

Warning:



Toxic workplaces demoralize, cause stress and illness, and ultimately cut into the bottom line. To stamp out workplace toxicity, the first step is to recognize it.

by Gabrielle Bauer

Amy Chow* doesn't have a name for her office environment. She only knows that she dreads going into work every day. An IT specialist in a Toronto financial firm, Chow puts in many extra hours for no extra pay. More than the unpaid overtime, though, it's the lack of recognition that gets to her and her teammates. "We often work double-time during peak periods," she says. "I don't think a day off here and there would be asking too much." In Chow's estimation, even a pat on the back would go a long way toward stemming the resentment brewing amid her team.

Chow also bemoans the lack of direction from superiors. "Trying to get a decision or status update is like pulling teeth," she says. "We're rushing around trying to meet our deadlines without the upfront analysis and development work we would need to do a good job. I had 10—yes, 10—meetings today, but nothing got decided or accomplished."

When asked whether her workplace could be described as toxic, Chow gives a noncommittal response. "After a while it starts to seem normal, but I know deep down that it isn't. It certainly isn't healthy."

Unreasonably heavy workload, lack of recognition, unclear objectives—all are classic hallmarks of workplace toxicity, says Dr. Marie McIntyre, principal, Your Office Coach, an Atlanta training and consulting business, and author of *Secrets to Winning at Office Politics*. Also classic is how Chow tried to rationalize the toxicity as the cost of doing business. "People who've been in a toxic workplace too long come to accept sick behaviour as normal," says Dr. McIntyre. "So they put up with it in silent despair, productivity suffers, and positive change becomes impossible."

What exactly is the sickness? Here's a simple definition by Dr. Graham Lowe, professor emeritus, University of Alberta, and president, the Graham Lowe Group Inc., an organizational research and consulting firm in Kelowna, B.C. "A toxic workplace is characterized by high-conflict relationships between individuals and by a lack of people focus in business practices and values," he says. Some experts have likened a toxic workplace to a dysfunctional family, in which destructive behaviours spread from one member to another.

The phenomenon may be on an upswing, says Tony Roithmayr, president, Performance by Design, a Calgary

consulting firm. "Five years ago we identified and reported on specific organizationally driven stressors that are being experienced to an even greater extent today," he says, citing the global economy, the pressure to perform in an increasingly competitive domestic market, and the talent crunch as culprits. "Producing results under these circumstances comes at the expense of the quality of the workplace environment and tips the balance toward toxicity."

The symptoms

Just like bodily diseases, workplace toxicity reveals itself through symptoms. Easily measurable symptoms include high absenteeism and rising benefit plan expenditures, an indication of deteriorating employee health. Less tangible but no less insidious is the low morale that inevitably creeps up and spreads in a toxic work environment. "We have solid research showing that unhealthy work environments lead to psychological disengagement and an increased desire to leave," says Dr. John Yardley, president, Metrics@Work, a research and consulting centre, and managing director, Workplace Health and Research Laboratory, Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont. Even if a worker deems literal escape impossible—because a hard-won pension would be sacrificed or because the organization is the only game in town, for example—"he escapes in spirit. He withdraws and no longer puts in the same

*Name has been changed



effort. He cares less about the fate of the organization or his work team.”

Toxic work environments also manifest themselves in the way co-workers interact with each other. Dr. McIntyre cites the following interactions as interpersonal symptoms of workplace toxicity:

- People talk to their managers only if they absolutely have to
- Entire departments are at war with each other
- Employees commonly engage in gossip, put-downs, blaming and backbiting
- Disagreements get personal and insulting
- Co-workers have a “my way or the highway” attitude and seldom help each other

“Conflicts and disagreements are normal,” Dr. McIntyre points out. “But when colleagues begin to see each other as enemies, that’s a sure sign of a toxic workplace.”

The pathology

Sometimes, the toxicity begins with just one or two individuals—the so-called bad apples. Edmond Mellina, president of the Toronto learning and consulting firm Transitus Inc., recalls a particularly toxic manager who would criticize people publicly during meetings. “He’d say things like, ‘Are you a moron, or what?’” says Mellina. “He also had a short fuse, and nobody knew when it was about to blow.”

Employees with such superiors have a tough hoe to plow, says Dr. Linda Duxbury, a pioneering workplace stress researcher and business professor, Carleton University in Ottawa. “Our research says that, in terms of your working environment and stress level, your immediate superior matters a lot more than the organization as a whole,” she says. “The type of manager you have is a major predictor of stress and mood.”

Having collected data on 100,000 Canadians’ views about their managers, Dr. Duxbury learned that, while almost half of Canadians work for great managers, about 15% work for “horrible managers who focus on hours, presenteeism and what people do wrong.” The remaining 35% work for what she calls “mixed managers” who combine positive and negative behaviours—often in the same day. “They have a meltdown at 1 p.m., then buy everybody Timbits at 5 p.m.,” she says. “In some ways these Jekyll and Hyde managers are the most problematic because they’re unpredictable.”

If nobody stops such behaviour, the poison can spread, much like a bacterial infection, says Dr. McIntyre. And who should be stopping it? “The fact is, toxic workplaces almost always result from toxic leadership,” she says. “For better or worse, the values and behaviours of top executives set the cultural tone for a company.” To put it simply, the irascible manager blows his top because he can.

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Sometimes the toxicity stems from the simple fact that people have too much work to do. “This happens when management feels compelled to squeeze the most they can out of workers to get the job done,” says Roithmayr. “The cost is employee well-being.” Rather than fuelling greater productivity, such attitudes predictably breed resentment, stress and even burnout, he adds.

