



At what point does a bad work environment turn into a toxic one?

Unfortunately, like much of what we talk about, there's not a set answer to this question.

A toxic work environment is not a legal designation, like for example, a hostile work environment. Instead, it's based on the experience and perception of each person.

For example, right now you might be working in an organization that you think is doing just fine, but your coworker might think is toxic or vice versa. Ultimately it's up to you.

What kind of environment do you want to work in?

What do you consider to be toxic?

Where is your threshold?

Where is your line?

As a team leader, it's also your responsibility to look out for your team.

Keep in mind that while you might think everything is going fine at work, you might be supervising someone who thinks it's toxic.

It matters because there are substantial costs associated with toxic work environments.

Of course many of these costs are financial.

Harvard Business School did this fascinating study, and they found that organizations can save a lot of money by hiring high-quality staff, but that they save a whole lot more money by avoiding the hire of toxic staff.

For staff who work in toxic environments, of course, there are many negative side effects.

They work less both in terms of their output and how many days they miss.

The quality of their work declines many times intentionally. They take it out on their customers and clients and in many cases they leave. Probably in many more cases that are captured here.

It also matters because there's an estimate that anywhere between 3-5% of employees are considered toxic.

Depending on how many employees you have at your organization, you can do the math.

Even still, it doesn't take many toxic employees to create a toxic environment.



In many cases, all it takes is just one.

It matters because in addition to the financial costs, there are costs to your organization's reputation and potentially to you by default for working there.

There are huge consequences to staff's mental, physical, and emotional health .

Life satisfaction declined significantly, and the Stanford Graduate School of Business found that working in toxic environments is actually the fifth leading cause of death. That is related to factors like stress and lack of health insurance, working too much and other unhealthy conditions.

Do you have experience working in toxic work environments, working for a toxic boss, or working beside a toxic coworker?

Might you be experiencing it now?

What is challenging for you about this and about being able to confront it?

And how can you shift your mindset to better serve you?

Now because there's not a set designation or definition of what a toxic work environment is, there's not one picture I can paint for you, so I'm going to throw in a lot of examples of what a toxic work environment can include and what it can look like. Certainly this is not comprehensive and everybody's definition and experience will be different .

In terms of who causes the toxic environment, it can be at the leadership level .

It can be with coworkers.

It can be with people you supervise.

This is not unique to any rung on that organizational ladder.

It could even be your clients or customers, partners, board members, funders- it can be anyone that you are interacting with in your day-to-day work .

It can be the culture and the behavior .

It can be just one person .

It can be a couple of people. It can be a whole lot of people .

One thing that it does need to be to qualify as toxic is persistent.

If you had one really bad experience at work, we wouldn't necessarily consider that



toxic, similar to the way we define bullying. There has to be a level of repetition to it.

How many times does it take for something to be considered persistent and therefore toxic? Again, I don't have an answer for you, but it is something that is happening at least more than once.

It can look like any one of these things, all of these things, or any combination of these things.

Many times it is something that is external and aggressive and negative and critical .

It could be people who are really narcissistic or very overly critical .

It can be lots of micromanaging, lack of trust, lack of communication, not knowing what expectations are, no clear direction. Of course bullying, harassment, and discrimination, working way too many hours, high turnover .

One that I want to throw in there at the top is not always what we think about when we think of toxic but there is this other version of a toxic work environment where people might on the outside be really friendly and kind and fun to work with but their level of incompetence might be such that it could constitute a toxic work environment. That they're just so bad at what they do and they create so much turmoil for everybody else. Even if they have a smile on their face while they're doing it .

What do you do if you find yourself in a toxic work environment?

It depends.

I know, the worst answer ever. But my asterisk is 1) there are some cases where you have to do something about it if it's an instance of harassment, bullying, or discrimination where you are legally required to do something about it and 2) it might be you have more choice when it comes to you.

If you are the one who's experiencing it versus somebody on your team. You might have a different threshold on how you choose to react based on if it's affecting you or somebody you supervise .

But in some cases, you can't do nothing .

Something needs to be done, and there is some choice in terms of who you report it to, how frequently you report it and how you're documenting it .

Whether it's something affecting you directly or your team, you want to always make sure you're protecting yourself .

In certain circumstances, you can decide to confront the person directly .



It depends .

It depends on what the behavior is and what your relationship with that person is .

That's something that you will need to decide if you want to confront them directly .

In almost all cases, you're going to want to go to HR and or your supervisor- probably both- to cover yourself .

You might decide it's enough that you are ready to quit .

If it's the behavior of someone you supervise it might be enough that you want to fire them .

It might reach the level that you want to sue .

These are difficult decisions to make and it's not always based on how big or small you consider the toxicity to be.

It might just be based on what you want to do with that experience.

The other thing that's really important to remember here is that when it comes to your staff you need to default to believing them. Yes, there are false claims and there are all sorts of things that go on in a work environment .

But you need to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that what they're telling you is the truth.

If your staff comes to you and tells you something and you dismiss it, that has further implications for you .

Err on the side of belief and involve HR and your own supervisor. You might consider going directly to the supervisor of the perpetrator .

That's a path as well .

You definitely want to make sure that you are giving your staff the benefit of the doubt by believing them.

Other things that are important to consider, is it one person or is it many people who are causing the toxic work environment?

Is it something that could be fixed?

If it's just one person, is getting rid of that one person going to fix the problem?

When you address it with HR and your supervisor and whoever else needs to know are



they willing to address it or not?

How do you feel about the rest of your job?

Are you happy?

Otherwise, are you able to overlook this one thing, this one person, this one pattern of behavior or not?

How is your well-being?

How is it affecting you?

When it comes to toxic behavior, like discrimination, harassment, and bullying, the number one cause of those incidents is retaliation.

You have to keep in mind that doing the right thing and reporting things as you should in many cases causes retaliation.

You want to always make sure you're protecting yourself .

So the most important question for you is, how will you protect your team and yourself from a toxic work environment?