CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENT

Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway

" I t wasn't until after this leader fired about nine people—all of whom were very good—that questions began to emerge. The sad part was that the lives of many of these people were completely ruined and the leader, who was ultimately fired, just moved away and is working someplace else. There should be LAWS or something to stop this kind of behavior. Quite frankly some organizations promote this behavior by tolerating it."

In our research on incivility and toxicity in the workplace with more than 400 leaders, this scenario from our interviews played out over and over again. It is one that is all too familiar to many leaders. In fact, 94 percent of leaders in our study reported working with a "toxic, disruptive, and uncivil" person.

The results affect what we refer to as the "double bottom line," which encompasses both the human and financial impact of workplace incivility. Leaders are often unaware of the insidious costs to the organization as a whole and tend to disregard these behaviors, especially if exhibited by their biggest sales producer or

indispensable expert. A quote from one of our leaders captures the result of simply ignoring the problem.

"One of our clients was a CEO who had temper tantrums. Not just occasionally, but every day. She demonstrated this behavior to those who did not have power over her. For example, no board members or key customers ever saw this behavior. No one appeared to tackle this person—no one; not even HR folks. . . . Over the last two years, more than ten people have fled from this leader, mostly by leaving the company."

But simply ignoring the problem leads to trouble, as Pearson and Porath reported in the *Academy of Management Executive:* 12 percent of victims of these behaviors quit, 68 percent report being less productive, and 78 percent said they were less committed to the organization; the Level Playing Field Institute found that 13 percent of those who reported unfairness and experienced humiliation as the primary factor discouraged others from using their employer's products; 27 percent reported that bullying resulted in their strongly

discouraging others from taking jobs with their employer. According to human resource metrics, replacing these individuals (many of whom are high producers) can range from 1.5 to 2.5 times their salary. Not only are organizations losing employees, they are reducing their ability to hire replacements and sell their products! It's incumbent on leadership to create organizational communities that have zero tolerance for toxic, uncivil behaviors—what we refer to as "communities of respectful engagement."

Three Toxic Behaviors Erode Respectful Workplaces

We discovered three primary categories of toxic behaviors that often fell outside any written policy:

- Shaming (the exercise of humiliation, sarcasm, potshots, or mistake-pointing with the intent of reducing another's self-worth)

- Passive hostility (the use of passive-aggressive behavior with the intent of directing one's anger inappropriately)

- Team sabotage (meddling with the intent of either establishing your power base or making the team less productive)

These three behaviors can make life a veritable inferno. Surprisingly, only 1 percent to 6 percent of victims ever report these behaviors, according to research by L. M. Cortina and V. J. Magley.

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Toxic systems are particularly resistant to change and have frequently been tolerated for years.

Most Leaders Feel Ineffective in Stopping Disrespectful Behaviors

In our study we were interested not only in what leaders viewed as toxic behaviors but also in how they and their team reacted to the presence of these behaviors and what role the organization played in the continuance or cessation of such behaviors. We found that leaders often have no easy answers as to what to do. In fact, they reported several strategies that were mostly ineffective:

- Reduce interactions with or avoid the toxic individual.
- Restructure the environment.
- Remove responsibilities from the toxic individual.

You can quickly see the devastating effects such reactions would have on a fully functioning and efficient team. Not only are good team members leaving but the functional communication or decision-making path is also breaking down. Everything is directed to avoiding the influence of the toxic and uncivil person! In the cases we examined, none of these strategies proved effective; each was time-consuming, reactive, and left a fragmented team in its wake.

