

Is Your Team Toxic? 4 Antidotes to Get Back on Track

There are 4 Team Toxins that are lethal to productivity and goodwill.

But you can learn to recognize these behaviors, so you can stop them before they spread.

Which will save you time, money, hard feelings, and help you keep your best employees.

It's Completely Normal

Even high performing teams resort to unskillful communication from time to time—especially in periods of uncertainty and change.

But when these toxins persist without being addressed, it erodes performance, trust, and morale over time. Which in turn, impacts your ability to achieve your mission.

So Much Is At Stake

Some alarming statistics from the Harvard Business Review¹ reveal the after-effects of being on the *receiving* end of toxic behavior at work:

- 66% said their performance declined,
- 80% lost work time worrying about the incident,
- 63% lost time avoiding the offender, and
- 78% said their commitment to the organization had declined.

There's not an organization on the planet that can afford that amount of loss—and that goes double for a mission-driven organization.

An important thing to know about the toxins is that they are **terribly contagious**. While it might seem relevant at the time, the origin of the toxin often ends up being irrelevant. What matters most is that the behavior stops immediately, before it does any lasting harm.

The 4 Toxic Behaviors of Teams

Toxic Behavior #1 - Criticism

There is a difference between a complaint and a criticism. A **complaint** addresses a specific failed action. A **criticism** adds a negative barb attacking someone's character or personality.

While it is perfectly natural to have complaints about a colleague's behavior, **personal attacks will shut down open communication** immediately. Criticism, real or perceived, is likely to spark the other toxins, setting them all ablaze.

Toxic Behavior #2 - Defensiveness

¹ Harvard Business Review, Forethought Managing People “How Toxic Colleagues Corrode Performance” by Christine Porath and Christine Pearson, April 2009.

While it's understandable that you defend yourself when criticized, the research shows this approach is rarely effective. Why? **Defensiveness is really just a tactic of shifting blame.** In effect, it says "it's not me... it's you!"

It's common for the defensive person to feel like they are "above" the conflict when they are actually escalating and perpetuating the situation. It is also common for the defensive person to interpret their own defensiveness as proof that their colleague was being critical (e.g. "If he hadn't started it, I wouldn't be feeling defensive"). Unchecked, one defensive coworker can trigger the rest of the toxic behaviors among your team.

Toxic Behavior #3 - Stonewalling

Often, after one or more team toxins have run amok, a person will "shut down." This is the essence of stonewalling—**complete shut down and cutting off of communication.** Silent treatments. Refusals to engage. Withdrawal. "Missed" emails. Or in milder cases, simply being reluctant to directly express your thoughts.

While reflection and solitude are helpful to collect your thoughts, prolonged stonewalling cuts us off from connection, and ends up feeding more toxic behavior in others.

Toxic Behavior #4 - Contempt

Sarcasm. Belittling. Cynicism. Name-calling. Hostile humor. Belligerence. Eye rolling. Contempt comes in many forms.

It is, by far, the most poisonous of all toxins. Contempt conveys a dehumanizing disgust and condescension. **Long-simmering negative thoughts** about a colleague take a serious toll on the camaraderie, trust, and the even physical health of your team.

Antidotes

If you recognize some of the above behaviors in your team, don't worry. There is hope... in the form of antidotes.

Once you've "snuffed out" these toxic behaviors, you can apply one of the four antidotes to help your team recover.

And, the good news is, just like toxic behaviors, the antidotes extremely contagious, too.

Antidote #1 – Soft Start Up

In order to fully understand a Soft Start Up it might be helpful to understand its opposite, the Harsh Start Up.

A Harsh Start Up is a launch into conflict that travels from 0 to 100 in seconds flat. A Harsh Start Up lacks context or consideration as to whether this is the best time or place to have the discussion.

In contrast, a Soft Start Up **gives your colleague the context needed to engage in a meaningful dialogue**. A Soft Start Up may also include a request for a good time or place if “here and now” isn’t ideal. The respect that is present in a Soft Start Up can quickly deescalate a conflict. Respect sets the stage for even the thorniest of conversations to go smoothly.

Antidote #2 – Find the Request Behind the Criticism

“Finding the Request Behind the Criticism” requires a shift in focus *from* what the conflict is about on the surface (who did what to whom) *to* **the request or need that lies underneath**.

Frequently, valid concerns come in the form of unskillful criticisms. But they often are lost in the “white noise” of the toxins.

Imagine if you could extract a kernel of truth, even 2%, in the most outrageous and unjust criticisms...what sort of leader would you be then? A solid request gives you something concrete to negotiate and consider, whereas a criticism is likely to trigger the use of more toxins. This antidote is nothing shy of a master ninja move. Use this antidote regularly and your colleagues will take note.

Antidote #3 – Make a Request

Tensions often increase due to an inability to effectively ask for what is needed or wanted. When you make a clear request, **you provide a handrail to steady the relationship** in the midst of conflict and confusion.

It can feel risky and vulnerable to make a request. It is both a generous and a bold act (even when the request is modest). Making a request requires emotional intelligence (EQ) and authenticity. Both are critical leadership skills.

A request can be met with a yes, no, or a counteroffer of negotiation. Be sure to check-in with yourself beforehand to make sure your request is *truly* a request and not a demand in disguise.

Antidote #4 – Give and Receive Repair Bids

The term “repair bid” was coined by relationship expert and bestselling author, John Gottman PhD. And they come in all shapes and sizes.

Repair Bids are behaviors that **extend an olive branch to another person**. They can be as subtle as a smile or as obvious as a direct apology. Regardless of their form, when received, they increase positive regard in that relationship. However, when rebuffed, they can set the relationship back, fueling negativity.

It can be challenging to recognize Repair Bids for what they actually are at times. One colleague might compliment your hard work (Words of Affirmation) in a meeting immediately after you’ve had a heated disagreement. Another co-worker may bring you coffee from the café (Giving Gifts) while a third may complete a dreaded task (Acts of Service) on your behalf.

All of these behaviors add to positive regard between colleagues when given and received. But conflict is not a prerequisite for a repair bid. Repair bids can simply add positivity to an already

good working relationship. Researchers Fredrickson and Losada² demonstrate that high performing teams have at least a 2.9 to 1, positive to negative, ratio between colleagues. When times are good, you can build the positive “reserves” to help your team weather whatever challenges may lie ahead.

I invite you to try out some of the suggestions and notice your results. And if you'd like to speak with me personally about your team, organization, or coalition's specific situation, schedule a complimentary and confidential Strategy Consult to get one action step to get your group back on mission... and back to work.

Email leigh@leighmarz.com to inquire about the next available Strategy Consult, or call 415.748.8074.



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² Fredrickson, Barbara L. and Losada, Marcial F. “Positive Affects and the Complex Dynamics of Human Flourishing” American Psychologist, October 2005.