

# Turning Toxicity Around



Strategies for a humane workplace

2020 Challenge Series



## PART ONE

## INTRODUCTION

By 2007, Organisational Psychologist and Stanford University's Professor of Management Studies, Robert Sutton, was so fed up with the lack of progress on addressing toxic leadership in the workplace that he wrote *The No Asshole Rule*<sup>1</sup>, which quickly became a New York Times Best Seller.

Sutton's research and field work highlighted an increasing trend in the prevalence of toxic and psychopathic people in workplaces, coupled with an avoidance or lack of understanding in knowing what to do about them.

If you weren't sure about whether the toxic leader you had in mind was indeed one, he provided a simple litmus test that would give you the answer: A 'yes' response to these two questions removed

any uncertainty – you were indeed, dealing with an asshole.

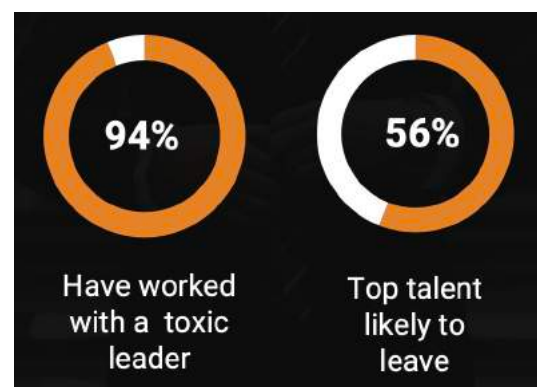
In over a decade since, multiple studies into bad workplace behaviour reinforce not only the increasing prevalence of toxic leadership, but also its deeply detrimental impacts on people and workplaces.

The vast majority of workers have encountered a toxic leader or colleague – you may well be one of them. If you are personally grounded and confident enough to withstand them, they usually seek easier prey - but many remain and suffer.

Another reality of having toxic leaders in a workplace is that they drive top talent out – great people are simply not prepared to stick around to cop the abuse<sup>2</sup>.

### ASSHOLE TEST

- Test 1** After talking to the alleged A-Hole, do you feel oppressed, humiliated, de-energised or belittled?
- Test 2** Does the alleged A-Hole aim their venom at people less powerful rather than more powerful? (kiss up, kick down)







## PART TWO

## IDENTIFYING TOXIC LEADERS

**What are** the red flags and warning bells to watch for? It's important to understand that good, bad and ugly leadership sits on a spectrum – every one of us will display some undesirable behaviours from time to time. None of us are all good, all bad or all ugly – if we were, it would be very easy to identify.



- Good leaders are inspiring, ensure clarity, foster collaboration and nurture talent.
- Bad leaders lack the skills, capabilities and comprehension of human motivation and performance drivers to achieve what good leaders can.
- Ugly leaders may demonstrate some of the attributes of both good and bad leaders – but their intent is the issue. They are self-centred, opportunistic and often callous in getting to what they want. Ugly is toxic.

Ugly is where the most serious damage gets done – to people and to organisations. At this end of the spectrum, there are leaders with diagnosable personality disorders.

The Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) describes the attributes of toxic individuals.

### The Narcissist

*It's all about me.*

We are all narcissistic to some degree. We naturally have a mild to moderate fascination with ourselves. Call it vanity, self-preservation, ego.

Narcissists typically exude confidence and charisma and are found in all forms of leadership – from politics to commerce and all types of professions and services. Their self-perception is that of grandiose superiority. They value power and see themselves as unique.

Narcissism becomes toxic when otherwise acceptable levels of self-interest become grossly exaggerated and can be described as:

*Arrogant*  
*Pompous*  
*Grandiose*  
*Self-glorifying*  
*Exploitive*  
*Deceitful*  
*Untouchable*



## The Histrionic

*I'm a drama queen!*

Histrionics tend to melodramatic behavior and use deliberately and excessively emotional exhibits to draw attention to themselves and attain their desired outcomes. At toxic levels they display such attributes as:

*Attention-seeking*

*Emotional*

*Charming*

*Demanding*

*Vain*

*Exhibitionistic*

*Flighty*

*Shallow*



Histrionics aim to present as social and exotic – they crave attention, praise and reassurance. Yet this gregarious, extroverted persona masks a much less grounded personality.

