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The Toxic Workplace

How much energy are you wasting?

By Steve Zanini

Effective organizations pay close attention to all aspects of their operations, including what gets done, how it gets done, and the results of that effort. Equally important is the energy expended in making all that happen. Every organization only has so much energy, some of which is siphoned off to processes, procedures and relationships that do not support the goals directly. One area where energy drain can become quite evident is when dealing with a toxic workplace and the toxic personality that drives it.

What happens if a person behaves in a way that demonstrates he/she is not in agreement with the values of the organization? What happens if a person's behaviors become so negative that he/she disrupts the work of those around him/her?

What happens when a person becomes so toxic that he/she single-handedly sabotages the collective efforts of a team?

The true test of leadership is to determine what to do with that one bad apple (which arguably may become a bushel)?

Research provides evidence that a toxic personality left unchecked will have a long-lasting negative impact on a work team. Over time, the team becomes accustomed to the condition and what was initially a toxic anomaly becomes a pervasive environment. Researchers Camacho and Paulus (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*,

1995) demonstrated the "bad apple syndrome" in their literature: a team consisting of two emotionally unstable members and two stable members performed just as badly as a team of four emotionally unstable members. The effects of the negative relationships infected the rest of the team with negative energy. Further, the researchers found that the effects of the negative elements had a stronger impact on work and commitment than the influence of other positive work relationships.

To further illustrate the toxic syndrome, think about a team that you work with. When everyone is physically healthy, works get done, people exchange ideas and meetings are beneficial. When someone gets a cold or flu, work may continue, but is the output the same? If the person comes into work, what happens when the illness spreads? The entire team is impacted by direct (infection) and indirect (lower capacity of members) effects of the virus and work suffers, translating into a negative impact to the bottom line. To fight a cold, intervention is required. With vitamin C and chicken noodle soup, eventually those impacted will recover. When a toxic individual is the source of work problems, the prescription is not as simple.

Rudeness, incivility, bullying, sarcasm, rumor mongering, silos and regular doses of CYA (cover your "backside") are behaviors that all of us display at one time or another, regardless of gender, colour or

orientation. These behaviors may occur as individual traits or in combination; they are indicators of a toxic personality at work. A toxic personality is a person that demonstrates a regular pattern of these behaviours that are counterproductive to the efforts of the team and even to the organization over a longer period of time.

The magnitude of such behaviour was studied by Mitchell Kusy and Elisabeth Holloway, authors of Toxic Workplace. Their survey found that 64% of respondents were currently working with a toxic person and an unbelievable 94% had worked with someone toxic in their career! Everyone is aware of the issue, but why are so many *still* working with these individuals? The toxic personality most certainly persists and thrives in organizations.

Unfortunately, recognizing the toxic personality is not as easy as one might think. Toxic people are very adept at changing their spots. They know who to impress and who they can intimidate. They are very familiar with the organization's political structure, protect their territory and do not accept constructive feedback easily. In most cases, they do not see themselves as toxic at all (or certainly won't admit it). Toxic people can insulate themselves from efforts to displace them behind a mask of productivity and high levels of expertise.

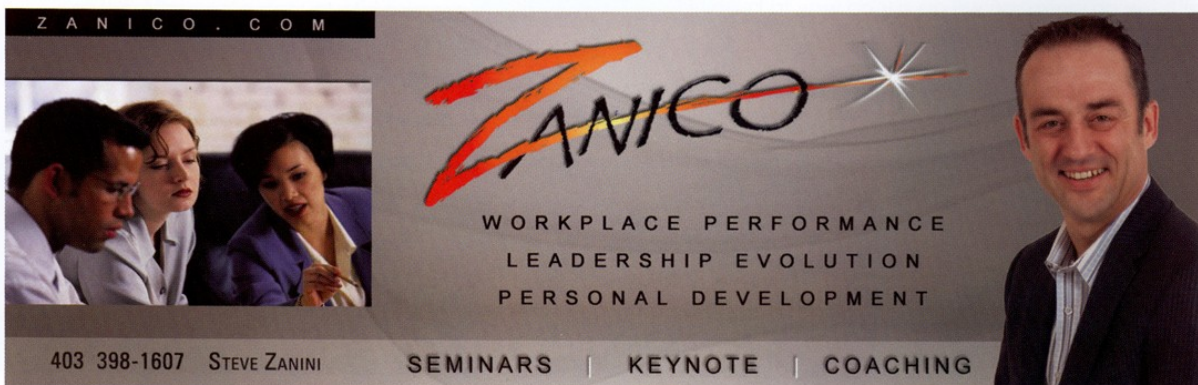
Recently, I was invited to work with a Director who identified a toxic person (let's call her Carol) in his management team. The director needed Carol's expertise and knowledge but had chosen to ignore her behaviours until it started to negatively impact the relationships with other team members. I engaged management in short interviews and distributed a team climate goal survey. The data

revealed that the Director's assessment of Carol was correct; she displayed many of the indicators, being condescending, demeaning and derogatory to her peers. Whether intentional or not, she was sucking the energy out of the team. Under the guise of helping her team, Carol deftly used her knowledge of systems and relationships outside of the team to hijack and manipulate internal decisions for her own benefit. Very friendly, engaging and collaborative one-on-one, she used passive-aggressive behaviours to ignore team direction and carry out the opposite of what she had committed to do. The behaviour had continued for over a year.

