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Toxic Workplace!

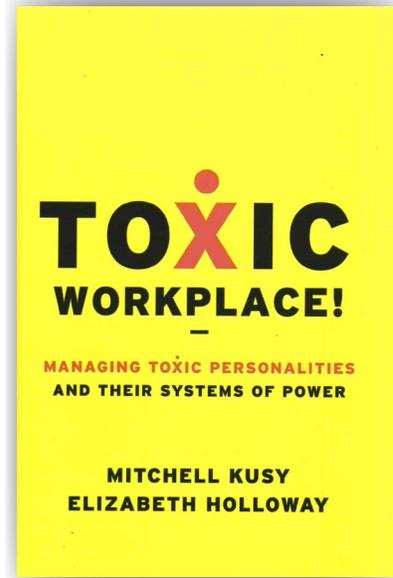
Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power

Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway

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INTRODUCTION

Ask employees at any company and you will find a vast majority of them have worked with a “toxic” employee. They go by many names: control freaks, narcissists, manipulators, bullies, or humiliators, but the result of their presence in the workplace is always the same – disruption, corruption, and often real damage to companies who do not or will not find ways to control or eliminate toxic employees.

In **Toxic Workplace!**, Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway present their study on toxic personalities, along with strategies at the individual, team, and organizational level that can help companies develop a values-based system to deal effectively with toxic employees and heal the damage they may have already caused within an organization.

TOXICITY IS UBIQUITOUS

In their research, Kusy and Holloway discovered that 64 percent of those they surveyed were currently working with someone they considered toxic, and 94 percent said they had worked with someone toxic during the course of their career. Toxicity seems to be more prevalent in certain careers like nursing, where studies have shown 91 percent report verbal abuse and other humiliating attacks from peers or supervisors. More than half of them did not know how to respond to such attacks or how to deal with a toxic person in their workplace.

Toxic behavior can be costly to organizations in terms of higher turnover, less favorable attitudes toward the job and the company, and greater psychological distress in employees. Almost half of those who

experienced toxic co-workers say they lost time worrying about the situation and what might happen in the future. Fifty percent contemplated leaving their jobs after dealing with toxic people, and 12 percent actually did so. In their study, one respondent told Kusy and Holloway that the toxic person was a senior human resources manager who experienced 80 percent turnover of his direct reporting team and staff because of his toxicity.

With toxic people so prevalent within organizations, many leaders believe it is easy to spot them and root them out, but Kusy and Holloway systematically dismantle the myths about toxic people.

Often toxic personalities are high performers within an organization, so supervisors are loathe to interfere with them. However, the high cost to the organization are often hidden and perhaps not realized until later after other talented employees leave rather than work with the toxic person, or customers begin to take their business elsewhere instead of dealing with the toxic personality. Instead of seeking to deal with the toxic person, leaders may allow the disruptive behavior to continue since the toxic person is a good worker.

Many also believe that toxic personalities disrupt an organization on purpose, but often many are clueless about how their self-serving behaviors affect others. Often, too, toxic employees will blame others and are shocked when they are criticized for their behavior. This leads to another myth – that feedback will change their behavior. In some cases, this may work, and Kusy and Holloway provide a structure on how to address toxic employees one-on-one, but feedback, in isolation from other forms of intervention, usually has little or no effect on a toxic person's behavior.

Why would people continue to put up with toxic people? If they are truly harming the organization, will people eventually get fed up with them? Kusy and Holloway found the opposite to be true. People will tolerate toxic behavior for years mainly because the toxic person may be a high performer or they may be their supervisor or have influence with someone higher up the chain.

Employees are reluctant to act against the toxic person and often assume their bosses will see how much harm they are doing or that human resources

KEY CONCEPTS

In *Toxic Workplace!*, Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway outline the dangers of toxic personalities and provide research-based solutions.

1. Toxic personalities are ubiquitous. Ninety-four percent of employees report either working with a toxic person now, or in the past.
2. Most common strategies posed to remedy the problem, such as one-on-one interventions or firing the employee, simply do not work.
3. To reduce or eliminate toxicity in the workplace, organizations must implement change on three levels: 1) organization, 2) team, and 3) individual.
4. The most important step to take in preventing toxicity is to develop concrete, specific values of respect and mutuality for the company that are lived out by supervisors and employees alike.
5. Organizations must respond *proactively* to repair the toxic atmosphere and *reactively* to heal the team members who remain after a toxic employee is gone.



