



The Cost of Workplace Conflict: Neutralizing Toxic Behaviors and Their Effects

Ken Williams, PhD

“Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes.”

“Over time, I have come to this simple definition of leadership: Leadership is getting results in a way that inspires trust.”

Leaders set the conditions for the organization as a whole and individual members to thrive and flourish.

Leadership is a social construct; influence without authority

Joseph Rost, 2001. *Leadership for the Twenty-first Century*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers), 102.
Stephen Covey, *The Speed of Trust* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

The Effects of Organizational Toxicity

Why use the metaphor “toxic”?

- Hinders Reproductive Potential
- Stifles Growth and Development
- Blocks or Sabotages Nutrition Process
- Inhibits Healing
- Inhibits systems and functions



Sherry Perkins, “Toxic leaders: Mission versus management,” Profiles International Inc. (2012). http://www.slideshare.net/Profiles_Asia/toxic-leaders?qid=8e1da618-3ffb-4600-81a3-841f9cb31bb6&v=&b=&from_search=9

The Consequences of Organizational Toxicity

Toxic, uncivil, and hostile behavior is associated with:

Individual

- Psychological well-being
- Physiological well-being
- Suicide
- Absenteeism
- Intent to leave
- Job satisfaction
- Family impact

Team

- Team effectiveness
- Team norms

Organizational

- Organizational performance
- Reputation
- Wasted resources
- Replacement costs

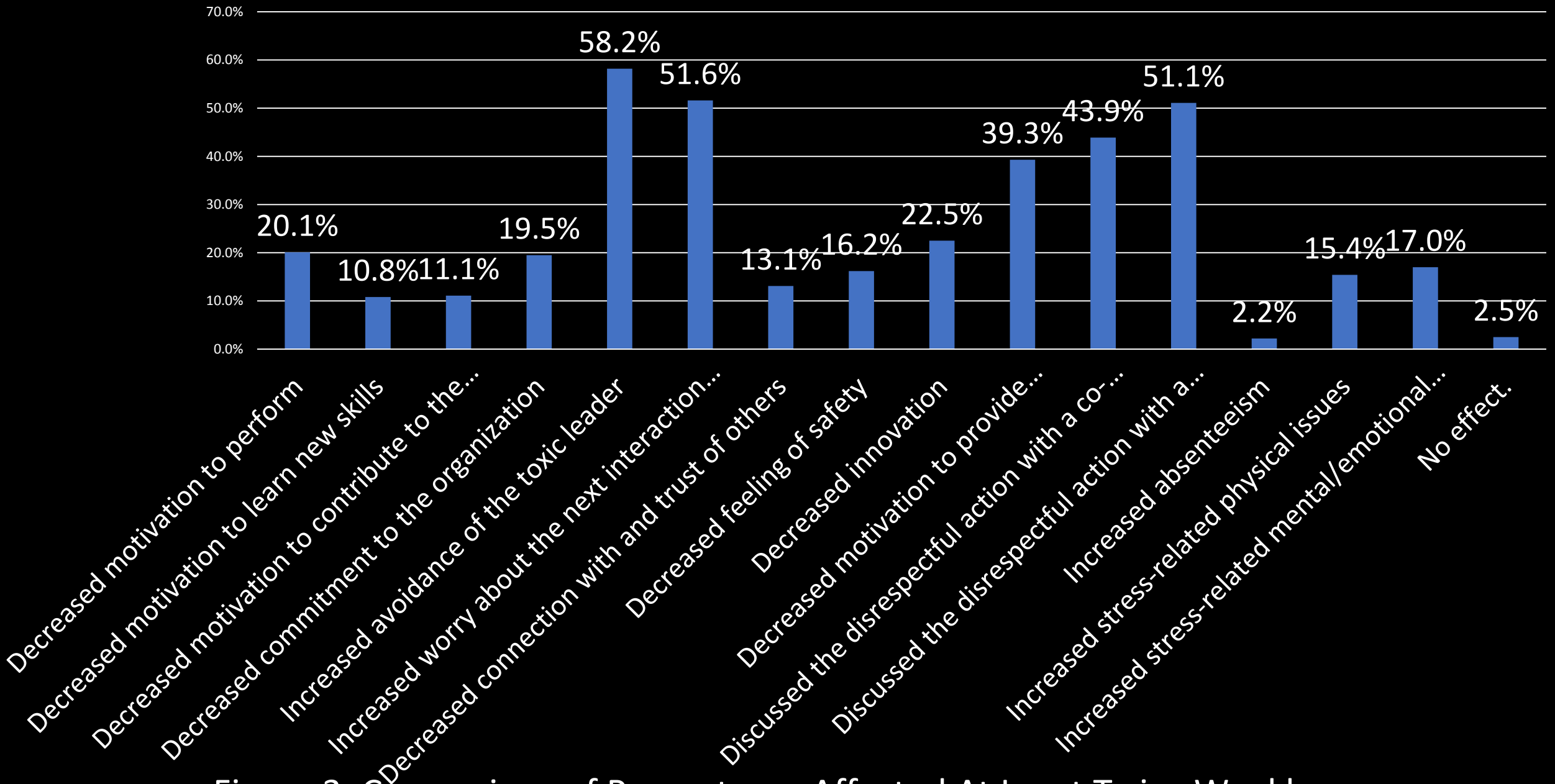


Figure 3. Comparison of Percentages Affected At Least Twice Weekly

Hypothetical 1,000 member organization; Prevalence: 10%; 100 members

Annual Salary: \$50,000; Work hours: 2,080; Hourly Wage: \$24

	<u># mbrs</u>	<u>Hrs/wk</u>	<u>Cost</u>
Worry (50%)	50	3.66	\$228,750
Avoidance (58%)	58	2.5	\$181,975
Lost time talking with co-workers (44%)	44	3.23	\$177,650
Absenteeism (2.2%)	2	1	\$2,750
Physical health (15%)	15	.5	\$9,375
Mental health (17%)	17	.5	\$10,625
Physician (\$76/hr)	15	.5	\$29,640
Mental Health Provider (\$76/hr)	17	.5	\$33,592
Replacement of targets (25%)	25	\$75,000	\$1,875,000
Replacement of witnesses (20%)	20	\$75,000	\$1,500,000
TOTAL	218	140,695	\$4,049,357

Perpetrators

- Some are intrinsically toxic - Narcissism
- Some are functionally toxic
- Some are situationally toxic
- Tend to work in positions or careers of:
 - High stress
 - Low autonomy
 - High insecurity
 - High employability
 - Highly skilled



Toxic Behaviors Undermine Trust

- Shaming
- Passive hostility
- Team sabotage
- Lack of compassion
- A negative interpersonal style
- A perception of getting ahead at others' expense

