



The Toxic Workplace

It's not unusual to find the following employee behaviours in today's workplace:

Answering the phone with a "yeah," neglecting to say thank you or please, using voice mail to screen calls, leaving a half cup of coffee behind to avoid having to brew the next pot, standing uninvited but impatiently over the desk of someone engaged in a telephone conversation, dropping trash on the floor and leaving it for the maintenance crew to clean up, and talking loudly on the phone about personal matters.¹

Some employers or managers fit the following descriptions:

In the months since [the new owner of the pharmacy] has been in charge [he] has made it clear that he is at liberty to fire employees at will . . . change their positions, decrease their bonus percentages, and refuse time-off and vacation choices. Furthermore, he has established an authoritarian work structure characterized by distrust, cut-backs on many items deemed essential to work comfort, disrespect, rigidity and poor-to-no-communication.²

He walked all over people. He made fun of them; he intimidated them. He criticized work for no reason, and he changed his plans daily.³

What's Happening in Our Workplaces?

Workplaces today are receiving highly critical reviews, being called everything from “uncivil” to “toxic.”

Lynne Anderson and Christine Pearson, two management professors from St. Joseph's University and the University of North Carolina, respectively, note that “Historians may view the dawn of the twenty-first century as a time of thoughtless acts and rudeness: We tailgate, even in the slow lane; we dial wrong numbers and then slam the receiver on the innocent respondent; we break appointments with nonchalance.”⁴ The workplace has often been seen as one of the places where civility still ruled, with co-workers treating each other with a mixture of formality and friendliness, distance and politeness. However, with downsizing, re-engineering, budget cuts, pressures for increased productivity, autocratic work environments, and the use of part-time employees, there has been an increase in “uncivil and aggressive workplace behaviours.”⁵

What does civility in the workplace mean? A simple definition of workplace civility is behaviour “involving politeness and regard for others in the workplace, within workplace norms for respect.”⁶ Workplace incivility then “involves acting with disregard for others in the workplace, in violation of workplace norms for respect.”⁷ Of course, different workplaces will have different norms for what determines mutual respect. For instance, in most restaurants, if the staff were rude to you when you were there for dinner, you would be annoyed, and perhaps even complain to the manager. However, at the Elbow Room Cafe in downtown Vancouver, if customers complain they are in a hurry, manager Patrick Savoie might well say, “If you're in a hurry, you should have

gone to McDonald's.”⁸ Such a comeback is acceptable to the diners at the Elbow Room Cafe, because rudeness is its trademark.

Most work environments are not expected to be characterized by such rudeness. However, this has been changing in recent years. Robert Warren, a University of Manitoba marketing professor, notes that “simple courtesy has gone by the board.”⁹

There is documented evidence of the rise of violence and threats of violence at work.¹⁰ However, several studies have found that there is persistent negative behaviour in the workplace that is not of a violent nature.¹¹ For instance, a survey of 603 Toronto nurses found that 33 percent had experienced verbal abuse during the five previous days of work.¹²

Another study found that 78 percent of employees interviewed think that workplace incivility has increased in the past 10 years.¹³ The researchers found that men are mostly to blame for this change: “Although men and women are targets of disrespect and rudeness in equal numbers . . . men instigate the rudeness 70 percent of the time.”¹⁴

Rude behaviour is not confined to men, however. Professor André Roberge at Laval University suggests that some of the rudeness is generational. He finds that “young clerks often lack both knowledge and civility. Employers are having to train young people in simple manners because that is not being done at home.”¹⁵ Professor Warren backs this up: “One of the biggest complaints I hear from businesses when I go to talk about graduates is the lack of interpersonal skills.”¹⁶

Workplace Violence

Recently, researchers have suggested that incivility may be the beginning of more negative behaviours in the

workplace, including aggression and violence.¹⁷

Pierre Lebrun chose a deadly way to exhibit the anger he had stored up from his workplace.¹⁸ He took a hunting rifle to Ottawa-Carleton-based OC Transpo and killed four public transit co-workers on April 6, 1999, before turning the gun on himself. Lebrun felt that he had been the target of harassment by his co-workers for years because of his stuttering. If this sounds like an unusual response for an irate employee, consider the circumstances at OC Transpo. “Quite apart from what's alleged or otherwise with Mr. Lebrun's situation, we know [OC Transpo's] had a very unhappy work environment for a long time,” Al Loney, former chair of Ottawa-Carleton's transit commission, noted. A consultant's report produced the year before the shooting found a workplace with “rock-bottom morale and poor management.” It was not uncommon for fights to break out in the unit where the four men were killed.