Histrionics dissociate themselves from the reality of their impact and impression on others. They are quick to shift their views and allegiances for opportunistic gains and have low levels of self-awareness and self-control.

Poor in emotional regulation, they can exhibit extremes of emotion - from elation to despondence - in short time frames and with minimal rational cause. They often lack attention to detail and appear unfocused, leading them to superficial and compromised judgment of people and situations.

Dubious and unreliable, but the life of any party.

## The Psychopath

*I have no guilt, no remorse.*

Sociopathic and psychopathic attributes in leaders are recognisable through their extreme egocentricity and inability to establish meaningful long-term relationships. Their drive to succeed is often at the expense of others and they are differentiated from narcissists and histrionics by the absence of any guilt or remorse for their damaging impact on others. These attributes were captured very aptly in the screen character of Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

At toxic levels in the workplace, these psychopathic attributes are evident:

*Impulsive*

*Aggressive*

*Untrustworthy*

*Vengeful*

*Non-conformist*

*Malevolent*

*Insensitive*

*Irritable*



Interested only in their own status and advancement, corporate psychopaths are dangerous due to their lack of empathy and concern for others. They discard relationships that serve them no purpose, viewing them as mere collateral damage on their path to success.

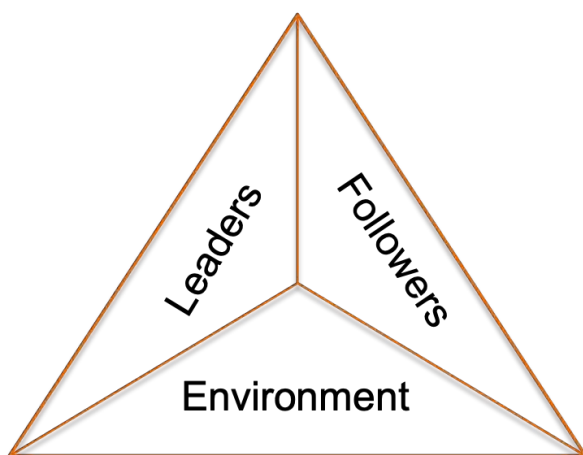
Corporate psychopaths employ fear and guilt to manipulate others. Unlike sociopaths, who can still demonstrate they have a conscience, psychopaths show no sense of guilt or remorse for their actions.



## PART THREE

## THE TOXIC TRIANGLE

The **popular** and prevailing depiction of workplace toxicity is that seen in toxic leaders, however toxic leaders cannot exist in a vacuum – it takes three essential elements for workplace toxicity to thrive. The toxic triangle consists of toxic leaders, those impelled to follow them and a workplace environment that accommodates – overtly or silently – toxic behaviours.



### Leaders

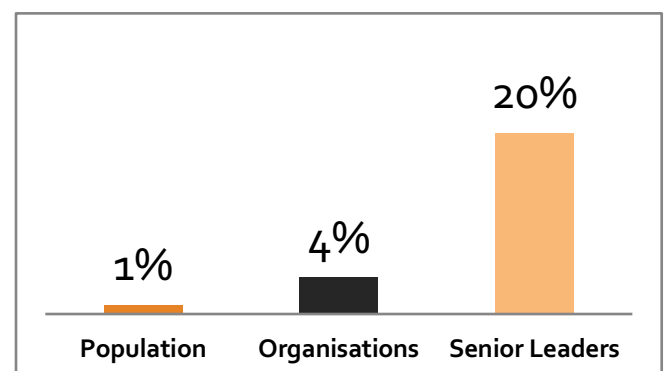
Disturbingly, corporate psychopathy – the ability to charm, manipulate and deceive others in pursuit of success in the workplace – is on the rise. This is the case despite the growing recognition of human motivation and performance drivers, the millions spent on leadership development, wellbeing and cultural transformation initiatives.