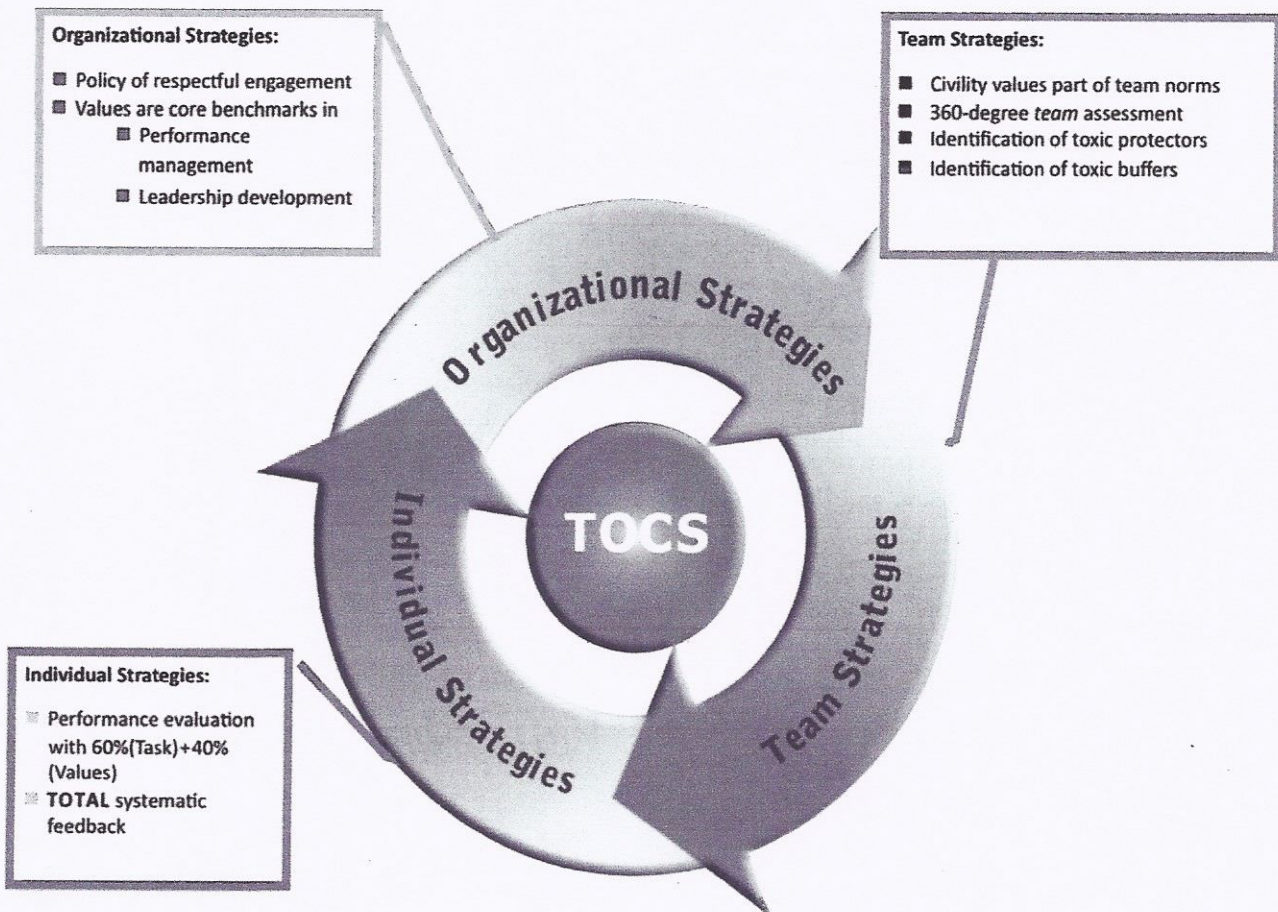## Are You a Toxic Protector or a Toxic Buffer?

Toxicity becomes a systemic problem because coworkers and leaders quickly get drawn into the uncivil web.

In our analysis, toxic systems are particularly resistant to change and have frequently been tolerated for years. We discovered two roles that create such a toxic system: the "toxic protector" and the "toxic buffer."

Toxic protectors are individuals who feel compelled to protect the toxic person from negative reviews or termination because they have a special interest in keeping the person as a part of their unit or team—particularly when the toxic person is the highest producer or specialized expert. The toxic person contributes to their social or positional power. Toxic protectors often don't realize that they are jeopardizing their team; ultimately the toleration of the toxic behavior will infect innovation, collaboration, and productivity. There is no net gain, regardless of the toxic person's high-profile sales. For example:

"Because of his division's success, help is often not forthcoming. Some of us continue to push back on him, though we pick our battles more carefully. Turnover has been frequent and high with his direct reports. Unfortunately, his boss protects him because his division continues to grow and make money, although at a decreasing margin."