Workplace violence, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), includes

*any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to [his or her] work. These behaviours would originate from customers or co-workers at any level of the organization. This definition would include all forms of harassment, bullying, intimidation, physical threats, assaults, robbery and other intrusive behaviour.*¹⁹

No Canadian statistics on anger at work are available.²⁰ However, studies show that anger pervades the US workplace. While 25 percent of Americans reported being “generally at least somewhat angry at work,” 49 percent say that they felt “at least

'a little angry' at work."²¹ A 2000 Gallup poll conducted in the United States found that 25 percent of the working adults surveyed felt like screaming or shouting because of job stress, 14 percent had considered hitting a co-worker, and 10 percent worry about colleagues becoming violent. This worry is not unfounded. Twenty employees are murdered each week in the United States.²²

Canadian workplaces are not murder-free, however. In 2001, 60 murders occurred at work, 10 percent of all murders for the year.²³ Most of these workplace incidents were carried out by male spouses and partners of female employees. Surprisingly, Canada scores higher than the United States on workplace violence. In a recent ILO study involving 130 000 workers in 32 countries, Argentina was ranked the most violent. Romania was second, France third, and Canada fourth. The United States placed ninth.²⁴

Sixty-four percent of union representatives who were surveyed recently reported an increase in workplace aggression, based on their review of incident reports, grievance files, and other solid evidence.²⁵ The ILO, in a separate 1998 study, found that, per capita, the rate of assault at work for Canadian women is four times that of American women.²⁶ To

understand the seriousness of this situation, consider that one quarter of Nova Scotia teachers surveyed reported that they faced physical violence at work during the 2001–2002 school year.²⁸

What Causes Incivility (and Worse) in the Workplace?

If employers and employees are acting with less civility toward each other, what is causing this to happen?

Managers and employees often have different views of the employee's role in the organization. Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor of organizational behaviour at the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University, notes that many companies don't really value their employees: "Most managers, if they're being honest with themselves, will admit it: When they look at their people, they see costs, they see salaries, they see benefits, they see overhead. Very few companies look at their people and see assets."²⁹

Most employees, however, like to think that they are assets to their organizations. The realization that they are simply costs and not valued members of an organization can cause frustration for employees.

In addition, "employers' excessive demands and top-down style of management are contributing to the rise of 'work rage,'" claims Gerry Smith of Toronto-based WarrenShepell Consultants.³⁰ He is the author of the recently released *Work Rage*.³¹ He cites demands coming from a variety of sources: "overtime, downsizing, rapid technological changes, company restructuring and difficulty balancing the demands of job and home."³² Smith worries about the consequences of these demands: "If you push people too hard, set unrealistic expectations and cut back their benefits, they're going to strike back."³³

Smith's work supports the findings of a study that reported the most common cause of anger is the actions of supervisors or managers.³⁴ Other common causes of anger identified by the researchers include lack of productivity by co-workers and others; tight deadlines; heavy workload; interaction with the public; and bad treatment.

The Psychological Contract

Some researchers have looked at this frustration in terms of a breakdown of the psychological contract formed between employees and employers. Employers and employees begin to develop psychological contracts as they are first introduced to each other in the hiring process.³⁵ These continue over time as the employer and the employee come to understand each other's expectations about the amounts and quality of work to be performed and the types of rewards to be given. For instance, when an employee is continually asked to work late and/or be available at all hours through pagers and email, the employee may assume that doing so will result in greater rewards or faster promotion down the line. The

FactBox²⁷

- In 2000, only 49% of working Canadians said they were committed to their employers. In 1991, the level of commitment was 62%.
- More Americans report commitment to their employers than Canadians: 55% of Americans vs. 49% of Canadians.
- Of those who experience rudeness, 12% quit their jobs in response, 22% decrease their work effort, and 52% lose work time worrying about it.
- Employees over the age of 55 express the highest degree of commitment to their employers.

employer may have had no such intention, and may even be thinking that the employee should be grateful simply to have a job. Later, when the employee does not get expected (though never promised) rewards, he or she is disappointed.

