

Dimensions of a Toxic Work Environment

Toxic workplaces are characterised by high levels of conflict which may occur at different levels in the organization. The morale of employees will be low and typically accompanied by high turnover and absenteeism. Other symptoms include differing levels of agitation, low productivity and motivation among staff.



Contributing factors to toxic experiences in the workplace

Employers are recognising the importance of organisational culture and its impact on employees and teams. Research increasing shows that conflict must be to be dealt with in an effective and concise manner.

If conflict is left unattended, it will fester and escalate. There are various contributing factors and these need to be addressed to understand the causal factors and address the issues.

- Increasingly unhealthy competitiveness among employees;
- Quick promotion and advancement of employees into supervisory and management roles without the proper foregrounding in management and leadership capability;
- Personality clashes;
- Differing interpersonal styles;
- Misunderstandings perpetuated without facts being established.

The impact of toxic behaviour on employees and management

1. Higher levels of burnout and stress;
2. Increased absenteeism rates, thereby impacting on productivity levels and loss of working hours. In this respect, replacement labour costs and associated delays in project or production will be noted;
3. Escalation in labour relations matters including grievances and other disputes;
4. Medical aid data and EAP (Employee Assistance Programme) statistics will indicate if more employees are utilising anti-depressants than previously;
5. High level utilisation of EAP and counselling services including psychological and psychiatric services;
7. Referral rates to external bodies such as the CCMA and findings against employer will result in distrust and increased litigation related costs.

What should an employee do when dealing with undesirable behaviour

1. Know the company policies and processes;
2. Seek help;
3. Record incidents in detail;
4. Maintain an ongoing record;
5. Approach your line manager;
6. Approach the relevant department in HR. Usually this will be the Labour or Employee Relations Office or Practitioner. Should your company have an Employee Assistance Programme/ Wellness Office or Practitioner, they should be consulted;
7. Consider the options to recourse open to you and take the necessary steps;
8. Do not avoid the perpetrator or situation and hope that the situation will improve. This is not the correct way to proceed.

Can an employee sue the employer for creating a hostile work environment?

Every employee has the opportunity to external recourse such as the CCMA or applicable Bargaining Council. However, in such matters, it is imperative that the employee initiate and exhaust all internal processes and opportunities for recourse. The danger in not doing so, could result in the matter being considered a premature referral.

The role of effective leadership

Leadership is tasked with leading change and embedding the kind of organisational culture that is cohesive, value aligned and progressive. They are therefore employee champions and need to lead from all levels of the organisation. Leadership development needs attention as leaders require a range of skills to advance and implement sustainable change efforts. HE requires new leadership to meet challenges which include volatile financial environment, expanding international partners, more accountability, a new business model, related technologies and diversity (SABPP, 2017).

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They need to display the following competencies:

- Consistency;
- Fair application of policies;
- Ongoing learning and development initiatives;
- Approachability;
- Ability to coach and mentor employees;
- Active and empathic listening skills;
- Ability to act impartially;
- Ability to maintain confidentiality.

The need for further training and development courses for employees

It is vitally important that employees be aware of their rights as well as their responsibilities in co-creating a harmonious working environment. Organisations should offer relevant further training and development courses. To this end, awareness programmes, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence and leadership development programmes can be beneficial. Some considerations may include:

- Ongoing training and workshops on current policies. All employees, including managers need to be trained on the policies;
- Values acculturation programmes should be considered to promote and embed the kind of aspirational institutional behaviours the organisation wants to see embedded;
- Reporting should be encouraged and the processes should be clearly outlined in workshops;
- Intercultural communication.

The latest trends and benefits related to Employee Wellness

Employee wellness programmes focuses on the care of employees centred around physical and mental wellbeing, the culmination of a range of initiatives such as vitality checks, counselling and fitness driven social activities.

Positive outcomes can include:

1. Promotes employee engagement;
2. Encourages employee participation;
3. Enhances productivity;
4. Reduces workplace conflict;
5. Reduces absenteeism;
6. Results in fewer external referrals;
7. Promotes beneficial for team cohesion and development;
8. Facilitates transition to a balanced work - life situation.

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