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## Coaching Culture v Toxic Culture

The unwritten rules of “how we do things around here” that shape a company’s culture can make or break its staff and its performance. But it can be hard, if you are embedded in a culture, to diagnose how healthy it is. This article reveals the ten tell-tale symptoms of a toxic work culture, how to identify them, and how to bring about lasting change.

### The ten symptoms of a toxic work culture

#### 1. Narcissistic leadership

Narcissistic leaders are often found at the head of toxic cultures. They typically exercise power without responsibility, while their reports bear responsibility without power. These leaders demand perfect standards from everyone else, while vainly trying to appear perfect themselves. They are often at one extreme or the other of the big-picture - v - micro-management scale. Big-picture narcissists fail to give their workforce clear expectations, while micro-manager narcissists neither appreciate nor tap into the diverse qualities of their teams. Bullying may be overt or take subtle and manipulative forms, like freezing people out or withholding information.

#### 2. The blame and shame game

Authentic positive feedback is in short supply: people only hear about what is not right. The toxic leader represents a threat, not a support, and public humiliation is rife. A common symptom is that real decisions do not get made at official meetings, but in unofficial silos of two or three people, in other places, at other times. What appears to have been readily agreed at the main meeting – where, in fact, everyone was just keeping their heads down and appeasing the feared boss – will not be successfully carried out. Middle managers may share their reluctance with their teams, who may even try to sabotage the results. When people feel unable to follow the toxic leader, an unofficial leader may emerge, whom colleagues consult in secret before addressing or responding to the toxic leader.

#### 3. Toxic competition

There is nothing wrong with healthy competition, like striving to win the “Employee of the Month” award. Toxic competition happens when a team’s energy is focused on petty rivalries with other departments, or taking colleagues down, rather than pooling efforts to succeed. When the sales

team is putting all its skill, talent and effort into proving that the R&D department's new product is unsaleable, no-one can emerge a winner. They have forgotten that their enemy is not another team, but external competitors in their market.

#### 4. Poor work/life balance

24/7 availability is demanded for emails and phone calls, even when people are on holiday. No-one can thrive under this kind of pressure. It leads to extremes of workaholism - forcing staff to put in long hours to meet impossible expectations - and absenteeism - as people burn out and succumb to fatigue and stress. Resilience fails and the top performers leave.

#### 5. Trash talking

People talk the organisation down; internally to each other, and externally to clients, feedback websites and the national press. They take no pride in the business and relish its failures.

#### 6. Poor customer service

The receptionists or customer service agents are rude, chippy or unsmiling. They seem to be set on finding ways not to help. If there is a toxic culture at the top of an organisation it will seep all the way down to the bottom so that customers are treated the way the CEO treats the top team.

#### 7. Low enthusiasm

People do not smile, laugh or joke with each other. Opinions are not freely offered, for fear of being shot down, and people wait for others to speak first. There is a sense of frustration, resignation and unease.

#### 8. Lip service values

Most organisations have values and mission statements. It is often the case that in a toxic culture, the more people proclaim these values, the less they "walk the talk". In a happy, thriving culture, the values do not need to be stated – everyone feels and lives them.

#### 9. Toxic peer pressure

People try to hold each other back. Enthusiastic new recruits are told to work more slowly because they are "showing the rest of us up". Toxic colleagues do not want to achieve more – they want everyone else to achieve less.

#### 10. Low trust

In a toxic culture, nobody trusts anyone except in small cliques. No-one trusts the toxic leader, the leaders don't trust their teams, and employees are wary of each other. People spend time defending their position and territory and will not openly share information.

Does this all sound depressingly familiar?

Negative behaviours, if left unchecked, can lead to a poisonous environment that feels inevitable and impossible to change. But it is actually possible to change the culture of an organisation. Step one is to recognise the problem.

## So you have a toxic work culture – what can you do?

If there is a toxic culture in your organisation, it can seem like an insurmountable problem: perhaps negative behaviours appear widespread and entrenched; maybe nobody else seems to recognise the issue; or it could be that the leaders in the business are at the root of the problem.

It is one thing to recognise that there is an issue with workplace behaviours which are creating a toxic environment for your organisation. But it is another to try to fix it. Often the best way to start is small:

### Quantify the problem

You may have recognised the 10 toxic behaviours identified above. Now you need to understand the scale of the issue in order to work out exactly what needs fixing.

### Official sources

Employee surveys are a rich source of intelligence, and if carried out regularly will reveal trends in the workplace. What does the data show – is there evidence of problematic behaviour? Similarly, customer feedback can be illuminating – customer satisfaction can be a close corollary of employee experience.

### Unofficial sources

Often – particularly in workplaces with toxic leadership – staff do not give feedback on those negative behaviours for fear of retribution, or because they assume that no action will be taken. A recent survey of US employees found 63% had witnessed disruptive behaviour but had not reported it. If you feel that's the case in your business, can you gather anecdotal or "unofficial" evidence of individual issues? Are there trusted team members with whom you can talk confidentially, who have the ear of their peers and can describe problems anonymously?

### A wider business and industry perspective

It is worth reviewing the evidence you gather within the context of your business challenges. When you review the culture issues in the workplace and the overall challenges the business is facing can you see a link? How is the organisation performing? Are sales where they should be? What is customer satisfaction like? What about employee health, engagement, and retention?

Taking a wider perspective, are the issues you're seeing prevalent throughout your industry? An eye on what is happening elsewhere can help to place your situation, to grasp what needs fixing, possibly to act as a cautionary tale for what not to do, and ultimately to show what happens if you fail to address the problem of a toxic workplace.

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## If I ignore our toxic culture will it go away?