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or other consultants will be brought in to solve the problem. The authors though, say it is often the boss who is the least likely to recognize the systemic effects of a toxic person. The toxic person may act very differently around the boss, or be seen as a valuable asset to the company, so any negative feedback about the toxic person may not be taken seriously or may be seen as bellyaching by peers or underlings. In short, human resources professionals are an important part of the process, but they, along with bosses, may not see the problem, and when they do, they may not take it seriously.

Kusy and Holloway, however, have taken this problem seriously, conducting a two-year research study on the effects of toxic people in the workplace and how employers can more effectively manage these people by creating a corporate atmosphere of respectful engagement. In their research, the authors studied both the toxic person and the associated system. Their premise is that by understanding the whole system they would have a better view of how leaders can build strategies for dealing with toxic, or difficult, employees at all levels of a company.

To better understand how toxic people affect companies and other employees, Kusy and Holloway

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mitchell Kusy, PhD, and Elizabeth Holloway, PhD, are both full professors in the graduate program in Leadership and Change at Antioch University. Kusy is a 2005 Fulbright Scholar in international organization development and consults around the world in strategic planning, leadership and organization development, and designing organizational communities of respectful engagement. Holloway has more than 25 years experience as a practitioner, educator, and mental health consultant. She is also a Diplomate of the American Board of Professional Psychology and fellow of the American Psychological Association.

surveyed more than four hundred leaders in both for-profit and nonprofit companies. They used informal interviews with some leaders, formal interviews with others, and gave some 400 of them an 82-item survey. (Appendix A of the book gives a full accounting of the research methodology and Appendix B details survey responses.)

When someone cuts a path of destruction with bullying behaviors, the organization sees higher turnover, less favorable attitudes toward the job and the organization, and greater psychological distress than as experienced with nonbullies.

The results identified five areas of importance used to conduct the survey:

1. The toxic person's characteristics and behavior
2. Leaders' reactions to toxic behaviors
3. Leaders' strategies for dealing with the toxic person
4. Effects of toxicity on the system
5. The role of organizational culture on toxicity

This book does not offer a "cookbook" approach to solving the problems toxic people can cause. The authors have discovered that quick recipes do not work. The dynamics within each organization can be complex, and toxic people derive much of their power in that complexity creating what the authors call a "toxic system" – a web of toxicity that can entangle managers trying to weed out toxic employees.

This is why direct intervention with a toxic person is not the best course of action for leaders in an organization. Instead, the system as a whole must be modified to make the environment one where toxicity is not only not welcomed, but not given the chance to take root.

To make that overall system change, Kusy and Holloway have developed what they call the *toxic organization change system* or TOCS. This model consists of three change strategies that help leaders identify and produce the most effective system-wide change in workplace toxicity:

1. Organization

2. Team

3. Individual

Only by addressing all three of these areas can organizations effectively address and remedy a toxic workplace.

TOXIC TYPES

Kusy and Holloway say identifying toxic people can be difficult because many will adapt when it is to their advantage – showing one personality or work ethic to superiors, while displaying a bullying or humiliating attitude to underlings. There are three toxic behaviors, however, that the authors have identified .

1. **Shaming Behavior:** The authors' survey includes several behaviors under this heading including humiliation, sarcasm, potshots, and mistake pointing. These behaviors can demoralize other workers and prevent the organization from creating a respectful environment.

Myth: Most people will not put up with toxic individuals. In fact, people will put up with toxic individuals, and they'll do so for a very long time.

2. **Passive Hostility:** Kusy and Holloway discovered that most toxic personalities are passive aggressive, often distrust others, and are very territorial seeking to remain in control and feel powerful at the expense of others. Toxic people also reject negative feedback and often do not see themselves as the problem.
3. **Team Sabotage:** Toxic people, according to the authors, are masterful at undermining teams. They will often monitor other team members, meddle in the work of a team, or abuse any authority that has been given to them over the team.