Unlike toxic protectors, toxic buffers appear to have quite the opposite motivation. They realize the person's behavior is uncivil and disruptive to team functioning. Unfortunately, they see the only way out as to act as a shield or buffer between the toxic person and team members. The person who plays this role is generally empathetic and highly skilled interpersonally. Unfortunately, in spite of these good intentions, the buffer is enabling the toxic person to

Organizational Strategies:
- Policy of respectful engagement
- Values are core benchmarks in
  - Performance management
  - Leadership development

Team Strategies:
- Civility values part of team norms
- 360-degree *team* assessment
- Identification of toxic protectors
- Identification of toxic buffers

Individual Strategies:
- Performance evaluation with 60%(Task)+40% (Values)
- **TOTAL** systematic feedback

TOCS

Organizational Strategies

Team Strategies

Individual Strategies

FIGURE 1. TOXIC ORGANIZATION CHANGE SYSTEM

Toxic protectors and buffers facilitate the enactment of a culture of incivility.

get away with bad behavior, and is absorbing the toxicity and becoming damaged in the process while holding the team hostage in a dysfunctional pattern of communication and authority. While the toxic person does spoil the positive climate of a team, the toxic protectors and buffers facilitate the enactment of a culture of incivility because these behaviors go unchecked.

What to Do: Respectful Engagement as the Organization's Mantra

To address this problem, actions need to occur on three levels: the organization, the team, and the individual. We refer to this as the Toxic Organization Change System (TOCS). Consider three questions related to these three levels:

- What are your organizational values?

- Are they clear to your team?

- Have they been incorporated into how you manage the performance of individuals reporting to you?

Organizational Level Strategy

Most organizations have stated values. But how pronounced are they in your organization? Is one of these values about respect? If not, you have some work to do. First, you'll need to make sure the value of respect (or however you term this value) gets incorporated into a code of professional conduct. Ultimately, this code gets rolled into an organizational policy. It becomes your mantra in creating a culture of respectful engagement. It's not just a nice-to-do; it turns out to have important impacts on the human and financial bottom line.

If your organization either wants to reexamine its policy of professional conduct or create one, we strongly suggest you not just get a group of executives together and design it from the top down. Instead, we suggest a multilevel process. The reason? Involvement here brings about greater ownership. We support what we create. To this end, facilitation by either an internal or external consultant is needed. Just as in the most successful strategic planning efforts, the best results often occur first by making sure that all stakeholders are engaged.

Part of the large-scale design of the professional conduct code is the establishment of a zero tolerance policy. This policy is important because it provides the context not only for how we live by these values but also for what happens when they are breached. Certainly, due process procedures must be followed when the situation is serious enough to warrant dismissal. However, there are many intermediary actions that can be taken by leaders to turn a culture of disrespect around.

Values-based discussions are an untapped resource with enormous power.

Finally, we'd like to ask one more question. Are your organizational values *on* your performance appraisal form? No, not at the top. But, as items on which one is rated, just like the task or so-called real work one has to do. Once these values are incorporated within your performance appraisal process, we recommend a 60–40 distribution in which the competencies associated with the "task work" are given a weight of 60 percent; the "values work" a weight of 40 percent. Thus, performance management processes are not simply a mandate to monitor and reprimand but a real opportunity to reward interpersonally effective behaviors that uphold your values.

But a word of caution here. It's not enough to spell out the intricacies of the values and policy to staff; it's just as important to live them out every day. And the best way to do this leads us into the next section: your team level strategy.

Team Level Strategy

We have found that one of the best ways to make sure these values are clear is to engage your team in thinking about values as a part of everyday actions. For example, one leader in our study reported that when she saw someone doing something particularly well, she aligned the discussion with the value at hand. In this case, it was the value of workplace integrity. It was important that the leader in this example didn't just comment on the value, she let the individual know how the value was related to the successful performance of the team. Another leader reported that when he had to give feedback on negative behavior that affected the team performance, he linked the discussion to the value. In this circumstance, the leader reported that he showed the team member how talking behind someone's back impacted both team performance *and* customer sales.

These strategies may appear to be no-brainers, but many leaders are adept at giving feedback on the "task work" and not on the "values work." We say to leaders that if values are so darned important, why aren't they given greater prominence? Values-based discussions are an untapped resource with enormous power.