At least once or twice a week for a duration of six months

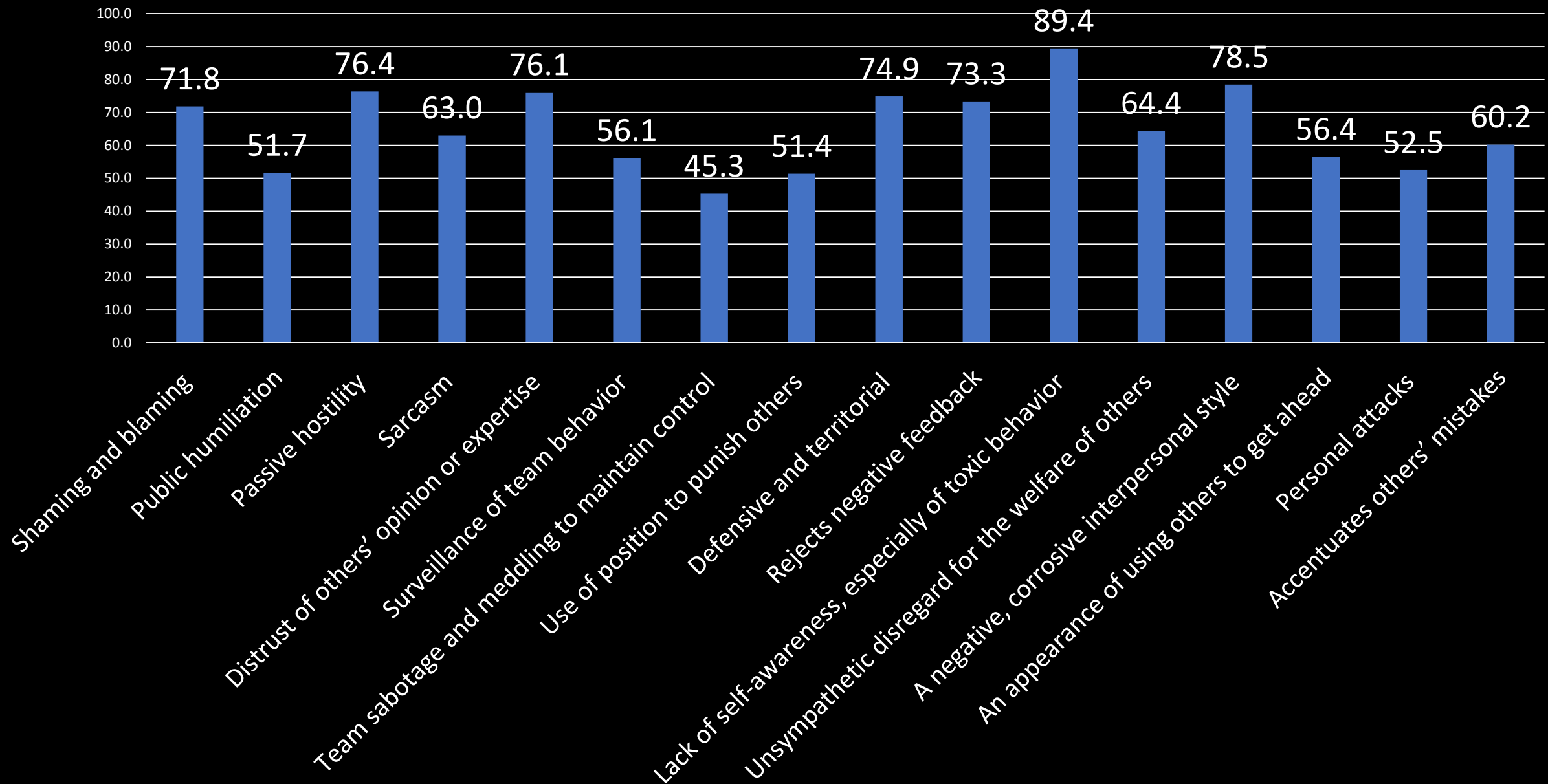
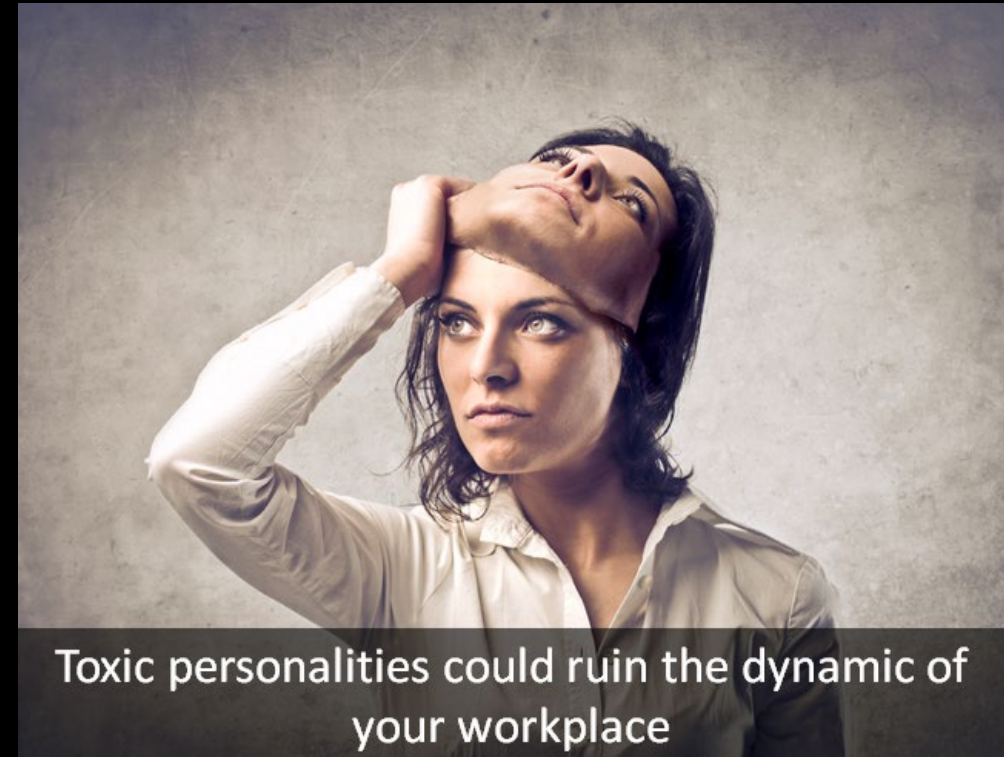


