How Neglect Fosters Workplace Toxicity

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The literature on toxic workers, toxic bosses, and toxic workplaces is vast. A common feature of many works on the topic is the presumption that toxicity is the product of malevolence, that is, that toxicity results from a desire to do harm. To be sure, there are instances of genuine occupational malice—most obviously, violence in the workplace [1]. Yet more commonly, toxicity is the product of neglect, and if we wish to detoxify our workplaces, we must recognize and respond to neglect's baleful effects.

Toxicity

Broadly put, a toxic workplace is one that tends to degrade performance, undermine teamwork, reduce satisfaction, and drive people away, resulting in higher turnover rates. One toxic person can cast a long shadow, an effect often magnified when such an individual occupies a position of substantial authority. If such individuals accumulate over time, an entire workplace may be rendered so inhospitable that no one wants to work there.

Studies indicate that the negative organizational impact of toxic individuals substantially outweighs the positive effect of superstars [2]. In other words, replacing an average employee with an outstanding one produces less organizational benefit than replacing a toxic individual with an average employee. Such

results suggest that reducing workplace toxicity can provide a better return on investment than promoting excellence [3].

Neglect

One way in which neglect leads to toxicity is the tendency for some individuals to think much more about themselves and their own discomforts, needs, and ambitions than those of the people around them. This neglect of the perspectives of others may be regarded as a form of narcissism, which in extreme cases can lead people to treat the organization they work for, its mission, and their colleagues as little more than tools for their own security and advancement [4].

Toxic individuals look at workplaces as little more than resources to be exploited for their own gain. When self-interest is aligned with the welfare of the organization and the people who work in it, toxic individuals may appear to be good team players. Once a gap between the two begins to open up, however, toxic individuals tend to put their own interest above everyone else's, perhaps even ridiculing the idea that anyone would ever put anything above self-interest.

To put this another way, toxic individuals tend to see themselves as superior to everyone else, and it is a short step from judging yourself superior to supposing that you no longer need to treat others as equals or abide by the same principles they are expected to. When this happens, toxicity can flare into outright breaches of ethical and even legal codes, wreaking tremendous reputational damage that requires considerable time and resources to recoup, if it is repairable at all [5].

Silo Mentality

A related feature of toxic individuals is a tendency to neglect broader frames of reference in making choices. A toxic individual does not see today's choices in larger contexts that include the interests and aims of current coworkers, as well as predecessors and successors in the organization and those it serves. Choices tend to be made in a rather immediate context defined by the convenience and interest of the toxic individual. Dedication to such larger constituencies is antithetical to toxicity [6].

In describing this difference, it can be useful to distinguish between owners and stewards. Toxic individuals tend to see themselves as owners, free to use any available resources as indicated to promote their own interests. Stewards, on the other hand, tend to see themselves as protecting and promoting resources for use and enjoyment by larger constituencies, including even people and communities they have never met.

Obsession with Major Initiatives

Toxic outlooks also thrive in contexts in which attention is focused on occasional big events, as opposed to the ordinary tasks of day-to-day work. When particular individuals or initiatives rise to such prominence that little time and attention are devoted to the contributions of the people who actually do the day-to-day work on the front lines, engagement tends to suffer. People say to themselves, "Perhaps the fact that the organization does not recognize my work is a sign that it does not really matter" [7].

For this reason, we need to beware of attempts to install a culture of hero worship. Acts of heroism are generally understood to be big events, which draw attention away from the many smaller acts of service people perform every day. Moreover, heroism tends to focus our attention on the acts of single individuals, distracting us from the collective contributions of many people, which cumulatively make a bigger difference [8].

Denial

Another form of neglect that sows the seeds of toxicity is the refusal to recognize distressing actions and the individuals responsible for them. Toxicity does not require frank malevolence and can grow on little more than a strong desire to suppose that everything is going along swimmingly. Such neglect can develop into a pattern of denial that prevents people from even recognizing destructive conduct, let alone confronting it and correcting it in a forthright manner.

One of the surest ways to foment toxicity, in other words, is to pretend that it does not exist. When this happens once or twice, people may not think much of it, but if it becomes increasingly apparent that

colleagues are doing nothing about bad conduct, it creates a widening chasm between the kind of workplace individuals aspire to be part of and the kind of workplace they actually inhabit. This can lead to hypocrisy and cynicism, both key ingredients in the recipe for toxicity [9].

Enron

Consider a cautionary tale that weaves together many of these themes of toxicity. Jeffrey Skilling was the CEO of Enron Corporation, whose failure represented one of the largest bankruptcies in US history. In 2006, despite insisting that he had "no knowledge" of the scandal and pleading not guilty to 35 counts of fraud and insider trading, Skilling was convicted of these and other felonies and sentenced to 14 years in prison [10].

It has been reported that Skilling's favorite book was Richard Dawkins's [11]*The Selfish Gene*, and he is said to have believed that people are motivated by two things, money and fear. As a result, he helped develop a system known as "rank and yank," which led to the termination of the lowest 15% of employees every year. Skilling also sought to intimidate others, an attitude that could produce "rude, contemptuous, and brutal" conduct toward subordinates.

If these accounts are accurate, it is no wonder that many Enron employees came to regard their workplace as toxic. In such a setting, people could easily conclude that their contributions were not valued, that the organization was exploiting them, and that there was no one with whom they could raise concerns without fear of reprisal. People were cowed into silence, and by the end very few people really knew what the organization was up to.

Conclusions

The time has come to stop overlooking the important role of neglect in fostering workplace toxicity. We need to open our eyes, ears, and hearts to the experiences of our colleagues and understand what our organizations and their work looks like from their point of view. Above all, we need to ensure that people

feel safe and empowered to share their concerns and create a workplace culture where no one feels they

are laboring in obscurity.

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