

By  
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# Toxicity at Work

## Getting clear on 'toxicity' in the workplace

The term 'toxic' has been popularised to such an extent in recent times - in management and leadership literature driven by the desire to generate eye-catching headlines, as well as through click-bait on social media - that we could all be forgiven for becoming more or less inured to the impact of a word that has traditionally conjured up vivid and usually disturbing images:

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*Jimmy Fallon apologises to Tonight Show staff after toxic workplace allegations*

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*Creative industries are notorious as toxic workplaces run by 'talented genius' bosses*

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*A toxic culture in places like the CBI and the Met can be changed*



“”

*Inaction around toxic leadership  
is taking a terrible toll*



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"It was ever thus!" you might say. And on one level, I would agree. But things are moving fast in our uncertain world. Inaction around toxic leadership is taking a terrible toll – in the corporate world, according to Gallup, the US economy loses up to \$550 billion per year in lost productivity while the Society for Human Resource Management puts it at \$230 billion. The hit in terms of value destruction is immense: the damage to employer brand, to talent attraction and to talent retention are just some of the effects. And all of this before we consider the profound effect on the mental well-being of people at work - the damage done to human beings.

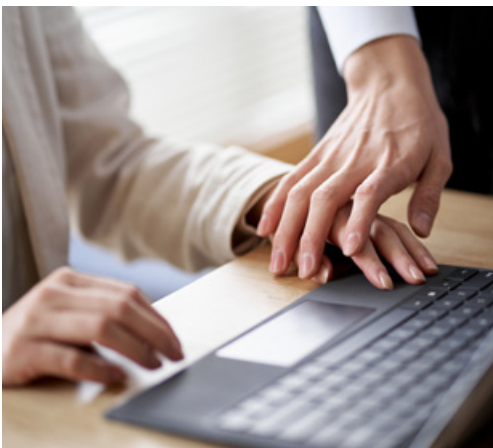
### Toxicity – a violent history

Alex Christian notes in a 2023 article that 'toxic' and 'toxicity' has "a violent history."

*"In ancient times, Scythian archers dipped their arrowheads into a mixture of blood, dung and snake venom. The Greeks called this 'toxicon pharmakon', loosely translated as 'poisoned arrows'. Borrowed from Latin and French, 'toxic' was first recorded in English in the 17th century to describe poison."*

**Alex Christian: "When 'toxicity' in the workplace has grown to mean so much, it's also come to mean so little"** (BBC, 17 October 2023)

Given its powerful roots, and the 'x' in the middle of it, toxic as a word has it all – impact both from the sound of it and the look of it. But what is really going on now? What do the words 'toxic' and 'toxicity' cover today? Do they still pack a punch? More importantly, do they still have meaning?



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*toxic organisational cultures are very much alive and making their (often indelible) mark on humans*

### **How toxicity in the workplace manifests itself**

The leading authorities on toxicity in the workplace, Donald Sull and Charles Sull, have observed through their research that toxic organisational cultures are very much alive and making their (often indelible) mark on humans. The Sulls show how toxicity in organisations can be broken down into five principal constituent parts:

1. Lack of inclusion;
2. Disrespect;
3. Cutthroat behaviour;
4. Abusive management and
5. Unethical behaviour.

They also point out in their report *The Toxic Culture Gap Shows Companies Are Failing Women*, that women are 41% more likely to experience toxic workplace culture than men, (source: Donald Sull and Charles Sull, *The Toxic Culture Gap Shows Companies Are Failing Women*, MIT Sloan Management Review, 2022). If we accept that people – human beings – play a central role in the creation of an organisational culture, then it follows that toxic cultures must in some way be an outcome of toxic or dysfunctional human behaviour, shaped by the leaders of those cultures. And yet, it is not just the leaders. It is also an outcome of a debased quality of *followership*. This is what we can call *systemic toxic collusion*, where leaders who display toxic leadership behaviours are shaped and enabled by colluding organisational systems even as they themselves imprint their values (or lack thereof) on the body politic of the organisation, forming a repeatable pattern or cycle which can only be broken by intentional disruption.

Unchallenged and left unaccountable, these leaders eventually poison the system (sometimes in pockets to begin with - and then gradually the whole enterprise). Have you ever wondered how these leaders manage to make it to the top of the organisation? It is not just because they are masters of managing up and manipulating down. I believe the root cause is way more worrying: it is the system of collusion that prevails in many places, due to poor and unethical leadership and the inability to live by the espoused values of the organisation. It is also attributable to sheer indifference, laziness, lack of courage and/or failure of governance on the part of others (for which boards and senior management teams are, in my view, equally culpable). This is why many organisations, even when freed from their toxic leadership - after the board fires the CEO for example - still struggle to change. It takes time, effort and sheer determination for the new leadership to

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25 yrs

It took 25 years for the board of amusement park operator Plopsa to exit the CEO despite years of toxicity and suffering under his watch

turn things around. It requires building trust in an environment where there has been precious little for a considerable amount of time – sometimes decades. For example, the board of the Belgian amusement park operator Plopsa finally decided to exit the CEO despite years, 25 to be exact, of toxicity and suffering under his watch.