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents that observed specific toxic behaviors at least weekly.

Detecting Behaviors that Undermine High Trust

- Toxic people are experts at managing upward – kiss up & kick down
- Collect data from a variety of sources – all levels, peers, key stakeholders
- The climate changes when the toxic person is present
- The team tolerates unproductive meetings





Detecting
Behaviors that
Undermine
High Trust,
cont.

Sutton's two tests:

- **Do you have a feeling of oppression, humiliation, etc. after interacting with the person?**
- **Does the alleged toxic person focus on “targets” who are less powerful?**

Robert Sutton, *The no asshole rule*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2010).

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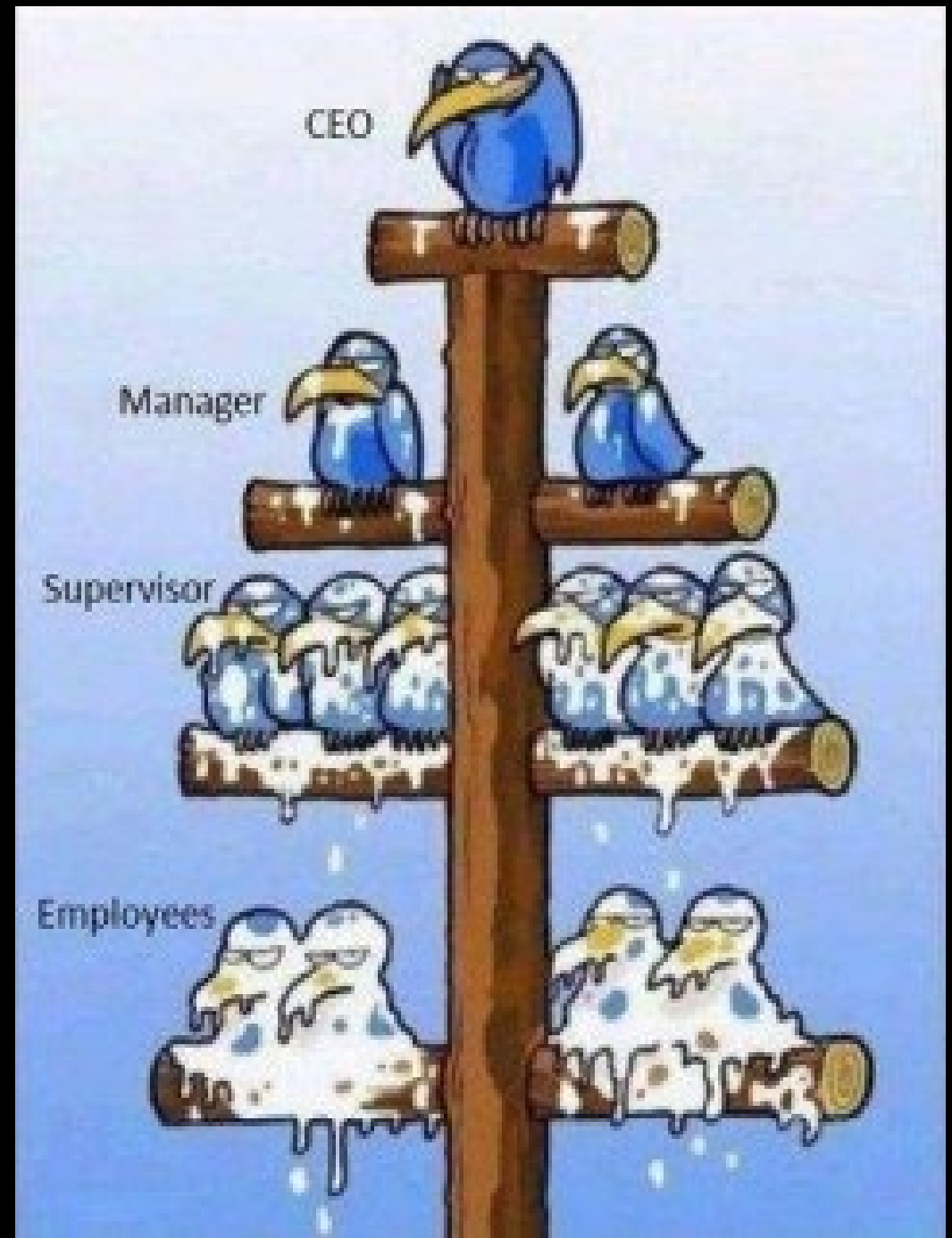
WHAT'S HIS STORY?

QUARANTINE

OH, WELL, WE COULDN'T GET RID OF HIM, SO WE GAVE HIM A NEW OFFICE AND SOME CREEPY ROBES.

Why do these toxic people exist and thrive?

The organization culture creates the conditions.



“Culture can now be defined as (a) a pattern of basic assumptions, (b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, (c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, (d) that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore (e) is to be taught to new members as the (f) correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.”

“Culture can be described as having less visible and more visible aspects, much like an iceberg.”

Culture-forming Mechanisms

- **Leader modeling**
- **Defining & measuring success**
- **Crisis response**
- **Recognizing performance**
- **Distributing resources**
- **Developing followers**



