

The Perils of Toxic Colleagues: How to Identify and Course Correct, to Ensure Your Team's Success



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The CEO very quickly realized there would be no easy fix for their problem.

One of the organization's top-producing teams, which had been in place for more than a decade, was suddenly struggling. As the CEO and CHRO dug deeper, they discovered that there was a simmering conflict between members, some of whom were demonstrating toxic behaviour. For two team members in particular, disdain for each other had boiled over.

It wasn't unusual for these two individuals to make passive-aggressive comments at team meetings and suggest to their direct reports that they ignore requests from the other business line. Away from team activities, there were signs they were trying to sabotage each other's work.

But what to do about it? The CEO contemplated moving one or both of the toxic team members. However, that would be difficult given the organization was highly dependent on this top-producing team, and both leaders involved were seen externally as industry experts.

Perhaps she could just remove one of the two battling team members? The CEO had deep concerns this would destabilize the team and, by removing but not addressing the problem, possibly spread the toxicity to another part of the company.

The CEO and CHRO knew that ignoring the problem wasn't an option. The team members, and others who were aware of the toxic conflict, were deeply affected by what was going on. A failure to act would undermine faith in the CEO.

And therein lies the challenge faced by this CEO: Left unchecked, toxicity tends to spread and become more embedded in team functioning and organizational culture. Eventually, team members begin to pick sides while others begin to resent the fact that nobody is dealing with the root of the problem.

The CEO and CHRO agreed that action had to be taken to stop the toxic behaviour from spilling over and undermining the work that had been done to create a collaborative culture and drive employee engagement.

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Who are toxic team members and where will you find them?

One of the reasons why toxic behaviour poses such an enormous threat to organizational effectiveness is that it can exist at all levels of an organization, from the board of directors and C-suite down to frontline teams.

The other complicating factor is that some of the most competent and productive people can also be the most likely to exhibit negative behaviours. Toxic personalities are often “gifted influencers” and are otherwise highly valued by CEOs and

customers for their ability to think creatively and produce results. That is why senior leaders are often tempted to overlook or excuse toxic behaviour; they know these are often the people who get things done.

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Warning signs of an approaching toxic storm

How can senior leaders recognize toxic personalities in their organization? Although each warning sign is not, in and of itself, proof that a toxic team member is in your midst, there are certain red flags that – when taken together – are fairly accurate at diagnosing a problem.

Lack of candid dialogue.

A high-performing team collaborates on solutions, shares its ideas, and welcomes feedback. When that's not happening, it's usually because members are afraid of the negative reactions they might receive from a toxic colleague.

Playing the blame game.

Faced with a setback, good teams share the blame and work quickly to learn from their mistakes and devise solutions. Teams infected with toxic personalities tend to point fingers at each other to escape personal accountability.

Overly cynical attitudes.

If your team is always negative when discussing challenges and outcomes, you have a problem with toxicity. It might not be everyone on the team that is cynical, but one or two very negative people can drag everyone else down.

Burnout.

Are there a lot of people on your team complaining about being disengaged, burned out, or disclosing physical or mental health issues? Are some of your team members requesting a leave of absence or a reassignment, or even quitting? These are the clear signs of the collateral damage that toxic behaviour can inflict on a team.

Different camps or cliques.

When you walk into a team meeting, can you see overt signs that different camps have been established? Is it less of an operating team, and more a series of small groups of people? Do members of these smaller cliques speak only to each other and ignore others in the room? These are clear signs that toxicity may have fractured your team.





The leader's checklist: How to defuse toxic behaviour and keep your team on task

So, you've taken a long hard look at the behaviour of your team and there is enough evidence of a toxicity problem. Remember, not taking action will only make a bad situation worse. How, then, can you address toxicity without blowing up your team?

1.

Name the toxic behaviour and communicate your expectations.

If leaders are stepping over a red line, it's important for you to communicate that clearly to each leader and to your broader team. It's also important to remember that this is not a situation where you can fight fire with fire. Responding aggressively to a toxic team member will only spark more toxic behaviour. You must raise the issue of their behaviour in a fair and objective manner. Hear them out, but make it clear that you want this situation resolved.

2.

Use Positive Inquiry.

Neuroscience tells us that giving people negative feedback triggers blockers to learning and change. Focus on creative positive scenarios where both leaders and their teams can create something together, rather than focusing on what they can't do. Creating a shared vision can be a much more impactful driver for change.

3.

Bring in an objective team coach.

In many instances, a team coach aided by 360 assessments can help bring out the specific issues and identify team member behaviours that are the source of toxicity. Remember that it's not always possible to spot toxic behaviour with the naked eye. You may need to dig deeply into team dynamics to find out the sources and triggers for conflict.

Toxic behaviour is not a problem that will go away on its own. Often, the toxic team member does not have the self-awareness to understand the effect they are having on other people. This is particularly so if the toxic team member is also – as is often the case – a top performer.

CEOs and other senior leaders need to look for the warning signs of toxicity and demonstrate a willingness to engage on the problem and find a solution. Otherwise, they will lose the support and confidence of the very people they are trying to lead.



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