Toxic Individuals in the Workplace:
How Can We Protect Ourselves?

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Brenda Clark Hamilton, MA Ed.

Toxic Individuals in the Workplace

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How Can We Protect Our Organizations?

Warning:
Content is sobering.

Here's Where We're Going

I. **What is a "Toxic Employee"?**
   A. *Definition*
   B. *Statistics*
   C. *Costs of Toxic Employees*
   D. *Traits and Signature Behaviors*

II. **What Can We Do to Protect Our Organizations?**
   A. *Organizational-Level Strategies*
   B. *Team-Level Strategies*
   C. *Individual Strategies*

I. What is a "Toxic Employee"?

- *"The entire team walked on eggshells in front of her."*

- *"His behavior was so extreme that people were almost immobilized."*

- *"Some people actually left after more than twenty-five years with the company when this person wasn't fired."*

- *"The day this person left our organization is considered an annual holiday!"*

"I could not believe that one person could spread so much poison and reap so much havoc within an organization. Our entire department acted like a dysfunctional family. No one dared disagree with her for fear they'd be the target of her ostracizing, and she seemed to thoroughly enjoy the drama, power, and chaos that she created."

A. Definition of *Toxic Employee*

"…anyone who demonstrates a pattern of counterproductive work behaviors that debilitate individuals, teams, and even organizations over the long term."

--Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway, *Toxic Workplace! Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power,* **Jossey-Bass, 2009**

"These difficult individuals have the capacity to pervade our thoughts and sap our energies so much so that they have the potential to undermine our sense of well-being. In a variety of ways, they get under our skin, infiltrate our professional and personal space, demoralize us, de- motivate teams, and ultimately can even make us doubt our own competence and productivity. They are toxic in every sense of the term."

--Kusy & Holloway, 2009

B. Statistics on Toxic Employees

- 23 million Americans will experience workplace bullying during their lifetime (Kohut, *Understanding, Controlling, and Stopping Bullies…,* 2008)

- ____% say they have worked with someone toxic at some point in their career (Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

- ____% reported they are *currently* working with a toxic person (Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

- **1600-employee study:**
  (Cloke & Goldsmith, *Resolving Conflicts at Work*, Jossey-Bass, 2005)

  - *Over 50% had lost work time because they worried about whether the instigator would start up again*

  - *12% had changed jobs to get away from the instigator*

- ____% of nurses reported experiencing verbal abuse, i.e., feeling attacked, devalued, or humiliated (Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

- Which has more toxicity— for-profits or not-for-profits? (Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

C. Costs of Toxic Employees

- Low morale; Job dissatisfaction

- Loss of productivity

- Decreased quality of individual and team work

- Increased conflicts and managerial time dealing with such (24%; 50%--Cloke & Goldsmith, 2005)

- Loss of customers/business

- Increased turnover; Many times, it's the most talented who leave

- Unnecessary "restructuring"

- Increased absenteeism; Stress-related health care costs

- Legal costs

- Human suffering

- Poisonous effects on the entire culture; Starts to seem 'normal'—attracts dysfunctional people

- Lasting effects, even after the person is gone

D. Who are these people?
Traits & Signature Behaviors

- Often, incredibly manipulative; Can be real charmers; Chameleons; Capable of turning their behaviors on and off, to their advantage

- May be highly 'productive' members of the organization

- Have a <u>pattern</u> of destructive behaviors within an organization: pot-stirring, bullying, ridiculing, intimidation

- *"Masterful at undermining teams"*

- Have a strong refusal to believe or admit that they could be at fault

(Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

"Bullying rarely begins with a 'bang'. It tends to be a subtle process of intimidation and criticism rather than erupting in a single event. The target does not realize what is happening or what lies ahead…"

--Kohut, Margaret R., *The Complete Guide to Understanding, Controlling, and Stopping Bullies and Bullying at Work*, 2008

Three Signature Behaviors
of Toxic Individuals
(Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

1. **Shaming**

   ✓ Humiliating others, often singling out and ostracizing

   ✓ Taking potshots

   ✓ Using sarcasm

   ✓ Mistake pointing

2. Passive Hostility

- ✓ Passive-aggressive behavior
- ✓ Distrust of others' opinions
- ✓ Territorial behavior
- ✓ Verbal attacks when receiving negative feedback
- ✓ Being 'clueless' about their own toxicity

3. Team Sabotage

- ✓ Surveillance of the team
- ✓ Constant meddling; Pot-stirrer
- ✓ Abuse of authority; Ostracizing members who do not support their ideas; Highly loyal to those who do
- ✓ 87% of their survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the climate changes when the toxic person is present; *Staff Infections* (Durre, Ph.D., *Surviving the Toxic Workplace*, 2010)

True/False: *Toxic people don't last long in workplaces.*

- ▪ Most toxic individuals do stay at organizations for a very long time, and people do put up with them.