Why?

The VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) environment has prompted organisations to actively seek and appoint leaders with high charisma, change appetite, willingness to challenge existing rules and models. Further, such leaders are given them free reign and high financial rewards for success<sup>6</sup>.

These are precisely the conditions that attract leaders with psychopathic tendencies – the opportunity to play for high stakes, high rewards and endowed with positional power and a crisis to validate any means to an end.

In the general population, psychopaths represent about 1% of the community. Studies show that in organisations, their representation is up to four times higher<sup>7</sup>. As toxic leaders often rise to the top, as many as 1 in 5 senior leaders are estimated to have psychopathic tendencies.





Extensive research has refined the dimensions observable in toxic leaders<sup>8</sup>.



### 1. Abusive supervision

When leaders abuse their power over others, they are deemed to be hostile supervisors. This can take the form of verbal abuse such as public humiliation, angry outbursts, derogatory comments or insinuations and any other overt words or actions that intimidate. It can also take the form of non-verbal abuse, using facial or physical gestures, ignoring particular individuals or applying the 'silent treatment'.

### 2. Authoritarianism

Toxic leaders are power-players: they seek to assert their influence over others and often subscribe to command and control leadership approaches. They expect unquestioning loyalty and obedience, rewarding those that succumb and punishing those that do not. They hoard decision making, micro-manage their subordinates and take credit for the work and successes of others.

### 3. Narcissism

As highlighted in Part Two, narcissistic attributes are a notable feature of toxic leaders. They are masked behind a veil of confidence and charm, but little is required to unveil the self-absorbed and arrogant core that drives these leaders to seek power and the admiration of others.

### 4. Self-promotion

Toxic leaders are in it for themselves, they are their own best advocates. They go to lengths to manage the impression they make on others, always aiming to present themselves as confident, competent, personable and important. They make dedicated efforts to manage their physical appearance and can be obsessively focused on how they are perceived by others.

### 5. Unpredictability

Their lack of true self-awareness and disregard for others often manifests in unmanaged and unpredictable behavior, including extreme mood swings and erratic responses to people and situations. Direct reports often 'walk on eggshells' in an attempt to navigate the uncertainty of what to expect from a toxic leader, who may swing from being ultra-supportive to vitriolic – overnight and without explanation.



## Followers

Not everyone that works with or for a toxic leader can be called a follower – some workers are able to maintain a distance or relationship that spares them the direct impact of such leaders.

Those that can be deemed followers fall into one of two categories<sup>9</sup>:

### Conformers – ‘pawns’

*People that accommodate the toxic leader, often because they have less power and influence, lower self-worth, an external locus of control or low self-identity.*

Conformers aim to maintain a low profile and, by doing the toxic leader’s bidding without question, try to remain below the radar to avoid abusive retorts. In this way, toxic leaders manipulate their followers to ensure their own success.

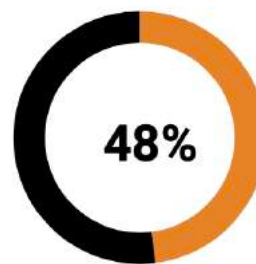
### Colluders – ‘patrons’

*People who align themselves with a toxic leader, hoping to stay safe and ride the wave of the opportunity as the leader pushes through the ranks.*

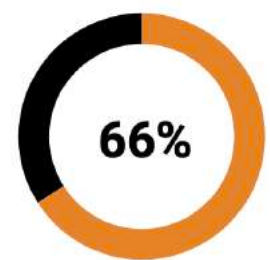
Colluders are prepared to play the toxic leader’s game, possibly by compromising their own values and/or turning a blind eye to their leader’s toxic behaviours. In doing so, they hope to both protect themselves and their interests as well as leverage any upside, such as career progression or favorable appraisals.

