

CONTENTS

Introduction	9
1 The Rise of the Toxic Workplace	13
2 The Many Faces of the Toxic Boss	31
3 Reality Check: Great Places to Work	49
4 Hidden Poisons in Nonprofits and Churches	63
5 Little Murders at Work	81
6 Rabbits on the Freeway	95
7 Descent to the Dark Side	107
8 Rx for Cynicism	119
Survival Guide and Toolkit	129
Concluding Remarks	169
Acknowledgments	170
About the Authors	170

CHAPTER ONE

{ THE RISE OF THE TOXIC WORKPLACE }

WHY SO MANY OF US ARE BREATHING
POISONS AND HATING OUR JOBS

DO YOU WORK for a toxic boss? Does your workplace feel poisonous?

If so, you have lots of company, and maybe this book will help you survive.

On the other hand, if you've had fairly positive work experiences, you might be as surprised as we were when we asked friends, contacts, and extended family if they'd ever experienced a toxic boss or workplace. Many told us sobering, even terrible stories.

Like most people, we had heard of "the boss from hell," but we never imagined how many in our circles would right away describe experiences ranging from highly frustrating to humiliating and health-threatening.

Yet we should not have been surprised. According to Gallup, seven of ten US workers either are "going through the motions" or flat-out hate their jobs. But why?

In our wired, globalized world, disruptive events impact markets, technology, stability—and people, as we continually see in the news. This upheaval batters worker morale in everything from manufacturing to retail to IT, from schools and local government to hospitals and banks. Employees struggle with economic uncertainties, downsizing, and demands to do more with less. They—we—feel overworked, underpaid, insecure, and underappreciated.

Attitudes sink into cynicism. The blame game escalates.

One professional, looking worn and defeated, told us that “bickering, criticism, and lack of support” had spread their poison through a workplace she used to love going to. Now, she said, “The tension here is so thick that I hate going to work. Actually, right now, I hate my life.”

When a workplace becomes toxic, its poison spreads beyond its walls and into the lives of its workers and their families. In contrast, positive organizations energize and inspire their workers. When forced to downsize, they try to soften reality’s hard edges. Their leaders know organizations thrive when employees thrive.

Oddly, toxic and healthy workplace cultures often boast similar mission statements. Both types cite values such as integrity, respect for the individual, and commitment to excellence. The difference is, positive organizations find ways to put their stated values into action, but toxic cultures allow personal agendas and other priorities to crowd out what they declare in print. Two similar organizations with nearly identical values statements might be dramatically different.

That’s what a young father named Bill experienced in three large companies in the same industry. He landed a job in company number one, totally green and grateful for a boss who patiently mentored him. Benefits were good and the atmosphere collegial. But then the company started outsourcing jobs to Costa Rica

and months later announced it was moving out of state. Because of family obligations, Bill couldn't move, and for the next nine months the company would fly him to their new headquarters to train replacements. He was given glowing recommendations to use in a job search.

When company number two eventually hired him, Bill was unaware he would soon experience the triple whammy of two toxic bosses in a toxic culture. Here's how he described it:

What a contrast to the first company! The drive for corporate profits was crushing the life out of employees. One day we received a message announcing record profits for the month and then, ironically, another demanding that all spending for office supplies and travel cease. I was at my computer before dawn to communicate with Europe and after a full day's work, back on at night with Asia. I was on salary and got no extra pay for the extreme hours, yet my grim workaholic bosses criticized me for taking a lunch break.

The atmosphere was all about company rules and success. The break room had a big TV playing only company propaganda. No pictures were in the restrooms, only lists of rules such as: only three pens or pencils are allowed on your desk; only two photographs are allowed in your cubicle.

As I tell this, it sounds exaggerated but it isn't. Two able associates were fired. Another with a wife and

"The company I left observed 'Appreciation Afternoon,' and it got canceled because of work pressures!"

kids walked out in the middle of the day, traumatized, never to come back. I wondered who would be fired next. The team of eight I started out with went down to my manager and me.

Handling a major account with no support staff, my workload tripled, but my bosses told me, “We’ve noticed you’re not asking for more work.” I guess it’s because they didn’t have anyone else to handle it, but never once did I hear a word of encouragement from them. Yet they warned me they had a file of all my mistakes.

After two terrible years I gained a lot of weight, feared for my health and my marriage, and felt trapped, unable to quit because I had a family to support. Yet the day came when I knew for my personal survival I had to quit. I called my brother and my pastor for moral support and gave notice.

Wonderfully, the same day a former colleague sent me a message about a job possibility! Soon I was reemployed in the same industry—and experienced another stark contrast. I went from toxic and miserable to warm and friendly. Now at work we talk and laugh together. We celebrate personal events and pitch in for each other. Our boss goes out of her way to offer hands-on help. She smiles as she comes up to a group and asks, “How are you guys doing? Anything I can do?” And she leaves at five o’clock, signaling to the rest of us we’re not expected to put in seventy or eighty hours.

