel great about how the job posting is advertised.

Here are a few red flags that show up in listing for a new job:

- "Work hard, play hard" language that urges employees to go the extra mile at all times
- Salary ranges with high upper limits but undefined lower limits
- Trial periods requiring new employees to work for free or for low wages
- Old job listings that have been reposted numerous times
- Use of the word "extreme[ly]" at any point

Remember: employees aren't the only ones receiving something in this transaction, despite how employers may try to make them feel. Executives don't want to work all the time, and the only way to achieve that is to hire laborers to do the work for them. If they frame this as an unbelievable opportunity, remember that their time is also valuable.

It's worth mentioning that in this age of tight job markets, some startups hope to capitalize on unpaid internship-type employment positions. No matter how well employers frame it, unpaid internships cannot pay rent or buy groceries. If you can't afford to pay your employees, you can't afford to be in business.

Preserve mental health at all costs

Employees matter. While you may seek to hire them at the lowest rate possible, they have the skills you need to earn revenue, and they deserve to be paid. Don't expect to hire them at a subpar salary if you want excellent performance. While your interest is to keep costs down, their interests are to improve their lives. Focus on the win-win deal.

The better your employees feel at work, the better work they'll produce. You can promote higher productivity simply by respecting their individuality and giving them what they need to be independent. Stay focused on their well-being, and they'll give it back to your company.