Another often-forgotten team strategy relates to recruiting. One of the things we tell our clients is that respectful engagement begins before someone ever enters the door. How you recruit makes a difference! Consider the fact (reported by Fernandez-Araoz, Groysverg, and Nohria in *Harvard Business Review*) that one-third of job applicants report false information and that one-third of organizations never do reference checks! Yes, we know what you might be thinking. *When I call to check on a reference, I'm given a standard reply that states the dates of employment for the individual, and that's it.* This is certainly not enough and we recommend that you keep making calls and asking for further references until you are able to obtain some information that either confirms the individual operates with respect or doesn't. In one scenario a leader related to us, a reference stated that he was not at liberty to state why the individual left the organization. Think about it this way. When you are asked for a reference about an individual who left because of a great opportunity and the individual was a person of high integrity and talent, you'd probably relate that information. Back to our scenario, as the interviewer checked more references, she consistently found that people were not willing to share information about the applicant. Finally, she was able to uncover the reason—the applicant had been terminated from two previous jobs for unacceptable behavior.

Individual Level Strategy

What differentiates the team strategy from the individual level is focus. The team strategy focuses on having the same type of performance discussions for every member of your team. The individual level strategy focuses the discussion on two types of individuals:

- The enablers of toxic individuals: toxic protectors and toxic buffers

- The actual toxic individuals themselves

We have discovered that toxic protectors and toxic buffers are particularly open to feedback on their behaviors. Just like toxic individuals, many toxic protectors

and buffers are often clueless about the results of their behaviors related to the toxic individual. Many times, all you'll need to do is draw their attention to what they have been doing and the result to the organization or team. Once these individuals change their protective behaviors, you will have broken the system of enabling a toxic culture.

Now for the more difficult situation: the toxic individuals. As we have found in our research, most toxic and uncivil individuals are unaware of the effects of their behaviors. The probability of feedback working will greatly increase if the person delivering the message has the authority to implement consequences for noncompliance and if the organization has strong policies and procedures for incivility. We encourage team leaders to engage multiple assessors to provide feedback. Hearing from team members who work for the person and from those to whom they report is equally important because some toxic persons are chameleons and display inappropriate behaviors only to those in less powerful positions—that is, in the vernacular, they "kiss up and kick down."

Some researchers have pointed out that appealing to the sense of personal ambition and competitiveness in conjunction with data-driven feedback can be effective.

We have developed the TOTAL approach to feedback with difficult individuals. This incorporates the following criteria:

- Third-party data
- One-on-one, first time
- Together, second time
- Appeal to their professional ambitions
- Leverage their competitive nature and Leave with a vote of confidence

In this TOTAL guide, we first suggest that the feedback include third-party data. For example, this may include documented evidence from others and, if available, 360-degree feedback data. And the first time feedback is given, we suggest it be as nonthreatening as possible—hence one-on-one. Then, if the behavior

Most toxic individuals are clueless about the effects of their behaviors.

persists, others are included in the feedback process—anyone who is affected by the person's behaviors. When giving feedback, we suggest that you appeal to personal ambition. For example, if someone wants to be a marketing director, you might show how the toxic behavior is an obstacle to fulfilling this goal. Finally, since most toxic individuals are competitive in nature, we suggest leveraging this by challenging them. For example, you might say something like, "I really don't know if you'll be able to change these behaviors, but I'm willing to give you a try." Then leave with a vote of confidence that the individual will produce results in this regard.

It's All About Systems Promoting Respect

Although much has been written about the more serious types of personal impairment, such as alcoholism, mental illness, physical aggression, and sexual harassment, the toxic effects of incivility on the culture of an organization are only now being unveiled. Incivility—backstabbing, gossip, angry outbursts, condescension, and sabotage—can quickly become the norm of operations and with that come costly losses in reputation and productivity. To create change from "cultures of toxicity" to "cultures of respect" a whole-systems approach must be implemented. We have outlined strategies that work at all three levels of the organization. Now, it's up to leadership to take action that will make a difference in productivity and personal well-being.

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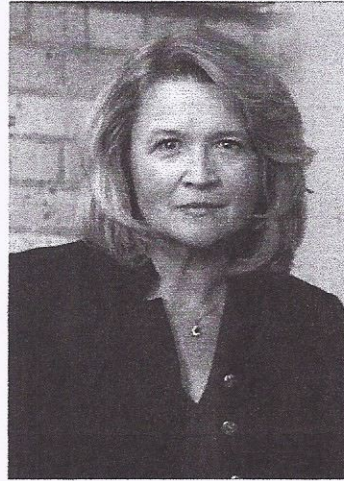
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