My new company has on its corporate calendar “Appreciation Week,” when it shows genuine appreciation for employees. The company I left observed

“Appreciation Afternoon,” and it got canceled because of work pressures!

Soon after joining my present company I Googled its employee satisfaction rating and saw my new company was rated very high. I also checked on the toxic company I had just quit and, sure enough, it was right at the bottom.

Oh, how I wish I'd looked that up earlier.

Bill's experiences with these companies are similar to those of many we've interviewed—employees disillusioned and wounded in one workplace but encouraged and energized in another. Some organizations are wonderful places to work, while thousands of others are so dysfunctional its employees become discouraged and disrespected enough to walk out despite the consequences—or desperately wish they could.

Author/consultant Annie McKee gives this description: “Toxic or dissonant organizations are rife with conflict, fear, and anger. The environment causes people to have physiological responses as if they're in a fight-or-flight situation. Healthy people become ill. Immune systems are less effective. Colds, flu, and stress-related illnesses such as heart attacks are more common. When you walk into a toxic organization, you can actually feel that something is wrong. By contrast, in resonant organizations, people take fewer sick days and turnover is low. People smile, make jokes, talk openly, and help one another.”

What's going on? Are today's toxic workplaces inevitable?

“LIFE IS DIFFICULT.” That's how Scott Peck famously began his bestseller, *The Road Less Traveled*. And if life is difficult, the huge chunk of it called work is sometimes the most difficult of all.

Pulitzer Prize winner Studs Terkel in his oral history masterpiece, *Working*, reflects what he heard from scores of his interviewees: “This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns. . . . It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.”

Yet work is also a source of not only sustenance but personal achievement and meaning. We all need work, and we’re all dependent on one another. Life is difficult and always has been, yet today’s economic pressures, uncertainties, complexities, and social breakdowns generate endless reasons workplaces fail to encourage and empower their employees.

No one wants to tell the boss bad news, let alone tell him he’s acting like a jerk.

Chief among them is failure of leadership, often by high achievers unaware or uncaring about their own limitations. The painful realities of toxic bosses are compounded by what researchers call “CEO disease.” The term describes the obvious—no one wants to tell the boss bad news, let alone tell him he’s acting like a jerk.

A manager named Ruth told us about her boss at a small company. “He had no management skills, and he was not about to listen to advice. He loved to use humiliation as a tool and provoked infighting among our staff. At any time, if there were three people in a room, they were talking about a fourth. It was a horrible place to work.”

As consultant McKee pointed out, workers in such places develop health problems, and Ruth was no exception. “It was

consuming me,” she told us. “My blood pressure was up thirty points, I had acid reflux, and I’d be seeing my doctor every six to eight weeks. He told me I was doing long-term cellular damage to my body. I told myself, ‘This is killing me,’ yet I had no other job prospects.”

We’ve been talking to many employees feeling similarly trapped. What should a worker do? Confront? Hunker down? Quit?

It took Ruth more than five years to extricate herself. She desperately needed her paycheck, so she kept enduring the abuse. A wise businessman from her church counseled her on how to ramp up her job search, but she couldn’t do much, barely getting through her sixty-hour workweeks.

One day she had an epiphany. At work she was demeaned and treated as incompetent, but everywhere else she was highly valued—as a mother, a friend, a valued church leader, and a neighbor. “These both can’t be true,” she realized. “People I admire and respect value me. That’s where the truth is.”

But that didn’t lessen what the workplace was doing to her. Her businessman friend asked, “Are you willing to move?” Ruth had good reasons not to, so she said no. However, a year later when he asked the same question, she said yes.

Although willing to go anywhere and work at almost anything, nothing came of her applications and networking, and her health continued to deteriorate. She knew she shouldn’t quit till she had another job, but she asked us, “When do you say, ‘This is killing me’? When do you simply quit? I knew I’d probably lose my house if I did, but I came to the point of realizing that was better than being dead! So after five and a half years of misery, I finally quit.”

Afterward, all she found was some freelance work, and it took her six months to regain the energy to aggressively go after a new

job. Happily, her networking eventually paid off and she found a position a thousand miles away that fit her experience and skills.

Ruth now lavishes praise on her new boss and new workplace. “I now feel valued and supported,” she told us. “Every day it’s a delight to go to work.”

Still, she suffered for years. In today’s job market, it isn’t always easy to move on.

WHAT’S MADDENING about so many of the stories we heard were descriptions of highly educated, well-credentialed leaders poisoning their organizations. We were especially jarred by leaders trained in psychology and interpersonal relationships who used their skills to advance personal agendas.