These behaviors, over time, create an overall sense of powerlessness in other members of the team or organization. The authors are quick to point out that these types of behaviors are often tolerated for months, perhaps even years, before anyone confronts or fires the toxic person. This underscores the importance of organizations learning how to recognize toxic personalities quickly and implement the toxic organization change system in a timely and effective manner.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Kusy and Holloway have witnessed many ways that organizational leaders have tried to deal with the toxic personalities among them, and have found that typical reactions are not effective. Some leaders try an "adjust or leave" response that too often leads the company to compromise their standards, accommodate the toxic behaviors, or leads other employees to leave the organization out of frustration.

Another common reaction is to reconfigure the situation by reducing interaction with the toxic person, demoting them or taking away responsibilities, or leaving them out of the decision making process. None of these actions will change the toxic person's behavior or promote productivity within an organization struggling with a toxic personality.

Even the seemingly obvious solution of simply firing the person was not recommended by the authors. Firing a toxic person does not solve the larger, under-

lying problems in the organization that remain even though the toxic person has left. This is an important part of the overall system Kusy and Holloway are recommending

with their book. Often, they say, organizations promote toxicity without even realizing it. They identify six primary ways in which an organization can promote toxicity:

1. The structure changes to accommodate the toxic person.
2. The organization tolerates the toxicity, provided the individual is productive.
3. The team climate changes when the toxic person is present.
4. The organization's leaders are unaware of the toxic person's behavior.
5. Less productive team members are tolerated.
6. The organization contributes to the toxic person getting away with counterproductive behaviors.

Behind all of these factors is the failure of the organization to provide concrete, behaviorally specific values within its culture. Effective values are not vague, like stating the company values integrity. Instead, values

must be spelled out, so there is no doubt about how employees are expected to behave. If integrity is a value, then definitions must be given, such as not talking behind someone's back or taking responsibility for one's own actions.

To be effective, however, the organization's stated values must be lived out, not just in the trenches, but in the boardroom as well. Leaders from the top to the bottom of the organization must model the stated values of the organization for them to be sufficiently engrained.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

Toxic people can affect all areas of an organization's system, so the best way to address toxicity is a holistic approach that involves organizational, team, and individual strategies. In their research, the authors discovered that only companies that combine organizational, team, and one-on-one methods have the best possibility for success.

However, if change strategies cannot be implemented at all three levels, the authors recommend beginning with organizational interventions first and teams second.

At the one-on-one level, the best person to implement this strategy is whoever has the authority to implement any consequences for the toxic person's reaction or continued behavior.

There are five steps in the organizational strategy part of the TOCS model:

1. **Organizational Policies:** Specific, concrete values that are spelled out clearly and lived out at every level of the organization are imperative for the eradication of toxic workers.
2. **Performance Appraisal:** These appraisals must follow the stated values of the organization and measure how employees are doing at embodying and achieving those values.
3. **Leadership Development:** These programs teach leaders how to live out organizational values and transfer them down the ladder.

One brave person without a system of support cannot solve the problem of toxicity. After all, if it takes a village to raise a child, then most certainly it takes an organization working together to change the tide of toxicity.

4. **360-Degree Feedback:** To be most effective, this type of feedback must incorporate the organization's values.
5. **Skip-Level Evaluations:** In this process, employees can seek help from their boss's boss if the employee is not receiving leadership from their boss, or their boss is the toxic personality. This gives employees two avenues they can use to report a problem: the boss's boss and human resources.

TEAM STRATEGIES

Kusy and Holloway outline four strategies at the team level that can limit or prevent toxicity:

1. **Select the right team in the first place** by using the most effective selection process known as a participative team member approach. Involve team members in the hiring process to choose the best new team member. This also gives current employees a sense of ownership and commitment.
2. **Translate your organizational values to the team level.** Even if an organization has not spelled out specific, concrete values, teams can set their own values and determine how to evaluate other team members and how to keep the values alive.
3. **Engage leaders to integrate values within teams.** Leaders should be clear about the values of the team or organization and serve as an example of how to live them out.

4. **Conduct a 360-degree team assessment.** Using team assessments can help root out ways in which team productivity and relationships may be undermined by toxic personalities.

The authors also suggest conducting exit interviews with people leaving the organization to determine if people are leaving because of a particular toxic personality.

GOING ONE-ON-ONE

The organizational and team strategies are mainly proactive strategies, meant to immunize an organization or team against a toxic personality. Individual interventions, however, are reactive since the toxic person is already on staff and the time has come to deal with their disruptive behavior.

