Hostile workplaces, including abusive supervision, toxic personalities, workplace bullies, and counterproductive climates, create a tax on organizations and their members, wasting resources, degrading performance, and costing productivity. This summarizes the cost, causes, and interventions of a hostile workplace.

True leadership is a relationship of trust. "Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes."[1] "Over time, I have come to this simple definition of leadership: Leadership is getting results in a way that inspires trust."[2] Toxicity sabotages trust.

Call it what it is, *toxicity*. A toxin hinders reproduction; stifles growth and development; blocks or sabotages nutrition process; inhibits healing; and shuts down functions and systems.

1. The Cost.
   a. Workers affected – 10-30%[3]; workers average three toxic leaders in 18 years[4]
   b. Avoidance and worry. Experiencing incivility, 63% avoided the person and 80% worried[5]; experiencing toxic leader, 58% avoided and 52% worried twice a week; 2.5 and 3.7 hours per week respectively[6].
   c. Talking with and adversely impacting co-workers and family members.[7] 44% and 51% at least twice per week; 3.2 hours and 1.8 hours per week.[8]
   d. Adverse health effects – physical and mental; stress-related illness; suicide.[9]
   e. Job satisfaction and absenteeism.[10]
   f. Erodes team norms and effectiveness.[11]
   g. Organizational performance, reputation, wasted resources, replacement costs.[12]
2. The Perpetrators.
   a. Types.
      i. Inherent[13] – from childhood learned to get their needs met by bullying.
         1. Narcissists need: to feel important and superior, to be admired, to take advantage, to attack; they overcome insecurity with arrogance
         2. They want us: to comply, surrender, give attention, be passive, be defensive
      ii. Situational – a mismatch of leadership style and organizational culture/status quo.
      iii. Functional – the belief that results require harshness.
   b. Jobs that tend toward toxicity: High stress; low autonomy; high insecurity; high employability; highly skilled.[14]
   c. Six key behaviors.[15]
      i. Shaming and blaming.
      ii. Passive hostility.
      iii. Team sabotage.
      iv. Lack of compassion.
      v. Corrosive interpersonal style.
      vi. The appearance of exploiting others for personal gain.
3. The Conditions.
   a. Culture-forming mechanisms.[16]
      i. Leader modeling. Personal conduct, communication, attention.

1. Leaders tend not to recognize toxic direct reports.
2. Toxic protectors and buffers:
   a. They have a personal or symbiotic relationship with the perpetrators.
   b. They need power and control.
   c. They are biased toward results, ignoring the methods.

ii. Defining and measuring success: performance metrics, values and ethics. The culture does not specify values-based behaviors and has a high tolerance for toxic behaviors.

iii. Crisis response. Adhere to the culture in chaotic contexts. Restructuring to accommodate the toxic person.

iv. Recognizing performance. Praise, promotions, and reprimands. Tolerant as long as the toxic person is productive. Lack of accountability. Downsizing and the pressure to produce.

v. Distributing resources. Tolerant of unproductive meetings.

vi. Developing followers. The climate changes when the toxic person is present.

b. Neutralizing, detoxification, decontamination, and the creation of a healthy culture.

i. Successful detox depends on integrating multiple strategies at three levels – organizational, team (division, department, section), and individual.

ii. Two key factors.
   1. Systems dynamics influence whether an organization either promotes or inhibits toxicity.
   2. An organization's values identify principles or standards for addressing toxicity.

iii. Organizational strategies.
   1. Clarify and integrate values-based behaviors, especially respect and trust, throughout the organization – policies, actions, decisions, expectations, team interaction, accountability of all personnel, prohibit abuse of the standards.
   2. Incorporate respect and trust in leader development to reinforce leadership involves both results and values. Every meeting is an opportunity for leader development.
   3. Incorporate values into performance feedback to clarify expectations. Job descriptions directly connect values to performance.
   4. Select team members for the desired culture. The job posting clearly connects values with qualifications and performance expectations. Check references by phone.
   5. Use 360-degree feedback systems to create self-awareness and improve performance – individual, Team 360, Organizational climate surveys.
   6. Conduct *targeted feedback*, a systematic method of problem solving applied to human behavior, to address and coach behavior change.[17]
   7. Intervene with toxic protectors and buffers to address their counterproductive tolerance and enabling.
   8. Recognize values-based performance to reinforce the desired culture.
   9. Establish mechanisms for advice and safe reporting to encourage bystanders and targets to blow the whistle.