**Entering the toxicity danger zone**

So how would you know you were entering the danger zone i.e., when toxicity is beginning to poison your organisation? The table below gives some pointers.

| On the surface and obvious  | Deep inside and not-so-obvious   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passive aggressive behaviour from bosses (and teammates)</li> <li>• High rates of absenteeism and presenteeism</li> <li>• High attrition rates including frequent turnover in senior management</li> <li>• Intimidation including bullying, gaslighting and blaming</li> <li>• A lack of respect for people's personal time</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lack of care – resulting in a compassion- and empathy-free zone</li> <li>• A lack of trust leading to a lack of psychological safety</li> <li>• Lip service paid to diversity, equity and inclusion</li> <li>• Stasis in terms of innovation and creativity</li> <li>• Mental ill-health on the part of employees</li> <li>• True 'Purpose' in decline</li> </ul> |



Our failure to address toxic behaviour is now at a crisis point in my view.

### What can we do to tackle toxic behaviour?

The first thing to recognise is that toxic behaviour occurs on a broad spectrum. Sometimes, when dealing with a leader or individual with certain toxic behavioural traits, the response should be one of empathy and compassion - such individuals are profoundly lacking in self-awareness and simply do not notice how their behaviour impacts others. They need help to gain the insights necessary to change, so coaching and mentoring may be beneficial in some cases. This represents one way forward. Unfortunately, there are leaders among us who do not care about such things as empathy and compassion and refuse to change. In fact, I am also hearing how some fundamentally unempathetic, harsh bosses are now learning how to 'model' empathetic working – a truly scary development – without a shred of authenticity or truth associated with it. So to deal with these individuals, as well as those who have narcissistic patterns of behaviour or who exhibit certain traits associated with psychopathy, we need a significantly more intentional, muscular and courageous response.

In their seminal paper *'The toxic triangle: destructive leadership, susceptible followers, and conducive environments'*, Art Padilla, Robert Hogan and Robert B Kaiser showed how three principle areas (or 'domains') come together, with their associated elements, to cause toxicity and destruction. These are:

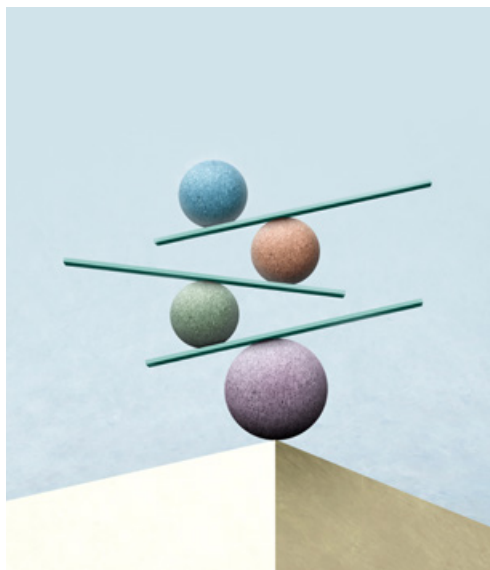
- Destructive Leaders
- Susceptible Followers
- Conducive Environments.



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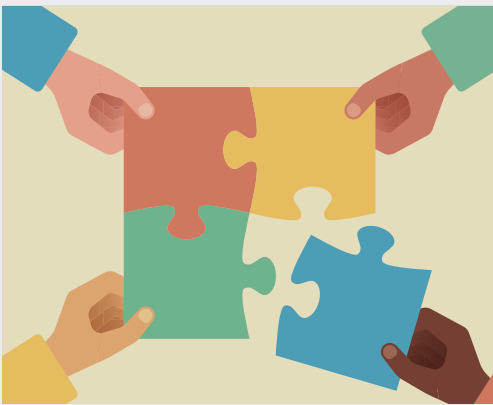


Our task, therefore, is to disrupt the evolution - in our respective organisations - of these three domains. To achieve this 'positive disruption', we need to counter the effects of toxic leaders and the seepage of their influence into organisational systems by intentionally changing 'the container' for the better. I suggest experimenting with these approaches:

1. **Positive Outreach** (for building a positive brand). Share positive and authentic stories about the organisation, focusing on honest, ethical activities.
2. **Best Fit** (finding non-toxic people to join you). Leverage AI to help screen potential newcomers. Stay sceptical of traditional one-to-one interviews and try to find ways to circumvent bias.
3. **Belonging** (building solid DE&I foundations to support the development of trust). Make sure you promote the idea of caring for others. If you can, push the idea of altruism.
4. **Talent Glue** (building critical skills and the right conditions for psychological safety). The majority of people love learning and developing - they enjoy challenge. Make sure yours is a learning culture.

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*To achieve this 'positive disruption', we need to counter the effects of toxic leaders*



**5. Alignment** (aligning organisational purpose/values with individual purpose/values). Keep asking the question of yourself and others: why are we here, doing what we are doing? If you can't answer this – and it is this question that helps you to understand your purpose – you will need to do some deep reflection. Be inquisitive about the motivation of others.

**6. An Eye to The Future** (ensure a humane departure to support future return). If you can, mark the departure of talented and good people in a way that keeps the door open for a future return (if that is attractive to both parties).

**7. Keep Connected** (build an alumni ecosystem to connect past and present to the future). Develop warm human networks consisting of 'strong-tie' networks (your closest friends) and 'weak-tie' networks (people who you know but who are less tightly connected).

What you want for your organisation and for your colleagues is an environment where people don't just survive – they thrive. Experimenting with the seven approaches above will provide a good foundation for creating more human and humane workplaces. They represent a set of antidotes to the systemic toxicity that too many of us experience on a day-to-day basis.

They must surely be worth a try as we strive for more human-centred organisations.

***Toxic Humans: Combatting Poisonous Leadership in Boards and Organisations*** is available via Amazon, Google Books, Barnes & Noble and Emerald Publishing Bookstore <https://books.emeraldinsight.com>

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