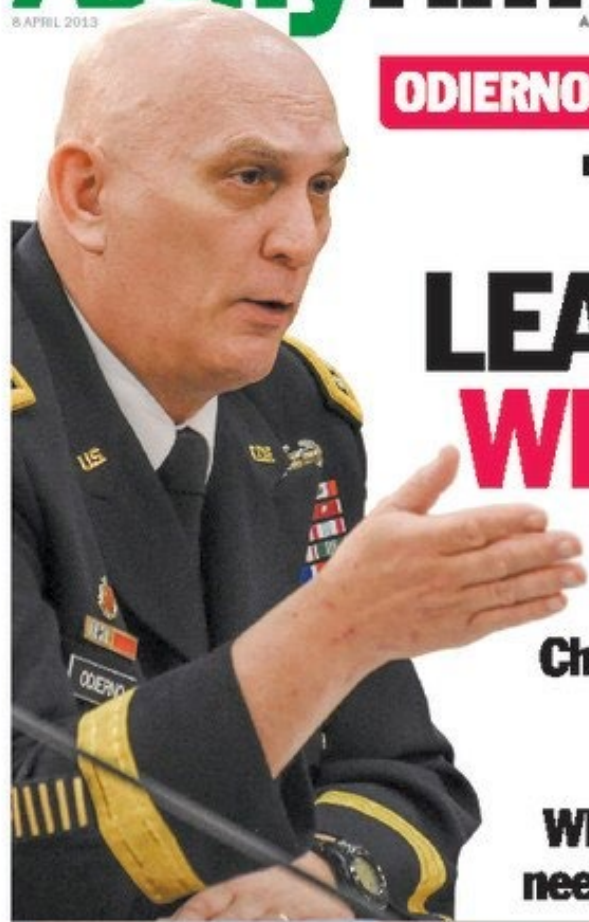


The Key Is Organizational Culture

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

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“Toxicity flourishes in situations in which the organization does not provide concrete, behaviorally specific values and has a high tolerance for toxic behaviors. Many organizations have stated values, but stating these is not enough when it comes to toxicity.”

Successful detox depends on integrating multiple strategies at three levels – organizational, team, and individual

Organizational Strategies

1. Clarify and integrate values-based behaviors, especially respect and trust, throughout the organization.
2. Incorporate respect and trust into leader development to reinforce leadership involves both results and values.
3. Incorporate values into performance feedback to clarify expectations.
4. Select team members for the desired culture.
5. Use 360-degree feedback systems to create self-awareness and improve performance

6. Conduct *targeted feedback* to address and coach behavior change. (Performance Improvement Plan)
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.
10. Conduct departure interviews.
11. Terminate.





The Target

- Higher tendency toward anxiety, depression, self-doubt,
- Higher negative affect: sadness, anger, and fear
- Females
- Minorities
- Those with a disadvantageous power imbalance.



Self-defense for Targets: Contact with Toxicity

- Do not take it personally but accept the toxic reality.
- Practice good health, physical fitness, and nutrition.
- Reframe the situation; conduct sensemaking; create a metaphor for understanding; make it a learning experience.



Juergen, M. (n.d.). 3 strategies for dealing with toxic people. <http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/232067>

Martinuzzi, B. (2013). 7 signs you're working in a toxic office. <https://www.americanexpress.com/us/small-business/openforum/articles/7-signs-youre-working-in-a-toxic-office/>

Self-defense for Targets: Contact with Toxicity

- Limit exposure to the perpetrator and other negative relationships.
- Don't retaliate or perpetuate negative gossip. Create emotional distance.
- Create an emotional safe zone. Befriend good people for mutual support. Speak positive messages.
- Enlist a coach to train stress management



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Self-defense for Targets: Direct engagement

- Don't interrupt.
- 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."
- Give feedback on observations (the FAU technique) – "You seem frustrated, [angry], [upset]. What's that about?"
- Confront/challenge with caution; don't facilitate defensiveness.

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Self-defense for Targets: Preparation for Defense

- Document EVERYTHING.
- Use objective criteria, organizational values, and the adverse effects on performance, productivity, readiness, resilience, and morale.
- Identify protectors and buffers.
- Identify senior leaders who have authority to act and do not have a conflict of interest.
- Accept the reality of the anxiety of reporting and the investigation.
- Remind yourself that the investment is worth it
- Consult with EEO; Labor, Management, and Employee Relations; and Ombudsman.

A recipe for a toxic culture:

- Failure to operationalize values into norms and behaviors.
- Systems that reinforce results and ignore values and norms – education, leader development, evaluation, promotion and selection.
- Failure to hold all people accountable for practicing the values and norms.
- Maintaining pressure to produce in downsizing.



To detox the organization:

- Operationalize the values into norms and behaviors.
- Teach leaders how to translate and reinforce values-based norms, i.e., create the culture.
- Evaluate, promote, and select based on values and results.
- Create self-awareness in leaders.
- Hold all personnel accountable for living the values and norms.



Questions