Sandra Robinson, an organizational behaviour professor at the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia, and her colleagues have found that when a psychological contract is violated (perceptually or actually), the relationship between the employee and the employer is damaged. This can result in the loss of trust.³⁶ The breakdown in trust can cause employees to be less ready to accept decisions or obey rules.³⁷ The erosion of trust can also lead employees to take revenge on the employers. So they don't carry out their end of a task. Or they refuse to pass on messages. They engage in any number of subtle and not-so-subtle behaviours that affect the way work gets done—or prevents work from getting done.

The Toxic Organization

Pfeffer suggests that companies have become "toxic places to work."³⁸ He notes that companies, particularly in Silicon Valley, ask their employees to sign contracts on the first day of work indicating the employee's understanding that the company has the right to fire at will and for any reason. Some employers also ask their employees to choose between having a life and having a career. Pfeffer relates a joke people used to tell about Microsoft: "We offer flexible time—you can work any 18 hours you want."³⁹ This kind of attitude can be toxic to employees, though this does not imply that Microsoft is a toxic employer.

What does it mean to be a toxic organization? The late professor Peter Frost of the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia notes that there will always be pain in organizations, but that sometimes it becomes so intense or prolonged that conditions within the organization begin to break down. In other words, the situation

becomes toxic. This is not dissimilar to what the liver or kidneys do when toxins become too intense in a human body.⁴⁰

What makes organizations toxic? Like Pfeffer, professors Frost and Robinson identify a number of factors. Downsizing and organizational change are two main factors, particularly in recent years. Sometimes

Do You Have a Toxic Manager?

Below are some of the toxic behaviours of managers and the workplace cultures that allow these behaviours to thrive.

Managerial Toxic Behaviour

- *Actor behaviour.* These managers act out anger rather than discuss problems. They slam doors, sulk, and make it clear they are angry, but refuse to talk about it.
- *Fragmentor behaviour.* These managers see no connection between what they do and the outcome, and take no responsibility for their behaviour.
- *Me-first behaviour.* These managers make decisions based on their own convenience.
- *Mixed-messenger behaviour.* These managers present themselves one way but their behaviour doesn't match what they say.
- *Wooden-stick behaviour.* These managers are extremely rigid and controlling.
- *Escape-artist behaviour.* These managers don't deal with reality, often lying, or at the extreme, escaping through drugs or alcohol.

Workplace Culture That Fosters This Behaviour

- *Macho culture.* People don't discuss problems. The emphasis is to "take it like a man."
- *Specialist culture.* Employees who are technically gifted or great in their fields don't have to consider how their behaviour or work affects anyone.
- *Elitist culture.* Promotions and rewards are not based on your work but on who your buddies are.
- *Office-politics culture.* Promotions and rewards are based on flattery and positioning.
- *Change-resistant culture.* Upper management struggles to maintain the status quo regardless of the outcome.
- *Workaholic culture.* Employees are forced to spend more time at the office than necessary.

Source: L. McClure, *Risky Business* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 1996).

organizations experience unexpected events—such as the sudden death of a key manager, an unwise move by senior management, strong competition from a start-up company—that lead to toxicity. Other organizations are toxic throughout their systems due to policies and practices that create distress. Such factors as unreasonable stretch goals or performance targets, or unrelenting internal competition, can create toxicity. There are also toxic managers who lead through insensitivity, vindictiveness, and failure to take responsibility, or they are control freaks or are unethical. The inset *Do You Have a Toxic Manager?* on page 253 lists some types of toxic managers and the workplace culture that fosters their behaviour.

What Are the Effects of Incivility and Toxicity in the Workplace?

In general, researchers have found that the effects of workplace anger are sometimes subtle: a hostile work environment and the tendency to do only enough work to get by.⁴¹

Those who feel chronic anger in the workplace are more likely to report “feelings of betrayal by the organization, decreased feelings of

loyalty, a decreased sense that respondent values and the organization’s values are similar, a decreased sense that the employer treated the respondent with dignity and respect, and a decreased sense that employers had fulfilled promises made to respondents.”⁴² So do these feelings make a difference? Apparently so. Researchers have found that those who felt angry with their employers were less likely to put forth their best efforts, more likely to be competitive toward other employees, and less likely to suggest “a quicker and better way to do their job.”⁴³ All of these actions tend to decrease the productivity possible in the workplace.