The authors recommend four specific strategies to deal with a toxic person one-on-one:

1. **Targeted feedback:** This is a process that does not stand alone. It should be integrated into the other strategies. Kusy and Holloway recommend that feedback be given in three phases:

Although numerous books espouse the virtues of confrontation, manipulation, or evasion in response to a toxic person, without the alignment of organizational values, team norms, and formal authority, the toxicity will continue, and the victims are the ones who will pay the highest price for any action taken.

1) Identify the problem and clearly describe it. Do not generalize or use judgmental language. Lead with positive appraisals first and follow it with any criticisms or complaints.

2) Share feedback in a measured manner by starting the discussion about why the behavior is a perceived problem, allow the employee to respond and if possible gain agreement that a problem exists. Both employee and supervisor should share ideas on how to solve the problem and agree to one alternative to fix the problem.

3) Give the toxic person a process to achieve set performance goals. Make the goals specific, measurable, achievable, results oriented, and time specific.

2. **Performance appraisals:** When organizations have clearly defined values, they should be used as the benchmark for any performance appraisal with toxic persons. The best system to use here includes multiple assessors that can be gained by using a 360-degree feedback process done by an external consultant. Key stakeholders need to be part of this process since they are more likely to

deal with the toxic person on a day-to-day basis and can better evaluate the progress of their performance.

3. **Coaching:** Coaches hired from outside the organization can help improve a toxic person's performance, but there are criteria that must be considered including a coach who can work with people who are prone to resist change. A coach must also take time to understand how the organization works, will work within the organization's boundaries, and who will make recommendations about how best to reintegrate the toxic person back into the team.

4. **Termination:** Getting rid of an employee is never easy and should never be done in haste. Termination usually comes after all other strategies have been exhausted and the toxic person persists in their disruptive behavior. In any case, termination must follow due process.

RENEWAL AFTER TOXICITY

In the end, it is leaders who are responsible for recognizing a toxic personality within the organization and using a systematic approach to rectify the situation and take steps to immunize the organization from future toxic employees. Kusy and Holloway suggest two processes to renew an organization after toxicity has been dealt with so that the organization can recover and move forward.

1. Create an organization that operates with values supporting human dignity, with a focus on respectful engagement.
2. Respond to the ravages created by toxic personalities through a healing process.

The first process is proactive and focus on developing teams and leaders, the second is reactive, meant to heal teams and leaders who have been harmed by the behavior of a toxic employee.

In a proactive process, Kusy and Holloway suggest several steps. The first is benchmarking, or discovering the best practices around certain industries or content areas. After best practices have been gathered,

the team can determine how best to implement them within the organization. To start in benchmarking, there are some values-related questions the authors recommend considering:

- How have you engaged your organization in practicing your core values on a daily basis?
- How did you determine these core values?
- How have you integrated your values into other core methods: performance appraisal, 360-degree feedback, or strategic planning, for example?
- How have you addressed toxic behaviors with people who do not live up to the values of respectful engagement?
- When a toxic person has violated core values and caused considerable damage to the team, what have you done? Were the values useful in this process? If so, how? If not, why?
- Is toxicity an issue in your organization? Why? Why not?

The authors also suggest leadership development programs to educate leaders in strategies to prevent toxicity and foster respectful engagement. Organizations do need to focus on things like strategic planning, performance management, career development, and other areas, but these skills would be enhanced by values clarification.

Organizations should also look for training programs that teach leaders how to deal with toxic workers so they can be more alert to signs of toxicity within the ranks.

Another proactive measure organizations can take is mentoring programs for their leadership. Mentoring can help to reduce, if not prevent, toxicity in the workplace. One of the leading ways mentoring can prevent toxicity is that in mentoring relationships people must be aware of themselves and others. Toxicity cannot thrive in such a relationship, and if it starts, it can be recognized and addressed quickly and in a manner designed for learning instead of punishment. Mentoring is an important proactive tool and has the

potential to change the culture of an organization from toxic to healthy while focusing on productivity and a person's individual growth.

Fostering good relationships can also be accomplished in a team environment by creating communities of practice that build team cohesion and reinforce team values. Communities of practice are defined as "a group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise." Kusy and Holloway recommend that the passion of this community of practice should be around respectful engagement. The group can share a free-flow of ideas and creative ways to address problems. Managers should be certain to find ways to access the group and be open to the ideas they produce.