It can sometimes seem as if the problem is so deeply embedded and political that it cannot be fixed. So, what is the risk of not dealing with a toxic culture? Here are a few high-profile examples of toxic cultures that got out of hand.

- The financial services industry has an unfortunate reputation for negative workplace environments. Recently, 331 year old insurance market [Lloyds of London implemented a new code of conduct for staff](#), and a bullying and harassment helpline following claims of sexual harassment.
- This is not just a problem for old traditional organisations– [fintech startup Revolut made the news this year](#) for its burnout culture resulting in high staff turnover and allegations of questionable work practices.
- Big Four accountancy firm Deloitte has fired 20 partners in the last four years for inappropriate behaviour.

Toxic workplaces are typified by poor performance, high staff turnover and low employee engagement. That is a costly mix of missed opportunities, subpar productivity and inflated staff and recruitment costs. But a toxic environment taken to its extreme can add to that with reputation - damaging headlines and expensive lawsuits. One recent [sexual harassment case won by a city banker against BNP Paribas](#) could result in a pay-out of £4m.

So you have diagnosed a toxic culture, quantified the problem in your business and thought about the impact of not dealing with the issue. The next step is to obtain buy-in from your managers to tackle a counter-productive working environment.

## How to get senior team buy-in to fix a toxic culture

The leaders of a business set the culture: it cascades from them throughout the organisation. But what if the leaders of your business are the problem?

Working with Sir Richard Branson inspired my own coaching methodology. At Virgin I experienced first-hand that if leaders lead through coaching they get more out of their teams. They enjoy management more when teams come to them with solutions rather than problems – or worse, if teams actively conceal problems through fear of blame. And coaching leaders' teams enjoy coming to work more – finding opportunities to be creative, contribute to the business and take responsibility. A coaching culture is the polar opposite of a toxic culture: overall performance, retention, hiring, and employee engagement all improve.

If the toxic environment in your organisation is being set by members of the senior team, you might be wondering how you can get the buy-in you need to fix the culture.

## Building a business case for change

You can build your case for developing a coaching culture by blending facts, identifying allies, working towards small easy-wins and taking advantage of emotional responses:

## Facts

In this article I have explored how to go about diagnosing and quantifying a toxic culture in your organisation and given some examples of bad company cultures that have hit the headlines. These facts may serve as the foundation for building a knowledge base tailored to your organisation that will set the context for your case for change. You will need facts at your disposal to prove there is a problem.

## Allies

When you have to manage change upwards as well as down, particularly when your leaders may be contributing to the unhealthy working practices, you need to identify allies to work with. They could be your manager, peers, or senior leaders in other teams. You will need someone to share ideas with and who can help you champion the cause. This is critical.

## Small easy-wins

When problems loom large the response can often be not to act. When it comes to trying to win broader support for your mission, it can help to outline “easy-wins”. So what can you do to demonstrate simple steps towards change?

Physician, heal thyself! Build your personal manager-as-coach skills and put them into practice. Keep notes of models you use, how you have implemented them and the results and feedback you’ve achieved. Use this to show that small steps can deliver results fast.

Armed with your personal results, engage your allies to push for a small pilot. Train a small group of managers to coach. Again, capture the feedback and results, and promote those successes within the business.

## Take advantage of emotional responses

You’ll be surprised at the power of a positive word of mouth campaign. As word gets out about the impact of the manager-as-coach pilot, you will pique the interest of colleagues and build demand for your programme.

It will become clear that coaching leaders are more effective leaders – and if the cold facts won’t convert the more tricky senior team, a mix of human curiosity and a desire to be personally successful just might do it. We’ve seen it happen – bullies can be transformed if they can learn a new, positive and effective leadership style. Coaching culture spreads like a happy virus when people realise what is possible.

## How to create a coaching culture

Here is a summary of the Culture at Work Ten-Point-Plan for building a coaching culture, which include the steps discussed in this article for identifying the culture. For the full details read our [article](#).

1. Identify the vision and purpose
2. Run an organisational health check
3. Create a stakeholder map
4. Get buy-in from the relevant stakeholders

5. Lay the foundations
6. Measure
7. Implement pilots
8. Evaluate and plan the next phase
9. Implement next phase
10. Maintain the momentum

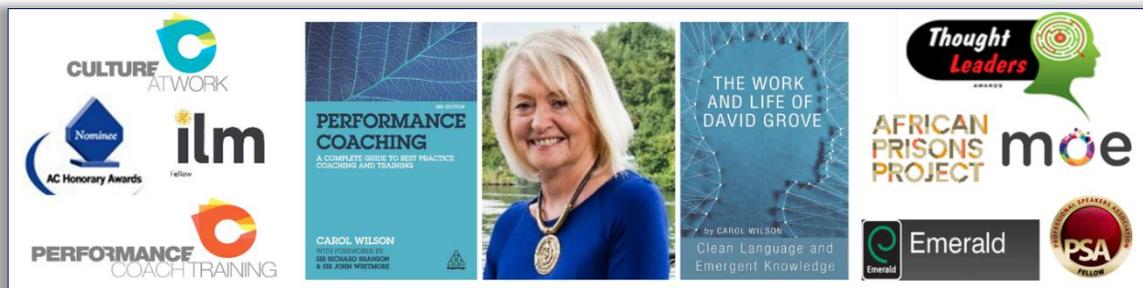
The benefits of coaching in business are powerful and the impact is speedy: it improves individuals' performance and engagement as well as team effectiveness. A coaching culture encourages accountability and creativity, allowing people space to learn from mistakes and to be rewarded for achievements. T

*"Here is the good news: the more you free your people to think for themselves, the more they can help you. You don't have to do this all on your own." – Sir Richard Branson*

## References

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## About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training'*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and *'The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge'*. She has contributed to several other books and published over 60 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.