

WHY I DON'T WORK HERE ANYMORE: LEADER BEWARE!

by Mitchell Kusy

An alarming 94 percent of leaders have reported working with a toxic person within the past five years; 64 percent reported that they currently do. These distressing statistics come from a study I conducted with co-researcher Elizabeth Holloway. With more than 400 leaders in this study, I was personally troubled by the reported incivility that runs rampant in the workplace today. Even more troubling was how these leaders reported its impact on not only personal well-being, but also individual, team, and organizational performance.

Often-Spoken, but Under-Managed

In writing this article, which is based on my latest book, *Why I Don't Work Here Anymore: A Leaders' Guide to Offset the Financial and Emotional Costs of Toxic Employees* (2017), I reminisced about various toxic colleagues with whom I have worked. You see, I once resigned from a great job because of a toxic peer. When I handed my boss my resignation, she attempted to talk me out of my decision. She could not understand why I was resigning, since I had outstanding performance reviews. Truth be told, I lied. I gave my boss a fictitious reason for resigning because I knew she would not believe me: My toxic peer was an organizational star, but unfortunately was the cause of others leaving as well. Because of her star status, her behavior was not on my boss's radar.

Unfortunately, this is not unusual. By being chameleons who can “knock down but kiss up,” many toxic people can cleverly avoid detection by those in power. My perception was that if I had told my boss the real reason for my leaving, she would have likely been surprised and would not have believed that this organizational star could cause such havoc. Hundreds of leaders told me similar stories and have resigned from great jobs because of a toxic colleague—with similar rationales, including feeling a sense of shame from the toxic individual.

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What is a toxic person? A toxic person is someone who demonstrates disrespectful, uncivil behaviors with profound effects to our psyches, individual and team performance, *and* the bottom line. Toxic people are bullies, narcissists, manipulators, and control freaks; they're people who shame, humiliate, belittle, or take credit for the work of others.

Calculating the Financial Impact in *Your* Organization

In my consulting and research work, I have discovered that most leaders have little awareness of the financial costs of toxic personalities. Even more importantly, many leaders do not understand how easily these financial costs can be determined. I base the financial costs on such known statistics as:

- The percentage of individuals who are likely to quit as a result of working with a toxic person
- The percentages of those who *do* quit
- The average replacement costs for individuals who leave the organization in three categories: entry-level, mid-level, and high-level

To calculate these costs, *The Kusy Toxic Cost Worksheet*© is a simple method in which leaders calculate the financial cost of toxic individuals in their organization by just inserting two statistics—number of employees and average compensation. The worksheet automatically calculates the replacement costs of people who quit because of toxic individuals. Using this template, I have found that leaders quickly understand how toxic behaviors impact their

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organizations' financial condition by up to 4 percent of total compensation costs—not to mention toxic behaviors' impact on employees' emotional well-being and team performance. (For a live version of this Worksheet where you may insert these statistics, please refer to www.mitchellkusy.com)

Why are these statistics so important? Most leaders certainly do support respectful engagement in the workplace and don't want toxic behaviors engaged. However, the rubber meets the road when, for example, an organization's highest performer is someone who is highly toxic. Instead of upsetting the applecart, and fearing that this individual may quit if the organization takes too heavy-handed an approach in dealing with his or her toxicity, the organization's leaders may "turn the other cheek" and bear with the behavior—all for the sake of organizational productivity. The *Worksheet* provides a cue to leaders that there are hidden costs to this star performer's productivity—the aftermath that others are likely to leave in the wake of their toxicity. Money sometimes talks, and sells. It is a call to action that we need to do something. Now.

A Call to Action Now: Five Key Strategies

I have identified five key strategies that leaders can engage immediately to offset toxic behaviors in order to improve team performance, restore personal well-being, and increase organizational productivity.

Strategy #1: Retool Your Performance Management System

In my work with leaders worldwide, I have found that approximately 95 percent of their organizations have a performance appraisal process. Unfortunately, only 20 percent have organizational values identified in this process. Worse yet, only 5 percent ever measure how employees perform on these values. Why is the measurement of values so important? First, toxic people often violate your organization's values. Second, it's difficult to fire toxic individuals because they often lament that no one else is measured against the organization's values, so, why they being held accountable? And they are right!

These statistics are critical because toxic individuals often violate the organizational values *and* we often don't hold them accountable to these values until it's too late, typically when leaders become exasperated and are at the point of firing them. Leader beware! Because many toxic people are high performers, it's difficult to fire them unless they are held accountable to achieving the organizational values. How to do this? I recommend several approaches. First, incorporate the values into your performance appraisal process with descriptors and examples of these values. Second, assess these values with the same rigor that you evaluate task performance. Third, integrate values discussions at every team meeting. For example, take just five minutes to talk about how someone achieved a value this week in a special way, or how someone experienced an obstacle to achieving this value. In all three approaches, employees and leaders will help make the values come alive and significantly reduce the probability of allowing anyone to get away with bad behavior.