Communities of practice are also valuable because they foster a sense of commitment and ownership among employees and help them engage with one another and build respectful relationships with peers and supervisors.

Kusy and Holloway also recommend reactive processes of healing for the organization touched by toxic behavior. External coaching of leadership can help supervisors heal and deal with the aftermath of emotional injuries caused by toxic personalities. In some cases, seeking the help of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) may be enough to assuage the damage but coaching may be necessary. If so, the coach should come from outside the organization and be one that understands the broad emotional damage people can sustain from a toxic person.

Even when a systematic intervention has been successful, there remain people who have lived through the nightmare and survived the ordeal. Renewal in this context is about taking the human condition in the workplace and making it into something that inspires, provides hope, and gives meaning to people's lives.

Organizations can also begin healing by taking team retreats facilitated by an outside consultant. During the retreat, employees would be encouraged to share their feelings about how the toxic person has affected them and the organization, but it should not

be allowed to devolve into bad mouthing the toxic person. Instead, the authors recommend that the main focus of the retreat be affirming and oriented toward the future of the team and the organization.

The retreat should not be a one-time event, however. There needs to be follow-up with the team as they implement one or two core actions that the group decided to take during the retreat. Both team actions and individual actions should be identified, and individuals should be encouraged to reaffirm and recommit to the values of direct communication, no talking behind anyone's back and no gossiping about the toxic person who no longer works there.

ALL ABOUT VALUES

In the end, what differentiates an organization that deals effectively with a toxic worker from those that do not are stated, specific, and concrete sets of values that are lived by top management and reinforced at every level of the organization through performance assessments and daily tasks. This means the best way to deal with toxic employees is through a system-based program like the TOCS model presented by Kusy and Holloway.

The TOCS approach encourages respectful engagement with individuals and the organization and instills in leaders a sense of integrity, authenticity, and social responsibility. When all these leadership qualities are brought together, Kusy and Holloway believe leaders can rise above blaming the toxic person for disrupting the company, and instead use it as an opportunity to reinvent or reinforce organizational values that will change the way employees engage with one another, and teach them how to work together through respectful engagement.

Though toxic employees may always be part of the working landscape, organizations do not have to be at their mercy. Instead, a values-driven approach like the one proposed by Kusy and Holloway seeks not just to prevent or reduce toxicity, but to foster a sense of pride, ownership, and commitment on the part of all employees.



FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Reading time: 6-8 hours, 242 pages

With so many employees reporting that they have experienced toxic co-workers either in past jobs or in their present employment, **Toxic Workplace!** is an important tool for managers and leaders within organizations. The book can help leaders recognize if toxicity is affecting their organization and how to implement system-wide changes that can reduce or eliminate toxic personalities.

The book is based on research conducted by the authors, Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway, and contains some of the tools they used to ascertain the level of toxicity in organizations. Leaders and managers can use these surveys and other research tools to discern if there are problems within their own environment. The remedies suggested by Kusy and Mitchell will work best when they are able to be implemented first at the highest level of an organization and carried out by lower level managers and employees.

The book can be read cover-to-cover, but if a manager already knows that toxic personalities are in their organization, they can skip to the second section of the book and find the best solutions to any current problems.

Overall, the techniques in this book will be most effective when implemented by managers. Employees at a lower level, with little or no supervisory power, will find little to help them remedy any toxicity they are dealing with unless those higher up the chain are willing to help implement new policies.

CONTENTS

Part One: Understanding Toxic People and Toxic Environments

1. The Human and Financial Costs of Working with Toxic People: Toxic Behaviors Are Just the Tip of the Iceberg
2. Recognizing the Toxic Personality: It Isn't as Easy as You Think
3. Leader Reactions and Strategies that Typically Don't Work: Why Identify Strategies that Don't

Work?

4. Organizational Culture: How Toxicity Spreads Like an Infection

Part Two: The Toxic Organization Change System Model

5. Organizational Strategies: Dealing with Toxicity at the Highest System Level
6. Team Strategies: Dealing with Toxicity at the Team Level
7. Individual Strategies: Dealing with Toxic People One-on-One
8. Myths and Truths about Toxicity - and Renewal from a Toxic Environment: How to Move Beyond Toxicity

Appendix A: Our Research Methodology

Appendix B: National Survey Responses to Toxic Behaviors

Notes

The Authors

Index

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