



WORKLIFE STRATEGIES

TOXIC ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

Best Practices for Prevention and Harm Mitigation

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After 35 years of observing, leading and consulting to people at work, I have concluded that the old outplacement adage that *“People are hired for their talents and fired for their behavior”* is true. People most often fail at work by exhibiting particular patterns of behavior that are toxic to the organization which must then protect itself against the noxious agent.

The following 6 varieties of toxic organizational behavior (TOB) top my list of offenders:

1. Aggressiveness
2. Narcissism
3. Lack of credibility
4. Passivity
5. Disorganization
6. Resistance to change

People who exhibit TOB run the risk of negative consequences for their own career and the organization in which they work. The presence of multiple carriers of TOB in an organization can quickly overload its immune system and cause serious harm.

Why are these behaviors so toxic?

Toxic organizational behaviors disrupt core work success processes. When people exhibit TOB they put themselves and the organization at risk for failure:

- **Aggressiveness** undermines safety and requires people to divert resources from productive work into defensive operations such as fight and flight
- **Narcissism** (excessive self-focus) interferes with the development of a positive and flexible culture of balanced negotiation and give-and take compromises

- When people don't do what they say they will do, they **lack credibility** and breed mistrust
- **Passivity** is the opposite of the initiative and ownership needed for optimal performance
- Operational requirements for focus, structure and discipline will not be met when people exhibit a **lack of personal organization**
- Since the world is always changing and requires continuous adaptation, rigidity and **resistance to change** guarantee eventual obsolescence and failure

Why do organizations keep getting “infected”?

There are three main reasons why organizations are generally not successful in either preventing carriers of toxic behavior from penetrating their perimeter defenses (selection/hiring) or fighting off an infection before major harm is done (talent management):

1. **Interviews** have weak detection sensitivity for these behaviors. Most candidates have enough political savvy to conceal their toxic behaviors throughout the interview process. Even more troubling is the fact that many people are unaware of their own TOB, making them the interview equivalent of the person who can pass a lie detector test because they believe their own lies.

2. **References** generate high rates of false negatives (i.e. not mentioning TOB when it is present) because they do not want to stir up conflict (and possible legal and behavioral blow-back) with their current or former employees. In addition, many references genuinely do not wish to harm a person's employment prospects by providing accurate “negative” feedback. Letters of recommendation are especially poor detectors of TOB; unstructured phone follow-up is not much better.

3. **Leaders/managers** often have difficulty detecting and dealing effectively with the dysfunctional behavior of their direct reports. They can remain unaware of TOB for extended periods of time because

- employees who are aware of their own toxic behaviors are often able to conceal them from their boss (just as they did during the interview process)
- the people who are aware of TOB (e.g. peers and direct reports) usually do not report it to the relevant authorities due to powerful group prohibitions against “snitching” (an offense punishable in most groups by shunning, expulsion or worse)

- employee “behavior” is often not included in the performance measurement/management system (if there is such a system at all!), thus communicating that technical competence is what matters but “behavior” is not part of the “real” job

If a leader becomes aware of TOB in an employee, they may avoid dealing with it directly because

- they are “too busy” dealing with more urgent matters
- they are uncomfortable “confronting” the behavior directly
- they lack the talent management skills to deal with the behavior effectively
- they have decided to retain the person regardless of their behavior and its impact (read: “rain-maker”)

The combination of leader unawareness and avoidance can result in the presence of TOB for months and even years in an organization’s blood stream with harmful effects on morale, performance and the bottom line.

An ounce of prevention ...

Toxic behaviors are quite stable (because they are driven by brain-based mechanisms) and resistant to change by even the most skillful managers or human resource professionals. For this reason, the best strategy for dealing with TOB is **prevention**. Following are best talent management practices based on the traditional 3-level prevention model:

Primary Prevention: the most powerful prevention strategy is one where the “illness” never even happens, such as when vaccines protect people from ever becoming sick. In the talent management arena this would involve utilizing practices that prevent people with TOB from being hired in the first place. As mentioned above, the challenge we face is that standard selection practices such as interviews and references provide weak if any protection. This has led to the development of a variety of assessment processes that aim to detect TOBs accurately [see www.wklf.com/INDEX5.pdf].

Another effective primary prevention practice is to clearly define TOB as a risk factor for success in your organization during the hiring/interview process. In addition to informing candidates about the core competencies for a position, you can alert them that they will be assessed for TOB during the initial period of employment, and that TOB detection may lead to early termination. For candidates with self-awareness of their

own TOB, this information will in some cases result in their removing themselves from consideration to the benefit of their own career and the hiring organization.

Secondary Prevention: while the gold standard in public health practice is to prevent disease completely, it is also valuable to detect illness early and intervene to minimize its harmful impact. In the talent management arena, this means detecting the presence of TOB early in a person's tenure and minimizing its deleterious impact. This can involve providing some education and coaching about TOB during the initial "onboarding" phase of employment as well as early detection through the use of behavioral assessments that employ a "360 degree" format. Detection of TOB should trigger verbal and written feedback (to convey the seriousness of the issue) accompanied by a focused mitigation plan.

For example, if the TOB of *Aggressiveness* is detected in a leader, an intervention plan should include some form of anger management coaching (be sure to use evidence-based best practices for this intervention or it won't work). In addition, an "anger protection program" for that person's peers and reports to prevent collateral damage should include such elements as

- empowering people to ask the aggressive person to use better relationship management practices (from their coaching) and to end a conversation or meeting if the person is unable to de-escalate
- guaranteeing that direct reports will not suffer any career damage as a result of pushing back against their manager's anger; this may involve shifting the performance management function from the aggressive leader to THEIR manager until there is evidence of stable improvement in that area

Tertiary Prevention: if all attempts at primary (selection) and secondary (early detection/management) prevention are ineffective, the remaining option is to "cure" the organization by terminating the offending employee's tenure before even more severe damage is done. Having documented clear and ongoing communication about and efforts to ameliorate the situation lays the groundwork for a relatively smooth and legally defensible outplacement process.

Conclusion

Leaders must manage the many external and internal challenges to the success of their organization. This article has addressed the common challenge of toxic organizational behavior (TOB) and presented a range of best practices for preventing and minimizing its harmful impact:

- selection assessment and communication about TOB
- onboarding education about TOB
- periodic performance measurement (including behavior)
- periodic performance feedback
- coaching and training as needed
- application of appropriate consequences

Employing these practices requires an investment of precious limited resources (attention, time, money) and their impact should be monitored to ensure an acceptable return on investment.

AUTHOR

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Trained as a behavioral scientist, Baird has worked as a health professional, leader and consultant. He has been a lecturer at the Harvard Medical School and an instructor/advisor at Harvard's office of executive education. Baird's publications include *Transforming Health Care: Action Strategies for Health Care Leaders* and *One Perfect Meal: Saving the World from the Calorie Crisis* as well as articles on professional and organizational effectiveness. He has been interviewed by Forbes, WebMD, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe and others on a variety of work-related topics.

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