- ▪ For someone encountering the toxic person for the first time, their reaction is often disbelief.

- **Toxic individuals are most successful at 'thriving' within their organization when:**

  - *They have a special relationship with the leader, such that the leader protects/enables them.*

  - *The leader somewhat bows to the person's power.*

  - *The leader places high value on their productivity, skills, or expertise.*

"Working with the toxic individual was one of the worst experiences I have had in my life. It took a long time to recover from the abuse I received in the workplace. It was difficult because others witnessed what was happening, but they were scared they might receive the same abuse, so they did not want to get involved. Management was passive about the behavior because this person produced work that was viewed as good." *--Anonymous, qtd. in Kusy & Holloway, 2009*
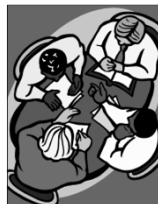

- Many times, organizations pass the toxic person from one work unit to the next, or even create a new position, to minimize the toxic person's destructive reach.

- Even if the toxic person is fired, it takes awhile for the team to recover and rebuild trust. Often, they have learned dysfunctional ways of interacting as a means of coping, and those behaviors remain long after the toxic person has left the organization.

II. What Can We Do to Protect Our Organizations?

Strategies at Three Levels:

✓**Organizational**

✓**Team**

✓**Individual**

(Research by Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

- *For the highest probability of success, utilize __all three levels__.*

- *Ideally, implement organizational first, then team, then individual strategies.*

A. Organizational Strategies

- Organizations that have the fewest problems with toxicity have *clearly-defined, concrete, behaviorally-specific values in writing*, and they adhere to them.

- These values clearly identify the types of behaviors that the organization will and will not tolerate, and are so specific that there are *few opportunities for misinterpretation.*

- The values involve **clear consequences** when an individual does not live up to the values/behaviors.

- The values are **regularly promoted** in the daily work of the organization.

- The organization's **leaders 'walk the talk'** in living out the values themselves.

- The organization's values are integrated into…
  - **Organizational policies** *(Everyone signs on!)*
  - **Performance appraisal/reviews**
  - **Leadership development**
  - **360-degree feedback systems**
  - **Skip-level evaluations**
  - **Leadership modeling** (Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

How does an organization put behaviorally-specific values in place?

1. Organizational leaders work with <u>multiple stakeholders</u> in creating and defining the organization's values.

2. The organization's mission statement is a great place to start.

3. Once adopted, everyone signs on, with a ceremonial roll-out and ongoing revisiting, e.g., *Standard of the Month*; Annual celebration of successes/ Re-signing party; In-services

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Resources for creating behaviorally-specific values:

- Do a Google search of "Standards of Behavior," and you will find several examples from different organizations

- Kusy and Holloway, *Toxic Workplace! Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power*, 2009 (contains a step-by-step process, including meeting agendas)

- Quint Studer, *Hardwiring Excellence*, 2003 (healthcare-specific); *Results That Last,* 2008 (contains seven steps to create standards)

- Michael Henry Cohen, *What You Accept Is What You Teach: Setting Standards for Employee Accountability,* 2007 (contains a variety of exercises to assist with developing standards)

Examples of Best Teamwork Practices

(Cohen, *What You Accept Is What You Teach:*
Setting Standards for Employee Accountability, 2007)

- Employees have positive things to say about their jobs and the people with whom they work.

- They are good at their work. They are skillful/resourceful.

- They build people up rather than tear them down. They make those around them feel more motivated, important, and effective in their work.

- They are enthusiastic. They possess a high level of energy in pursuit of positive outcomes.

- When finished with their own work, they offer assistance to others in need of help without being asked.

- They work well with a wide variety of people. They have a high tolerance for diverse cultures, personalities, work styles, and perspectives.

- If they have conflicts with co-workers, they talk to (not *about*) them at the earliest possible opportunity, and they remain cool, calm and collected. They are direct, honest, and respectful.

- They acknowledge co-workers when they enter a room. They exchange pleasantries when they come into contact with others. They say "please" and "thank you." They can be friendly without being friends. They say "hello" in the morning and "goodbye" in the afternoon. They conduct themselves in a professional and courteous manner.