Based on the assessment, the first option raised was to terminate Carol; however, her dismissal would leave a large gap in company's operations during a time of significant change to the business unit. Another option, which the Director chose, was to have me work with the team to improve the team dynamics and to deliver coaching. Carol was still seen as a valued employee based on her ability to deliver results. The method by which Carol delivered those results had been achieved, but they needed improvement.

In choosing to ignore Carol's behavior for so long, her behaviors impacted the team and threatened to derail the operational changes being implemented in the company. Firing her would have solved the immediate issue, but it would not have resolved lingering effects of her behaviors on the team. During the interviews, it was revealed that her behaviours were not only apparent to her peers, but *they had adopted some of her traits!* In choosing to focus on team dynamics, the wider system of behaviors could be remedied. This is not to say that

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in some cases, termination is not the best option, but instead, that there will always be further work required once a toxic person leaves. The longer the toxic behaviours are ignored, accepted or accommodated, the more widespread the impact and the more extensive the required intervention. Carol's story illustrates the need for a broader approach and recognition that a toxic personality is part of a larger system. This outcome does not absolve the individual of his/her negative behaviours but recognizes that there are a variety of factors that contribute to a toxic workplace.

If you observe signs of a toxic personality at work, then consider the following steps to fix the energy drain.

Conduct a Thorough Assessment

Every vehicle needs regular assessment and maintenance. In the same way, conduct a checkup by engaging the workforce in a survey or 360-degree team assessment to determine the team climate and create a baseline from which future assessment can be evaluated. This might include a series of interviews to further explore the origins and effects of toxicity in the workplace.

Integrate the Values of the Organization

Review the values of the organization; what are they, are they evident and have they been integrated into other work processes? Document the values you want modeled throughout the organization: by your leadership, in your performance appraisal systems, in your team development programs, and within your operational procedures such as hiring. In particular, hiring the right people with values that align with the organization will go a long way to keeping your workplace toxic-free.

Establish Behavioural Team Norms and Guidelines

World class teams are successful because they set team norms to ensure their success. Engage your team in determining a set of norms based on the values of the company. Identify specific behaviours that translate the values into action. For example, if the organizational value is respect for others, one behavioural norm may be "No talking

behind someone's back." Define the consequences if someone violates the norms.

Conduct Regular Follow-Ups on Team Norms

Hold the team accountable for what they have developed by revisiting the norms. Scheduling regular review meetings or connecting a review of norms to the annual performance appraisal process will generate greater commitment and ownership to strengthen the team. Remember that nothing is written in stone, and regular analysis can keep the team norms fresh and relevant. Teams may consider the following:

- What is working or not working and what evidence do we have?
- What team norms need to be created, continued or stopped?
- What could each person do to reinforce a particular norm in the future?

Tie Feedback to Performance Expectations and Follow-Up

If a toxic personality continues to act inappropriately, a more direct approach may be required. A structured, systematic feedback process is only part of the solution. Ensure feedback relates directly to a set of stated performance deliverables to reinforce the seriousness of the need for change. The process can be as simple as these:

- Identify the problem (gather *only* the facts)
- Establish a set of mutually agreed resolutions and concrete examples of what is expected
- Determine next steps and set dates for regular progress reviews

Each step will have more details, but the underlying premise is to launch a commitment to change. Setting a timeline for regular reviews allows progress to be tracked as new behaviours are adopted.

Provide Individual Coaching

Changing a person's personality is very difficult and certainly doesn't happen overnight. The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching as a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires people to maximize their personal and professional potential. Coaching is a co-active

partnership designed to further the individual towards personal and professional goals. In the case of toxic personalities, coaches must be able to work with people resistant to change to help them explore new perspectives and possibilities leading to new behaviours.

Termination

When behaviours are so severe that there is a risk to both the other team members and the organization itself, dismissal must be considered, especially when all else has failed. Carefully consider the methods of the dismissal. When the values of the organization include "a respect for others", the method of termination must preserve the dignity of the individual in agreement with the values but also for the benefit of those that remain. Additional healing interventions are likely to be required for the group due to the lingering effects of a toxic personality.

A systematic approach that targets the symptoms exhibited by a toxic personality can pay

dividends. The energy of the team can be redirected towards what makes them successful.

Think energy conservation.

"Good energy management, then, comes down to the following: 1. generating more, 2. conserving it better, and 3. channeling it with greater focus. These actions increase our 'capacity for work'." Reference: *The 4th Level of Change*, Price Pritchett, 2009

Instead of focusing attention and efforts on dealing with, reacting to and recovering from the influence of a toxic personality, imagine how much better your organization could be when you invest that energy back into the business of creating value for the shareholders, customers and employees you serve.

Dealing with a toxic personality? Looking to save some energy? Contact Steve Zanini through www.zanico.com.

For more information about the toxic workplace, visit Ignition <http://zanico.com/blog/> <<http://zanico.com/blog/>