Organizations spend significant resources on values identification and engagement. The result in many organizations is that the values are on conference room walls, business cards, and organizational position statements. However, the values may not be integrated into what's really important—into the fabric of what people do every day at work. What is also amazing to me is that engagement through these three approaches is incredibly easy, free, and painless—and produces results.

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Strategy #2: Recruit Better

Have you ever had the “perfect” candidate—one for whom everyone was in total agreement that this individual fit the role to a *T*? Leader beware! Many toxic individuals don't show their full personalities until after they are on board—when it's too late. They are often clever chameleons who *knock down* at those without perceived power but *kiss up* to perceived influencers. A recent client told me how she discovered a candidate's chameleon-like personality when she accidentally witnessed the candidate “scaring the living daylights” out of the company driver who didn't help him with all his luggage. Quite frankly, all the best team interviewing might never get at this kind of behavior. Enter: *The Recruiting Cue Sheet*. The accompanying sidebar provides an example of this.

The next time you are interviewing a candidate, extend the interviewing process beyond the hiring team. Distribute *The Recruiting Cue Sheet* to those who are not formally part of the interviewing process but still might have an opportunity to interact with the candidate—for example, maintenance staff, drivers, cafeteria workers, and receptionists. Relate that you are hiring a candidate, and they may or may not have an opportunity to meet the individual. If they do, please ask them to complete *The Recruiting Cue Sheet*. The questions are pretty straightforward and are designed to add an extra layer of feedback that would be difficult

Sidebar 1. The Recruiting Cue Sheet

If you have had an opportunity to interact with this candidate, please indicate the degree of your response for each question. Please feel free to elaborate in the comments area.

Thank you for your time. Your responses will help us make a better hiring decision.

	Minimally or Not at All	Somewhat	To a Large Extent
1. How engaged with you was this candidate? Comments:	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. How effectively did this candidate demonstrate our organization's values? Comments:	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. How much would you like to have this candidate as a colleague? Comments:	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Is there anything else you would like to say about this candidate?			

Thank you for completing this form. I will plan on collecting this by the end of the day on [provide date].

to obtain because their interaction would occur during more casual times. Let them know that when the interviewing process ends, you will collect this form and review their responses with the hiring team. These responses are confidential in the sense that these will only be shared with the hiring team. *The Recruiting Cue Sheet* will help you reduce the probability of hiring someone with chameleon-like behavior—one who knocks down but kisses up.

A second recruiting strategy is to reconsider the use of hypothetical questions during the interviewing process. These allow candidates who are chameleons to disguise their real, previous actions. Consider a past, “legitimate” question you may have asked a candidate: “How would you deal with a peer with whom you have conflict?” If the candidate is toxic, and rather than reveal that he or she has had many conflicts with team members, he or she now has an “out”: the hypothetical question enables the candidate to answer with what he or she “would” or “might” do. Additionally, the candidate would possibly not get caught in a lie by revealing something untruthful. Also consider what happens if you ask a non-hypothetical

question, such as “How have you managed a team with members in conflict?” And further, consider that the candidate has had multiple team conflicts but, obviously, does not want to reveal this. This candidate might share with you what he or she “would” do. The interviewer needs to challenge this by turning the answer around and probing with deeper questions, such as “Tell me what you did step by step” or “We have all had some kind of conflict with team members. What is important to us is to know how you managed this. So, please take us through a specific scenario in a detailed way.” Through the vehicle of avoiding hypothetical questions, you will be able to much more quickly and effectively identify clever chameleons who can camouflage their true colors during the interviewing process.

Strategy #3: Give the Right Feedback the Right Way

Many leaders stumble in giving feedback to toxic employees, who may likely be impervious to this feedback. The first call to action is to determine the pros and cons of whether you even want to give

Sidebar 2. Pro-Con Analysis to Determine the Worth of Giving Feedback to a Toxic Person

Color in the circle corresponding with the response that most closely approximates your perspective. Then review results according to the instructions within the article.

	Low	Medium	High	Not Applicable
1. Has feedback to the toxic person from others been largely ineffective?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Has feedback from others backfired such that others have simply given up?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Are there serious consequences that can occur which preclude me from giving feedback?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. How much am I trying to prove with feedback that I am right?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Is the feedback a retaliatory move on my part?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Has someone I trust warned me not to give feedback?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

feedback because, in reality, it may not work. The *Pro-Con Analysis* will help you determine the worth of even having a conversation with the toxic person, as demonstrated in the accompanying sidebar. When analyzing your responses, the more items towards the “high” end indicate that you should pause and be concerned about giving feedback. Your next call to action is to review your assessment with someone you trust. Then make an informed decision as to whether giving feedback is in your best interests.