A supervising social worker named Clayton told us of his first work experience fresh out of grad school. He had worked in several human services agencies with healthy levels of common purpose and mutual appreciation, but that wasn’t true in his first job as a licensed professional.

When he met the director of the small agency, Clayton thought the older professional would help him learn the ropes. The four other clinicians welcomed him and he enthusiastically started preparing case studies for the weekly team review. But in the meeting, he noticed a lot of silence from his coworkers. When cases were presented, the director would rush to point out what the clinician missed.

Here’s what happened to Clayton:

The director was unreasonably harsh with the others, but when I first presented, he softened his criticism. He even said the more experienced clinicians could learn from the new guy. It felt weird to be held up this way since I was the newbie.

Days later I presented a case with an unclear diagnosis. I expected the team would engage and work together to ferret out the best approach. Instead, the director laid into me, asking if my credentials were legitimate and how could I call myself a counselor if I couldn't figure out a simple diagnosis? I was stunned and humiliated, wondering if I really was clueless. I'd never been so embarrassed.

Over the next few days, each one of the other clinicians privately let me in on the truth. Despite the director's experience and knowledge, he taught through humiliation. They said it was simply a matter of time before I'd be his target again.

I was demoralized, but I stayed, thinking I was lucky to have the job since I wasn't very good at it. I accepted my role as another abused child in the family.

Since I didn't quit after he laid into me, the director had the green light to verbally attack me. Every meeting was painful. We all felt relief when we weren't the target, but felt terrible for the one who was. We all got used to thinking we were inept losers who didn't really deserve to be paid.

Looking back, I can't believe I stayed four years. I moved up to supervisor and program manager but dreaded going to work, knowing if not today then soon I'd be told what an idiot I was and asked how I could live with myself knowing I was a complete fraud.

"We all got used to thinking we were inept losers who didn't really deserve to be paid."

Our damaged self-esteem kept us questioning our approaches with clients, unable to make healthy decisions while trapped in a toxic and abusive work environment. We felt hypocritical telling our clients to be in charge of their choices. I began to identify with the “wounded healer” archetype, but in a resentful and self-loathing way. Exhausted and demoralized, I finally hit the jobs listings.

When I left, I gradually felt the darkness in my life lift. I no longer came home after work to withdraw and escape—I came home with energy and gratitude. My new job, with a supportive and wise supervisor, made me realize the depth of the toxic environment I’d been in. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t seen how bad it was sooner! I determined that no matter what, I would never again subject myself to a work environment that made me feel bad about myself.

WE EXPECT COUNSELING centers with their commitments to healing and their high degree of training to be community oases. When those values are violated, it strikes us as very strange. Other organizations dealing with social breakdown and crime often hire less trained employees and sometimes the combustible fumes in the air explode. For instance, well qualified with a PhD and considerable experience, Diana just seven months ago became the new manager of a community’s corrections division. She had no idea she’d have so much to clean up. A tragic event had led to two investigations and the department chief, a deputy chief, and a unit supervisor were forced to retire.

Here’s what she told us:

“Toxic” barely begins to describe my work environment. Misinformation, rumors, and gossip are making this time stressful for everyone. Despite weekly meetings to keep staff up-to-date and address rumors, the toxicity multiplied. A few vocal, disgruntled employees approached the media, wrote anonymous letters to the mayor, and keep spreading their negativity. Everyone feels the turmoil.

Our chief will soon retire, and he recently placed six people in acting supervisory positions. They are excellent choices. Each has shown leadership qualities, positive attitudes, and a strong work ethic. Yet the toxic employees are complaining they were not selected and are running to HR.

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“We have too much to do to allow the toxic naysayers to control the situation.”
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Diana’s solution:

This week I decided I’ve expended more than enough energy and time trying to appease them. Many good employees want to make our division a model for all community corrections agencies. We have too much work to do to allow the toxic naysayers to control the situation.

I’m hopeful this roller-coaster ride will soon be over.

Diana is putting most of her efforts into positive initiatives and resourcing those who want to move forward. She’s playing both defense and offense, empowering those who can bring about new realities, and she sees light ahead.

Yet some workplaces are so toxic, the roller-coaster ride seems endless and the sooner one can quit the better.

That was surely true of a businessman named Carlos. He told us at a previous job his two bosses would go overseas to raise a million dollars, and then they would come back to use half of it for their lifestyle of drugs, alcohol, and women. He once walked in on his boss and found him lining up cocaine on his desk. Of twenty employees, Carlos says he was the only one who hadn't slept with the receptionist. Talk about a dysfunctional workplace!