It’s not just those who work for an organization who are affected by incivility and toxicity. Poor service, from indifference to rudeness to outright hostility, characterizes many transactions in Canadian businesses. “Across the country, better business bureaus, provincial government consumer-help agencies and media ombudsmen report a lengthening litany of complaints about contractors, car dealers, repair shops, moving companies, airlines and department stores.”⁴⁴ This suggests that customers and clients may well be feeling the impact of internal workplace dynamics.

The Toxin Handler

Employees of toxic organizations suffer pain from their experiences in toxic environments. In some organizations, mechanisms, often informal, are set up to deal with the results of toxicity.

Frost and Robinson identified a special role that some employees play in trying to relieve the toxicity within an organization: the toxin handler. This person tries to mitigate the pain by softening the blow of downsizing, or change, or the behaviour of the toxic leader. Essentially the toxin handler helps others around him or her deal with the strains of the organization, by counselling, advising, shielding employees from the wrath of angry managers, reinterpreting the managers’ messages to make them less harsh, etc.

So who takes on this role? Certainly no organization to date has a line on its organizational chart for “the toxin handler.” Often the role emerges as part of an individual’s position in an organization, for instance, a manager in the human resource department. In many cases, however, handlers are pulled into the role “bit by bit—by their colleagues, who turn to them because they are trustworthy, calm, kind and nonjudgmental.”⁴⁵

Frost and Robinson, in profiling these individuals, suggest that toxin handlers are predisposed to say yes, have a high tolerance for pain, a surplus of empathy, and when they notice people in pain they have a need to make the situation right. But these are not individuals who thrive simply on dealing with the emotional needs of others. Quoting one of the managers in their study, Frost and Robinson cite the full range of activities of most toxin handlers: “These people are usually relentless in their drive to accomplish organizational targets and rarely lose focus

How Toxin Handlers Alleviate Organizational Pain

- They listen empathically.
- They suggest solutions.
- They work behind the scenes to prevent pain.
- They carry the confidences of others.
- They reframe difficult messages.

Source: P. Frost and S. Robinson, “The Toxic Handler: Organizational Hero—and Casualty,” *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 1999, p. 101 (Reprint 99406).

FACEOFF

Manners are an over-romanticized concept. The big issue isn't that employees need to be concerned about their manners. Rather, employers should be paying better wages.

The Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you," should still have a role in today's workplace. Being nice pays off.

on business issues. Managing emotional pain is one of their means."⁴⁶

The inset *How Toxin Handlers Alleviate Organizational Pain* on page 254 identifies the many tasks that toxin handlers take on in an organization. Frost and Robinson suggest that these tasks will probably need to be handled forever, and they recommend that organizations take steps to actively support people performing this role.

Research Exercises

1. Look for data on violence and anger in the workplace in other countries. How do these data compare with the Canadian and American data presented here? What might you conclude about how violence and anger in the workplace are expressed in different cultures?

2. Identify three Canadian organizations that are trying to foster better and/or less toxic environments for their employees. What kind of effect is this having on the organizations' bottom lines?

Your Perspective

1. Is it reasonable to suggest, as some researchers have, that young people today have not learned to be civil to others or do not place a high priority on doing so? Do you see this as one of the causes of incivility in the workplace?
2. What should be done about managers who create toxicity in the workplace while being rewarded because they achieve bottom-line results? Should bottom-line results justify their behaviour?

Want to Know More?

If you'd like to read more on this topic, see Peter Frost, *Toxic Emotions at Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2003); P. Frost and S. Robinson, "The Toxic Handler: Organizational Hero—and Casualty," *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 1999, pp. 96–106 (Reprint 99406); and A. M. Webber, "Danger: Toxic Company," *Fast Company*, November 1998, pp. 152–157. You can find the latter article at www.fastcompany.com/online/19/toxic.html. It contains an interview with Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer, who discusses examples of toxic organizations.