4. The Targets.
   a. Characteristics.[18] Targets' tendencies:

       i. Higher neuroticism.
      ii. Higher negative affect: sadness, anger, anxiety, and fear.
     iii. Females and minorities.
     iv. Those with a disadvantageous power imbalance.
  b. Self-defense.
       i. Self-protection.
         1. Do not take it personally but accept the toxic reality.
         2. Practice good health, physical fitness, and nutrition.
         3. Reframe the situation; conduct sensemaking; create a metaphor for understanding; make it a learning experience.
         4. Limit exposure to the perpetrator and other negative relationships. Don't retaliate or perpetuate negative gossip. Create emotional distance.
         5. Create an emotional safe zone. Befriend good people for mutual support. Speak positive messages.
         6. Enlist a coach to train stress management
      ii. When directly engaging:
         1. Don't interrupt.
         2. Ask questions for clarification: "Do you really mean what you just said?" Could you repeat that back to me in a calmer tone? I missed what you said."
         3. Give feedback on observations (the FAU technique) – "You seem frustrated, [angry], [upset]. What's that about?"
         4. Confront/challenge with caution; don't facilitate defensiveness.
     iii. Counteraction.
         1. Document EVERYTHING.
         2. Use objective criteria, organizational values, and the adverse effects on performance, productivity, readiness, resilience, and morale.
         3. Identify protectors and buffers.
         4. Identify senior leaders who have authority to act and do not have a conflict of interest.
         5. Accept the reality of the anxiety of reporting and the investigation.
         6. Remind yourself that the investment is worth it
         7. Consult with EEO; Labor, Management, and Employee Relations; and Ombudsman.

Every employee deserves a workplace in which to thrive and contribute meaningfully to organizational success.

Notes

[1] Joseph Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2001).

[2] Stephen M.R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

[3] Bennett J. Tepper, Lauren Simon, and Hee Man Park, "Abusive Supervision," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 4, no. 1 (2017): 123–52, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-041015-062539; Aaron Schat, Michael Frone, and Kevin Kelloway, "Prevalence of Workplace Aggression in the U.S. Workforce:

Findings from a National Study," in *Handbook of Workp[Lace Violence*, ed. Kevin Kelloway, Julian Barling, and Joseph Hurrell (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 47–89; Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik, Sarah J. Tracy, and Jess K. Alberts, "Burned by Bullying in the American Workplace: Prevalence, Perception, Degree and Impact," *Journal of Management Studies* 44, no. 6 (September 2007): 837–62, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2007.00715.x; Ethics & Compliance Initiative, "Interpersonal Misconduct in the Workplace: What It Is, How It Occurs and What You Should Do About It," Global Business Ethics Survey 2018 (Vienna, VA: Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2018), https://www.ethics.org/download-the-2018-global-business-ethics-survey/; John P. Steele, "Antecedents and Consequences of Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Army: A Two Year Review and Recommended Solutions" (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Leadership, June 2011).

[4] Kenneth R. Williams, "Toxic Leadership in Defense and Federal Workplaces: Sabotaging the Mission and Innovation," *International Journal of Public Leadership* 14, no. 3 (July 2018): 179–98, https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-04-2018-0023.

[5] Christine L. Porath and Christine M. Pearson, "The Cost of Bad Behavior," *Organizational Dynamics* 39, no. 1 (January 2010): 64–71, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2009.10.006.

[6] Williams, "Toxic Leadership in Defense and Federal Workplaces."

[7] Judith A. Black, "The Lived Experiences of the Army Officer's Wife to an Army Commander's Toxic Leadership: A Phenomenological Study" (Ph.D., Capella University, 2015), http://search.proquest.com/docview/1705951056/abstract/3BCD4B63D9A84BF3PQ/1; Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway, *Toxic Workplace: Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Kindle Edition., 2009).

[8] Williams, "Toxic Leadership in Defense and Federal Workplaces."

[9] Bennett J. Tepper, "Health Consequences of Organizational Injustice: Tests of Main and Interactive Effects," *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes* 86, no. 2 (November 2001): 197–215, https://doi.org/10.1006/obhd.2001.2951.

[10] Porath and Pearson, "The Cost of Bad Behavior"; Christine Porath and Christine Pearson, "The Price of Incivility," *CFA Digest* 43, no. 2 (May 2013): 88–89; Christine L. Porath and Christine M. Pearson, *The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility Is Damaging Your Business and What to Do About It*, vol. 39 (New York: Portfolio. Kindle Edition., 2009); Porath and Pearson; Williams, "Toxic Leadership in Defense and Federal Workplaces"; Kenneth R. Williams, "The Cost of Tolerating Toxic Behaviors in the Department of Defense Workplace," *Military Review*, no. July-August (2019).

[11] Christine Porath and Christine Pearson, "How Toxic Colleagues Corrode Performance," *Harvard Business Review* 87, no. 4 (April 2009): 24–24; Williams, "Toxic Leadership in Defense and Federal Workplaces."

[12] Al-Karim Samnani and Parbudyal Singh, "20 Years of Workplace Bullying Research: A Review of the Antecedents and Consequences of Bullying in the Workplace," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 17, no. 6 (November 2012): 581–89, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2012.08.004; Williams, "The Cost of Tolerating Toxic Behaviors in the Department of Defense Workplace."

[13] Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians -- and How We Can Survive Them* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Kusy and Holloway, *Toxic Workplace: Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power*.

[14] Samnani and Singh, "20 Years of Workplace Bullying Research."

[15] Kusy and Holloway, *Toxic Workplace: Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power*; George Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press. Kindle Edition., 2015); George E. Reed, "Toxic Leadership," *Military Review* 84, no. 4 (August 7, 2004): 67–71.

[16] Edgar H. Schein, "Organizational Culture," *American Psychologist*, Organizational Psychology, 45, no. 2 (February 1990): 109–19, https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.45.2.109; Kusy and Holloway, *Toxic Workplace: Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power*.

[17] Kusy and Holloway, *Toxic Workplace: Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power*.

[18] Samnani and Singh, "20 Years of Workplace Bullying Research."