But this comes at a price. Research highlights the staggering loss of productivity that occurs in the workplace as followers of toxic leaders struggle to do their work in such environments.

With 80% of workplace output attributed to the bulk of workers in an organisation, consider these impacts<sup>10</sup>:



Decreased work effort



Decreased performance



Although unintentional, followers by the actions and inaction, unwittingly play a role in condoning toxic leadership. In this way, they are an essential element in the toxic triangle.





## Environment

The third element necessary for toxicity to thrive is the environment, or the organisational context in which it exists.

Toxic leaders have a ripple effect in the organisation. They spread the acceptance of toxicity by normalising bad behaviour, and they impact many more workers than they directly interact with.

Toxicity is often a by-product of the culture and behaviours an organisation promotes. For instance, highly competitive cultures that reward results irrespective of how these are obtained may inadvertently attract and validate toxic leaders.

Environments that spawn the conditions within which toxicity can thrive show these attributes:



### 1. Highly political

Complex hierarchies in which position power rules create a natural foundation for toxicity to flourish.

Personal agendas frequently outweigh what is in the best interests of stakeholders and the organisation overall. Power-mongers build larger and larger empires to deepen their control of key business functions and people.

Unstated but well-understood rules and norms restrict deviation from the political objectives of those in senior or critical positions. Oftentimes, inequitable rewards favoring the in-group are obscured behind a cloak of secrecy.

### 2. Highly stressful

Organisations that seem to be in constant crisis-mode channel toxicity. The unrelenting pressure to perform induces stress and rationalises the ends to justify the means of attaining them. In these environments, back-stabbing and gossiping underpin survival as individuals jockey for position and only the fittest survive. High absenteeism and employee turnover are indicators of the destructive effects of such environments.

### 3. Poor communication

Debate is discouraged or ignored, collaboration is weak and silence pervades. Toxic environments rely on top-down communication channels that restrict the voice of the majority. Innovation is stifled as talented individuals cease discretionary effort and limit their contribution to meet the parameters of their job descriptions, or leave.



## PART FOUR

## MANAGING TOXICITY

**Let's turn** our attention to what we can do to confront the challenge and manage toxicity in the workplace.

To begin with, we need to acknowledge that oftentimes a combination of cultures and personalities have made us reticent to tackle the issue, effectively making us complicit in allowing toxicity to continue, largely unchecked.

It's also important to recognise that toxicity can and does occur at multiple levels in an organization – it often manifests in leaders but peers and even direct reports can display toxic behaviours.



**Your  
Manager**



**Your  
Peers**



**Your  
Subordinates**

This means a variety of strategies may be necessary to address workplace toxicity. These strategies fall into two categories:

**SELF PROTECTION MEASURES**  
**MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

**Self-protection measures** are inward facing and focus on the victim's well-being and coping mechanisms.

In the absence of training and support, those subjected to toxic leaders will revert to a number of different coping strategies, some effective, some less so.

The choice of strategy varies by individual and will be a function of their locus of control, self-confidence and self-belief and their support networks. Some coping strategies are more effective than others<sup>11</sup>.

### COPING STRATEGIES



**Adaptive**

Problem solving  
Support seeking  
Accommodation  
Self reliance  
Negotiation  
Reframing



**Maladaptive**

Helplessness  
Delegation  
Isolation  
Submission  
Opposition  
Confrontation

**Management strategies** are outward facing and support workers in dealing with the individuals and behaviours they confront. We will address these for each type of toxic relationship.



