

Are You A Target For A Toxic Workplace?

By Lynn Brown, CHRP

It lies just beneath the surface. You can't see it but you know it's there—brewing. An atmosphere of higher stress, conflict and indifference.

The toxic workplace has entered the lexicon of management in the 21st century and like many management concepts it is loosely defined. But, however it is defined, it can be even more difficult to fix.

In a recent executive roundtable we held discussing the issue of toxic workplaces or poisoned work environments, we were surprised at how many people identified the issue as one of “bullying.” Strictly speaking, however, bullying is but one aspect of those elements that can poison the workplace.

Others include active gossip or a rumour mill with malicious overtones, or disrespectful behaviour that may or may not fall into the category of harassment under the prohibited grounds of discrimination.

Any workplace can become toxic if it includes (or even promotes) those behaviours that negatively affect others individually and/or collectively. Certainly the symptoms of a toxic workplace will become evident in short order. These can include increases in absenteeism, health problems and use of Employee Assistance Programs. Other symptoms may be unusually higher levels of stress on managers and employees, apathy, lethargy and fewer face-to-face communications.

As the problem worsens, the signs of toxicity will become more overt and may include significant lowering of productivity, an increase in health problems and accidents, more resignations and the loss of talented employees and, ultimately, a discernable effect on the firm's bottom line.

While it is true that in some cases, a toxic environment can be traced to one individual or group within the organization, sometimes systemic factors come into play. Increased economic stresses, poor management practices, consistent and unresolved conflict can serve to mask, foster or strongly reinforce toxic behaviour or practices. Indifference to the plight of employees faced with

bullying or other abuses of power are obvious examples.

Often the resolution of toxic situations and its underlying causes land squarely on the desk of the human resources professional. The good news is that there is hope because there are ways to fix the poisonous work environment.

Strategies to address work environment issues can include: preventative measures such as comprehensive recruitment and orientation procedures, implementing performance measures, including training and performance appraisal systems to address the issues, and developing policies and procedures to build better accountability.

Support of senior management is vitally important in working towards positive resolutions to address the problems. Management may, however, need to be aware that there are definite bottom line costs of not addressing these situations, including lost productivity, high employee turnover and even legal liability if issues remain unchecked.

Identifying the sources of the problem can be key in developing a good resolution. These may include independent audits or assessments using such techniques as questionnaires or focus groups.

If there has been a specific complaint, the investigation often falls within the responsibility of human resources professionals. Conducting an investigation internally can be challenging in partnership environments. In particular, if the complaint is against a partner, human resources is faced with the difficult task of investigating an owner of the firm.

Consequently, many organizations, both in and outside of the professional services realm, are turning to third-party investigators. These investigators gather the facts of the situation without any internal bias toward the individuals involved in the situation. While they present their findings to management, however, they are not generally involved in the resolution.

Being aware of the signs and open to the possibility that a toxic work environment may be

developing within your firm can be the first step in restoring your firm back to health.

This article was published in *TLOMA Today*, January 2004. Lynn Brown is Managing Director of Brown Consulting Group, providing HR consulting, outsourcing and training. You may reach her at 416-694-6101 or lynn@brownconsulting.ca. Visit our website at www.brownconsulting.ca