



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

WORK MATTERS COLUMN

December 2023

Toxic Workplace Cultures - Infecting & Affecting Perceptions, People, Productivity and Progress

A 2022 MIT Sloan Management Review article posited that the leading cause for the ‘Great Resignation’ was Toxic Workplace Cultures. This Great Resignation refers to an unprecedented phenomenon in which millions of US-based employees voluntarily left their jobs in 2021. Several reasons were provided for the exodus of resignations, including the impact and lingering effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

‘Toxic workplace culture’ is not a new occurrence. In fact, it’s a term that is loosely used in today’s professional spaces, especially by millennials and early-generation-Z employees. One internationally renowned management guru, Mr. Dimitris Tsingos, described ‘toxic workplace culture’ as one in which ‘employees do not feel valued, respected, or supported...There may be high levels of stress, poor communication, lack of trust, and little opportunity for growth or development.’ Elements of this definition were also cited by Mindy Shoss, a professor and industrial-organizational psychologist, who stated that ‘toxic workplace culture is an abstract term to describe infighting, intimidation, and other affronts that harm productivity...’

One wonders about the connectivity between these postulations and employees increasingly valuing their physical and mental well-being. They have also been openly demonstrating a willingness to leave hostile environments and toxic relationships in search of healthier alternatives. The aforementioned MIT Sloan Review also noted that toxic culture was 10.4 times more likely to be the reason for an employee leaving than their compensation. The U.S. Surgeon General’s office stated that ‘Chronic stress from workplace abuse can lead to depression, heart disease, cancer, and other illnesses.’ Simply put, the money is not worth the drama.

Identifying the elements and characteristics that both form and contribute to toxic workplace cultures is a great first step towards creating improvement. It is recommended that efforts be directed to addressing the core matters that cause employees the highest levels

of discomfort and insecurity in the workplace. These are multiple reasons that contribute to employees becoming disengaged, which often lead to them quitting. Some of these elements include a lack of transparency which refers to making information available to all because the hoarding of information by select individuals or managers usually fosters mistrust in the team. It is evident that most workers want to know more about how decisions are being made in their organizations and desire their employers to be increasingly transparent. At its basic level, transparency refers to the use and promotion of a two-way communication methodology between management and staff. Another issue of concern is that of micro-management, where this unproductive management style centers around excessive amounts of monitoring and control of employees. In a 2021 Forbes article, Heidi Lynne Kurtzer proposed that 79% of employees had experienced micro-management; 71% said micro-management interfered with their job performance; 85% reported their morale was negatively impacted; 69% considered changing jobs due to micro-management, while 36% actually changed jobs. Innovative employees usually feel stifled when they are constantly monitored and their autonomy, innovation and creative efforts are unduly measured and, in some cases, curtailed.

Further, the issue of favoritism is still an issue that plagues the workplace. This refers to the unfair and unethical practice of preferential treatment that erodes and undermines workplace morale and team spirit. In many instances, it also hinders the personal development and career advancement of employees. The effects of favoritism include, but are not limited to, siloed operations and mindsets, negative competition, decreased employee performance and motivation, and increased instances of litigation in some cases.

Finally, bullying, violence and harassment are serious issues to be considered when dealing with toxicity in the workplace. According to a WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey conducted in January 2021, 30% of

employees have suffered abusive conduct at work; another 19 % have witnessed it; while 49 % are affected by it; and 66 % are aware that workplace bullying occurs.

It is often said that the success of an organization lies with its leadership. As such, I am suggesting that leaders need to be concerned with symptoms of toxic workplace culture as they can severely affect the organization's reputation as well as its scope, schedule, and cost baselines, as these are directly linked to profits and all-round productivity. However, beyond the realms of financial resilience and value management, all leaders have a responsibility to create, maintain and ensure a safe working environment for employees/workers.

Addressing toxic work culture should be a shared responsibility of both leadership and employees. Leaders must be willing and equipped to commit to change and set good examples. Employees, on the other hand, must be willing and permitted to report issues and accept a culture of accountability. Ultimately, institutional change is required and would present several challenges to many organizations, but management and staff could rest assured that it is possible if all hands are on deck.

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