## MANAGING A TOXIC LEADER

Toxic leaders are known to oscillate between being super-supportive and ruthlessly damaging. If the option to separate yourself from such a leader is not viable, the following strategies should be employed:

1. **Document everything.** This will be essential to support your case. Keep a diary of toxic encounters – include dates, times, topics, quotes, witnesses and impacts.
2. **Create distance** – physical and emotional. Where possible, remove yourself from direct daily contact with the leader. Change desks or offices, or work remotely. Protect yourself emotionally by seeking support from friends, family and colleagues – don't suffer in silence.
3. **Broaden your network.** Extend your relationships with other senior managers, colleagues and influencers in the organisation. Ensure your work is acknowledged as yours by others. Seek internal and external mentors and advisers, including HR professionals and business managers.
4. **Remain professional.** Toxic leaders can exhibit less than professional behaviours, including sarcasm, emotional outbursts and derogatory snipes. At all times, focus on being polite and professional. Walk away or avoid scenarios in which you feel your reactions cannot be constrained.

5. **Get out.** If the situation becomes intolerable and support or change unlikely, a dignified departure may be the best option. Your talents and commitment could be better appreciated elsewhere.

## MANAGING A TOXIC PEER

1. **Don't compete.** Resist the 'two can play that game' temptation. Toxic peers are likely to have honed their skills of manipulation, sabotage and white-anting over many years. You are likely to come off second best and, possibly worse, be seen to be demonstrating toxic behaviours yourself.
2. **Set boundaries.** The best way to ring box a toxic peer is to confront them with what you will and will not accept or tolerate from them. As leadership researcher and author Brene Brown suggests, be clear on 'what's OK and what's not OK'<sup>12</sup>.
3. **Get a coach.** Seeking independent support from a professional coach or trusted mentor can help to formulate effective strategies to deal with toxic colleagues and a sounding board for implementing them.
4. **Focus on solutions.** Avoid the negative spiral of elevating the problem and self-denigration. Concentrate your strategies and efforts on what



you can do, including gaining support from leaders and other colleagues.

## MANAGING A TOXIC SUBORDINATE

Many would think that position power over a subordinate would be sufficient to avert toxic behavior, but that is not necessarily so.

Direct reports may become toxic for many reasons: having been overlooked for a promotion, believing themselves to have superior skills or experience to you, disagreeing with your approach or being actively disengaged from their work or the organisation, to name a few. Whatever the reason, it is important to:

1. **Set clear expectations.** In addition to the performance objectives for their job, expectations about behaviours and values in achieving these objectives need to be set.
2. **Use the illusion of choice.** Having options they can exercise gives people a sense of control. The options you present should all achieve your goal and your direct report gets to choose. The illusion is that the direct report feels they have exercised free will rather than being directed to a particular course of action.
3. **Monitor tightly.** 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer' is the principle here. Without micro-managing, ensure toxic subordinates are

closely supervised and signs of defiant behaviour quickly quashed.

4. **Promote transparency.** Ensure your team values open communication by recognising and rewarding transparency and role-modelling this as leader.

## STAY OR GO?

Management strategies and self-protection measures are essential to both the well-being and work performance of those experiencing workplace toxicity. But should you persist and tolerate toxicity at all?



Many individual variables will influence the answer to this question – it will be a personal judgment and decision. Leaving a toxic leader or environment is not a reflection of failure. In many cases, it is the best strategy available.



## THE HUMAN RESOURCES ROLE

With its remit to attract, develop and retain human capital, the Human Resources (HR) function is strategically positioned to impact both the talent and culture of the organisation. In order to curb toxicity, proactive HR policies and procedures are critical.



## AVOID BREEDING TOXICITY

Organisations can inadvertently breed toxic environments via the practices they directly and indirectly support.

1. **Candidate Sourcing & Selection.** The pressure to attract top talent in a competitive market can lead to sourcing strategies and selection processes being compromised. Special attention needs to be paid to diverse candidate source pools and rigorous selection processes that avert unconscious biases unduly influencing the recruitment decisions that are made.