"For most employees, just knowing that a Standards of Behavior document exists—and knowing that their signature is affixed to a pledge to uphold it—is enough to keep them on their toes. It creates an extra boost of awareness that really does affect day-to-day behavior. A Standards of Behavior document forces people to do their best and
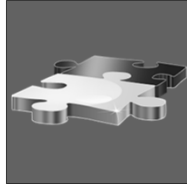<u>*to be their best*</u>*."*

--Quint Studer, in *Results That Last*, 2008

B. Team Strategies

- Two types of team-level strategies:
  - *Proactive*
  - *Reactive*

  (Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

Proactive Team Strategies

1. **Select the right team members.**

   - *Involve team members in the selection process.*

   - *Use behavioral interview questions. Listen for Top-of-Mind Specificity (Marcus Buckingham)*

   - *Use a variety of groupings in interviewing.*

   - *All things equal, choose likeability over competence.*

   - *If feasible, use cognitive and personality tests.*

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2. **Translate organizational values to the team level:**

   - *What does this value or standard mean to our team?*

   - *What does this standard look like on our team? What does it look like when we are <u>not</u> living up to this standard?*

   - *How can we keep awareness of this standard in the forefront on our team (e.g., huddles, team meetings)?*

3. **Have ongoing communication about the work environment.** (Stay interviews: Kaye and Jordan-Evans, *Love 'em or Lose 'em,* 2014)

Reactive Team Strategies

1. Use 360-degree team feedback and individual interviews to help gauge team dynamics.

2. Conduct exit interviews to uncover the reasons for self-termination.

3. Identify the hidden enablers/protectors.

4. Recognize and do the work needed to repair the team and restore trust and healthy relationships after the toxic person has left.

C. Individual Strategies

- Most successful when combined with organizational and team interventions

- The person using the individual strategy must have both in place:
  - *Sufficient formal authority to carry clout*
  - *Strong organizational support for taking action*

The Four Individual Strategies
(Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

1. **Targeted corrective feedback:**
   - Typically, only somewhat effective; Tend to deny any wrongdoing
   - Female managers find it even less effective than their male counterparts.
   - Best if caught and addressed early

2. Performance reviews/appraisals:

- Easier when behavioral standards are part of the performance review process

- If behavioral standards are <u>not</u> in place, utilize 360-degree feedback from multiple sources; this usually is most effective if done by an external consultant.

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3. Coaching:

- Toxic employee working one-on-one with a coach (internal or external) to identify undesirable behaviors and learn new ones

- Outside coach should take the time to get to understand the organization, its goals and norms

- Should commit to ending the coaching relationship if clearly going nowhere

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4. Termination:

- ***<u>Document, document, document!</u>*** Make sure all involved understand the importance, and how-to, of effective documentation within your organization

- Your documentation should tell a story

- Easier to do if clear behavioral expectations/standards are a part of the performance review

Post-Script:
What if __I__ must work with someone toxic?

- **Don't blame yourself:**
  "We have concluded that one brave person without a system of support cannot solve the problem of toxicity." (Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

- **Seek help from the appropriate channels within your organization.**

- **Seek emotional support for yourself outside the organization, and if the situation is extreme, seek legal advice.**

- **Minimize the physical contact that you have with this person.**

- **Minimize the impact of this person's emotional drain on you.**

- **Maximize your mental, physical, and emotional strength. Take care of yourself physically and surround yourself with people who strengthen you.**

- **Stay true to who you are.**
  Hold your ground, especially on the "biggies".

- **Consider your options…and there are __always__ options.**

Toxic Individuals:
How Can We Protect Ourselves?

What is __one point__ that you will remember about toxic employees?

- For the best protection, utilize a systems-wide, proactive approach, where a clear message is stated, i.e., we don't tolerate that kind of behavior here.

- Work as an organization to create a strong, healthy work environment, which toxic individuals are not even attracted to… and certainly are not allowed to thrive.

"The person whose behavior is targeted needs to understand that the organization is serious about its commitment to respectful behavior. Individuals who choose not to conduct themselves in accordance with this value will no longer be welcome."

(Kusy & Holloway, 2009)

Brenda
CLARK HAMILTON, MA Ed.
FRESH COFFEE: PROFESSIONAL GROWTH PROGRAMS
214 Robinson Drive • Algona, IA 50511
515.295.2379 • frcoffee@ncn.net
www.BrendaClarkHamilton.com

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