Indeed, a 2000 Statistics Canada survey found that 34% of working Canadians cited “too many demands or hours” as the most common source of workplace stress.

In other cases the imbalance rests in the distribution of work among team members. A common scenario of this type arises when a few hard-working people feel they must “cover” for a slacker or two. “People usually know who is and who isn’t pulling their weight, and management and staff both know when nothing is being done about it,” says Dr. Yardley. “This type of imbalance eats away at the soul of an organization or a work team.”

As Chow’s story exemplifies, unclear or conflicting performance goals may open the crack through which toxicity enters. “This has been observed in call centres,” says Roithmayr. “Workers are held accountable for the quality of their calls, but are paid for the number of calls they make,” he explains. “This motivates them to keep the calls short, which often results in low customer satisfaction. They can’t win, so they quickly grow resentful.” A survey of Calgary firms conducted by Roithmayr and his group identified such conflicting demands as a

Poison control

As everyone knows, the best way to conquer a bad habit is to replace it with a new one. Here are five poisonous practices experts say you should avoid—along with replacement strategies that will help you leave the toxins behind.

Organizational toxin	Replace with...
Unreasonable and unflagging workload	Commitment to provide downtime during intense work periods; discussions about reasonable workload
Ambiguous roles and responsibilities	Role clarification, with attention to employees’ greatest strengths
Lack of positive feedback	Clear performance evaluations and reward systems
Excessive imbalance of power	Transparent communication of company policies, objectives and values
Culture of blame and anger	Training in effective leadership practices



concern for 72% of respondents. Roithmayr also flags lack of clarity about how performance is to be evaluated—a concern for 42% of respondents—as a harbinger of workplace toxicity.

Finally there's the sweet poison of technology. "All the email and cellphones and BlackBerrys are creating another form of toxicity," says Dr. Duxbury. "The technology has fuelled an expectation that we will be available 24/7 and donate our personal time to work responsibilities. The boundaries have blurred."

The complications

Simply put, toxicity begets toxicity. In a toxic organization, "workplace-induced stressors can lead to mental and physical illnesses that raise benefit costs and lower productivity and morale, which further threatens the health of the organization," says Roithmayr. "And so the cycle continues."

If anyone doubts the connection between stress and physical well-being, consider these statistics: A report prepared by Léger Marketing for the Toronto-based firm Multi-Health Systems Inc. found that 53% of Canadians experienced headaches, clenched jaws, sweating, digestive problems, fatigue or insomnia due to stress. Poor productivity doesn't follow far behind: in the same survey, 52% of respondents said workplace stress caused them to procrastinate, neglect responsibility and perform poorly.

Kathryn Wilkins, a senior analyst in the health information and research division of Statistics Canada, says her own group's research corroborates the link. A national survey of 19,000 nurses, which Wilkins helped develop and interpret, found a strong link between a poor working environment (as evidenced by lack of respect from colleagues, role overload, and low sense of control, among other parameters) and both physical and mental health as well as health-related absenteeism. Stress can even lead to injury, she adds. "One of our surveys uncovered a significant relationship between stress and occupational injuries in women."

Still more extreme, though by no means rare, is the violence that can erupt in stressful work environments. A 2004 National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety (NIOHS) study found that 24.5% of companies surveyed reported workplace violence incidents in the preceding year. Such incidents aren't confined to "tough" working environments like mines or construction sites. In 2004, 275 health and social service workers in B.C. experienced traumatic injuries resulting from assaults and violent acts. In that same year, B.C. teachers filed 45 compensation claims for such acts.

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Of course, employees mired in toxicity can always play their trump card and leave. Chow, who has had stellar performance ratings and numerous raises throughout her career, has recently accepted an offer for another job. "It just wasn't worth it anymore," she says.

The cure

If you're concerned about the quality of the environment in your workplace, the first step is to gather information, says Dr. Yardley. "Tools like the *Quality of Work Life and Engagement* surveys capture toxic work environ-

ments quite well," he says, noting that "you'll usually find the worst toxicity resides in just one or two areas or work units." Simple corrective measures can eradicate specific areas of toxicity (see Poison control, page 13).

Systemic toxicity, on the other hand, may need to be removed from the top down, says Mellina. "If the current leaders do not embody the company's desired values, they need to be replaced with new leaders that do," he says. "Nontoxic leaders at the top will build a team of like-minded people."

In communicating the desired values to employees, Dr. Yardley says management needs to get down to brass tacks. "If you want to encourage collaborative behaviour, provide examples of what this behaviour looks like," he says. "Spell it out in the company's policy manual. For example, 'An us-and-them mentality will not be tolerated in this organization.'" Of course, "management must also walk the talk and model the desired collaborative behaviour in their day-to-day interactions."

Lowe, for his part, stresses the importance of judicious hiring to ensure new recruits embody healthy workplace values. "The recruitment process needs to screen out individuals who are not totally committed to basic values like respect, and who lack the collaborative skills needed to foster a healthy psychological environment," he says. **Ditto for promotion. "You can't promote based only on hard results," Mellina points out. "If you're seeking to avoid toxicity, 'soft' skills like attitude and fairness are at least as important."**

Ultimately, the younger generation of workers may force even reluctant organizations to address the toxicity in their midst, says Dr. Duxbury. "Today's young people are no longer prepared to put up with the sickness," she says. "They'll turn the whole workplace around because they're willing to sacrifice money and advancement for a life." The companies that hire these young people, in turn, "will have to change or they're going to lose their best people." ■

Gabrielle Bauer is a freelance writer in Toronto.