## 2. Promotion & Succession.

Toxic employees are adept at politicking and working the organisational systems, aligning themselves with key influencers to support their career aspirations. Objective evaluations and anonymous 360-degree feedback are essential.

## TAKE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

1. **Diversity & Inclusion.** D&I focus has been shown to have numerous organisational benefits, from increased employee engagement to superior innovation and employee performance. D&I also plays a role in addressing toxicity by reducing the likelihood of toxic norms and behaviours being reinforced.
2. **Performance & Development.** Toxicity should be addressed as a performance issue – it most likely contravenes expectations of behaviour and almost certainly breaches organisational values. In most cases, *how* employees achieve outcomes (behaviours and values) is as important a measure of performance as *what* they achieve. Where toxic behaviours are evident or suspected, performance coaching and clear development plans should be put in place.
3. **Exit.** Ultimately, the best way to address toxicity may be to eradicate it from the organisation by terminating toxic individuals. Appropriate policies and procedures need to be in place.



## A GREAT PLACE TO WORK

We all aspire to be part of a workplace in which we find our work is meaningful and rewarding, our talents are utilised and valued and our relationships are authentic and trusting. In return, we offer commitment and performance. A fair exchange. An equitable psychological contract between employer and employee.



What constitutes a great to work? Ten factors that indisputably contribute to a great workplace are:

- A **purpose** and vision that connects employees to the organisation
- **Clarity** of expectations and rewards
- A **safe** environment free from physical or psychological hazards
- **Fair** and equitable policies and processes that are free of biases
- Opportunity to exercise **autonomy** and control within the parameters of their role
- Care for the holistic **wellbeing** of all employees
- Opportunity to grow and **learn** in order to reach personal and professional potential

- **Transparency** that eliminates subversive behaviours and practices
- A **social** community that values diversity and inclusion, and
- **Open communication** that ensures workers are in full knowledge of actions that may impact them.

### GREAT WORKPLACE TOP 10

- 1 Purpose
- 2 Clarity
- 3 Safety
- 4 Fairness
- 5 Autonomy
- 6 Wellbeing
- 7 Learning
- 8 Transparency
- 9 Social Connection
- 10 Open Communication

Toxic people and cultures breach this contract. They generate confusion, fear and distrust. They breed damaging environments in which workers shift their energy and focus from discretionary effort to self-preservation.

The fact that workplace toxicity continues in 2020 is an indictment on organisational leadership and points to a systemic failure in delivering a basic duty of care.

It does not need to be that way.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Sylvia Vorhauser-Smith



Sylvia is a change leader, executive coach, speaker, author and leadership workshop facilitator with extensive experience in corporate and entrepreneurial business environments. As CEO of BrainBiz, Sylvia specialises in bringing neuroscience principles into business practices.

Sylvia is an international speaker on applied neuroscience, the future of work and human capital management and a seasoned executive facilitator and coach. She is a featured contributor to Forbes Magazine, a member of the Australian Human Resources Institute, author of numerous white papers on talent management and co-author of the books *Talented South-East Asia 2014*, *Talented Philippines 2015* and *CLIFFHANGER, HR on the Precipice in the Future of Work 2017*. In 2019, Sylvia co-founded Future Fit Learning, a change leadership forum for senior executives.

## ABOUT BRAINBIZ



BrainBiz was conceived in 2017 with the aim of *bringing neuroscience to the art of leadership*.

Your fingerprint is your unique physical identifier. It is permanent, static and unchanging. Your *brainprint* is your unique cognitive identifier – but differs from your fingerprint by being dynamic and malleable. Neuroplasticity ensures the brain changes and reorganises itself with each learning and life experience. Every day. For life.

BrainBiz applies neuroscience principles to support leaders, teams and organisations to develop their brainprint and deal effectively with change. We build the cognitive muscle to enable L-PB.

Leadership – Personal Best.

[www.brainbiz.com.au](http://www.brainbiz.com.au)

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