

FAST COMPANY

80% of workplaces are toxic. Is yours?

Strategic mental health advisor Kerry Howard says if you want to transform a toxic culture, you need to be assertive, use proven communication techniques, and refer to existing laws and guidelines.



[Photo: [Anna Shvets/Pexels](#)]

BY KERRY HOWARD 3 MINUTE READ

We spend more than one third of our life at work. Given that we spend so much time in this environment and our occupation is often a key component to our sense of identity and self-worth, it is essential to our overall functioning in life to be able to operate in a supportive environment. This means a workplace that provides psychological safety and security and affords us a positive sense of our value and contribution. It means a workplace that gives us an opportunity to meet our greatest emotional need: the need for *connection*.

WORKPLACE CULTURE

Workplace culture is the environment that you create for your employees. It plays a powerful role in determining their satisfaction with their career, interpersonal relationships, and career progression. The culture of your workplace is determined by a combination of the company's leadership and the employees' values, beliefs, and attitudes, which translate into behaviors and interactions that contribute to the relational environment of your workplace. In general, these are the intrinsic rules that govern interpersonal connections in the workplace among peers.

TOXIC WORKPLACE CULTURE

Toxicity in the workplace develops from a pattern of combined behaviors that are counterproductive. According to [Kenneth Williams](#), a professor in the department of ethics, National Defense University, when promoted by toxic leadership, a toxic culture incorporates six specific behaviors: passive hostility, shaming, indifference, team sabotage, negativity, and exploitation.

Passive hostility, shaming, and indifference alone give the feeling of being dismissed or ignored when issues are raised. In fact, this is one of the 10 key questions developed by sports performance consultant and toxicity expert [Linnda Durré](#). Any one positive response indicates that a workplace is toxic. For example: "Have you asked for help but nothing changes?" Most people will answer 'Yes' to that question alone.

According to Durré, some people in positions of authority maintain control through abuse of power. Behaviors include ego, distrust, paranoia, cruelty, unfairness, inequality, pressure, greed, ruthless ambition, and disrespect that negatively affects everyone around them.

Toxic cultures are known to promote attitudes that adversely impact employee psychological well-being. Social-psychology expert [Carol Ryff](#), Hilldale professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, defines psychological well-being by six attributes: autonomy, environment management, personal growth, positive relationships, having life goals, and self-acceptance.

Employees with higher levels of psychological well-being are more likely to escape when the organization's toxicity worsens, whereas employees with the lowest psychological well-being are the most likely to become passive rejectors.

It isn't that difficult to see why these numbers need our attention. If 80% of workplaces have a moderate to high toxicity, and 40% of those employees are passively disengaged, 33% are actively disrupting the workplace, and 27% are actively looking for work elsewhere, it isn't hard to understand why actively reducing toxicity in the workplace should be the major goal of all compassionate leaders. The disenfranchisement of our human resources is leading to

significantly reduced productivity, and this is silently eroding the profitability of businesses globally.

If you want to transform a toxic culture, you need to be assertive, use proven communication techniques, and refer to existing laws and guidelines. If that doesn't work, find a new role in a healthy company that is built on truth, honesty, cooperation, and open communication.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

How we manage and treat our people at work can be directly linked to managing psychological safety at work: the ability to feel like you're able to be "human" at work. When people on a team possess psychological safety, they feel able to raise concerns, admit mistakes, ask for help, suggest ideas, and challenge the ways of working. They are comfortable to question the ideas of others on the team, including the leadership. It's a workplace culture that embraces respectful honesty and openness.

When the workplace provides psychological safety, risks are reduced, new ideas are generated, the team is able to execute on those ideas, and everyone feels included. By focusing on building an inclusive workplace through the key components of tackling trauma and promoting psychological safety, you are going to create an exceptional workplace culture for your people, increasing productivity and profits and creating a level of positivity that will translate into widespread happiness at work.

Kerry Howard is the author of How to Heal a Workplace, a strategic mental health advisor, motivational speaker, executive coach, trainer, and facilitator.