

What Do You Do With a Toxic Leader?

At the far side of unhealthy culture is the toxic zone—a hostile environment where abusive patterns of interaction inflict mental, emotional, and psychological harm. It's easy to assume that they are fairly uncommon. That would be a big mistake. We conducted a global employee survey in which we asked 961 employees across a variety of industries and organizations this question: “Have you ever worked in a toxic culture?” Nearly nine in ten (86%) of those surveyed said they had.

In our research, we discovered a crucial distinction: Some employees worked with **actively toxic** leaders who, themselves, engaged in toxic behaviors, while others worked with **passively complicit** leaders who allowed others to be toxic without consequence.

What should an organization do at this point?

Remove the actively toxic leader.

After an abusive episode, most actively toxic leaders are more concerned about their image than the harm they cause. Nearly always remorseless, actively toxic leaders tend to focus on impression management. Specifically, they tend to display one or a combination of three common patterns of deflection—denial, blame, and excuse. Most actively toxic leaders must be removed from people management positions. Our research suggests that only 5 percent are coachable. The rest should be managing resources, not leading people.

Coach the passively complicit leader.

The motivational profile of a passively complicit leader is often quite different. They represent the negligent side of leadership, tolerating cycles of mistreatment through the enabling behavior of being passive, aloof, or absent. Some believe the fear others induce through toxic behavior is productive and provides accountability that they, themselves, are either unable or unwilling to provide. Some are intimidated by the toxic members of their teams, and despite their positional power, yield to the influence of bullies and abusers. Finally, some passively complicit leaders are preoccupied with other things, and it is that aloofness that makes them dangerous. Fortunately, passively complicit leaders are almost always coachable if given honest feedback and the opportunity to improve.

Remember, teams and organizations don't outperform their leaders, they reflect them. Sources of toxicity must be identified and either removed or coached.

Note #16