If you decide to give feedback, I have discovered the process is slightly different for each of these types of individuals:

- Your direct report
- Your peer
- Your boss

In *Why I Don't Work Here Anymore*, I provide a template for each. In this article, I will share their distinctions.

In the *Direct Report Strategy*, don't use your power to induce action. Instead, appeal to your observations of the impact of the toxic employee's behaviors on others and/or on the organization. If the employee counters this with excuses, this is where your influence as the boss is key. Relate the fact that intent or rationales

will not help change the situation; the behavior must change. Leader beware! Don't be overly zealous in expecting the person to do a complete about-face. Request the change in baby steps: break down the larger behavior into smaller increments. Follow up periodically and often.

For the *Peer Strategy*, the key distinction is to note that this is a very difficult conversation for you (which it likely will be, as peers may not be used to giving this kind of feedback to each other). Address how the behavior has impacted *you* before moving on to how it may have impacted others. Allow time for the person to respond. Create a dialogue and show empathy as appropriate. Explain how you may have tried to resolve this in the past, but it has not worked. And with a peer, it is best to seek things that *both* of you can do. Yes, both! For example, the toxic person may agree to not shame team members in public; you agree that if this happens, you have his or her permission to bring up the issue privately afterward and give your perceptions of what occurred—as well reinforce the person when positive behaviors have occurred.

The most difficult of all three strategies is giving feedback to one's boss, because of the perceived power differential. In the *Boss Strategy*, begin with your commitment to your boss and the organization.

Empathize as appropriate the pressures your boss may be facing. Be clear it is a difficult conversation and state what is bothering you about his/her behavior in behaviorally specific terms. Do not use absolute phrases such as “You never ...” “You always ...” “100 percent of the time ...” and the like. These absolute phrases have a tendency to set up a defensive reaction, and the boss may respond with, “Well, I don’t always do that. I remember just three weeks ago, I reacted differently.” Also, because someone is the boss, I have found there is a tendency to not follow up. This is key. Tell your boss you would like to follow up in a certain period of time to check to see how things are going.

Strategy #4: Revamp Your Exit Interviews

When the boss is toxic, exit interviews can be fraught with disaster. Leader beware! As our study found, 51 percent of individuals who are targets of incivility stated they will likely quit—being the target of incivility from the boss is no exception. Because of the potential threat to one’s self-esteem that a toxic boss can inscribe, some exiting individuals are not likely to be truthful during the exit interview process, when they are still technically employed—even though they are about to depart the organization!

The solution is to conduct the exit interviews anywhere from three to six months *after* the individual has left the organization. If someone is feeling threatened by a boss, exit interview responses may not extract the truth for reasons such as: “What if my boss tries to undermine me by sharing his/her thoughts about me with my new organization?” One candidate who left the organization and had reported to a toxic boss told me this: “I’m not going to allow this person to ruin my reputation in this city. I’ll give them what they want to hear during the exit interview and be done with it.” Conducting an exit interview three to six months after the person has left will significantly reduce the probability of this occurring; the dust will have settled and the person will likely have established

Build a culture of civility.

a new, and hopefully positive, reputation. And it may not need to be stated, but just in case, the boss should never conduct the exit interview. It should always be a neutral party—ideally, someone from the human resources department who has the professional skills and experiences to conduct exit interviews.

Strategy #5: Build a Culture of Civility

“It takes a village,” so it’s said, to create a culture where toxic people don’t get away with bad behavior. One final strategy I would like to share is one that I often share with my clients and doctoral students: *To be a leader is to teach. If you’re not teaching, you’re not leading.* Don’t keep these strategies to yourself. Teach those strategies that you believe are most important to others. Take the values off the walls, metaphorically speaking, and make them come alive by integrating them into daily conversations. At team meetings, take just five minutes to address how a particular value has been achieved this week. In your one-on-one meetings with direct reports, spend a few minutes on what each team member did to honor a particular value—or how a team member may have had difficulty engaging a value, given a particular circumstance with a customer.

When you keep these strategies to yourself, leader beware! When you share the wealth, leader engaged! And engagement is the key to dealing with toxic behaviors. It will create a village of everyday civility.

This article is adapted from Mitchell Kusy’s latest book, *Why I Don’t Work Here Anymore: A Leaders’ Guide to Offset the Financial and Emotional Costs of Toxic Employees*. Boca Raton: CRC Press / Taylor & Francis Group (2017).



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