However, he couldn't immediately quit. How did Carlos survive? "I just did my job," he told us. "I'm task-oriented and engrossed myself in my checklist of what I had to do." As soon as he lined up other employment, he got out of there.

POISONOUS FUMES rise from many sources, including bureaucracies that frustrate and stifle. Along with that, workers have been telling us how hierarchy marginalizes them, with the promoted looking down on those left behind, and the credentialed lordling it over the non-credentialed.

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 "A smile or single word of appreciation would have made all the difference."
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A workplace mediator named David described the situation in federal military projects. He told us that thousands of workers with similar experience and skills find themselves in hierarchical environments where your place in the hierarchy can immediately stigmatize you as an outcast. "Contractors experience it as a brutal industry, with musical chairs, in which you're paid a lot of money but you get no respect."

David describes the hierarchy as having three levels: the contractors are third-class, civilian employees second-class, and those still in uniform first-class. "The irony is

they all have pretty much the same experience, dress alike, and think alike. Most of the guys have served together, they're veterans, but those up a level or two in the caste system call those at the bottom 'slimy contractors.'”

Coming in with the “wrong” credentials can marginalize employees in many workplaces. A young father named Ted earned a four-year master’s degree and enjoyed a decade of success in his field, but he suddenly found himself unemployed. After months of desperate searching he found a job in a local school system as a “behavioral interventionist,” supervising troubled teenagers.

The administration did little to train him and nothing to encourage him. Twice a student assaulted him, but no one cared or asked if he was okay. Though Ted was the only one spending entire days with the troubled students, he was never invited to evaluation meetings.

Ted told us, “I had always found my opinions sought and valued, but not there. Only teachers and administrators were valued, with the handful of us on staff treated as inferiors. The atmosphere was extremely negative, with constant talk about drinking, partying, and sleeping around. Invitations to the school events to boost employee morale went only to teachers and administrators. It was tough handling angry, troubled kids all day, but that didn’t drain me nearly as much as being snubbed by the professionals who never said a cheerful word, let alone an encouraging one. A smile or a single word of appreciation would have made all the difference.”

Ted worked just a year at the school and here’s how he endured it: “I survived by spending time with three secretaries, who were in the same boat. They said cheerful things; their camaraderie and the positive atmosphere around them would revive my spirits. I learned that concentrating my mind on that one oasis of friendliness and constructive attitudes would get me through the day.

They had no idea how important their encouragements and positive attitudes were to me.”

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY. Ruth decided her paycheck was not as important as her health. Bill gutted it out day after toxic day for two years, gaining weight, his energies depleted. He paid a steep price and is still trying to physically and mentally recover. When your body insistently complains, seriously consider all your options.

GAIN PERSPECTIVE. Seek out someone objective and wise. Share the full breadth of what’s going on, and then listen for new ways of looking at what action steps you can take.

FACE YOUR FEARS. We all have them, and too often they lurk deep within, sapping our will and clouding our thoughts. Surface them, confront them, and ramp up courage by seeking resources that challenge and inspire you.

STAND TALL. Clayton was too inexperienced to know that letting his toxic boss demean him would give him a green light to humiliate him again. In the next chapter we’ll see an employee firmly confront her boss when she realizes she may be his next victim. If common sense and your gut say your boss is way out of line, find a way to draw your own line in the sand.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS

LIFE CAN BE BRUTALLY unfair, and that’s surely true of toxic workplaces. Even if you get out quickly, the unfairness can keep eating at you and your wounds may keep festering.

It's no accident that much has been written about the power and necessity of forgiveness and acceptance. Coauthor Gary Chapman has counseled many clients who have struggled with the ways they've been mistreated. One woman he counseled for two years couldn't get past her painful experience in her company. She was a hard worker in one of America's largest manufacturing companies and had risen to management. All was well until she got a new supervisor. Then, although she had worked there for twenty-five years, she was fired. She told Gary this about her supervisor:

I couldn't please her. No matter what I did, it was never enough. I would work late and come in early in order to meet deadlines, but always there was something missing. All of my colleagues saw it and expressed empathy for me.

I tried talking with her and asking what I needed to do to improve. Her answers were never anything specific. She just didn't like me, and eventually she accused me of cheating the company. God knows, I was not guilty! I would never do anything like that. She had no evidence but was convinced. So, I was fired.

That's when she came to see Gary, and week after week he listened to her recount the same painful experiences of how she was mistreated. She once brought a former colleague with her who corroborated her story. Gary tried to help her process her pain and move on with her life, but she remained trapped in her resentment.

For the next twelve years she invested all of her energy in talking with attorney after attorney about suing the company. She finally found one who would take her case and for three years she

invested her money in a futile effort to “make them pay” for what happened.

Gary summarizes her efforts this way: “She essentially wasted fifteen years of her life fighting a hopeless battle. This is a poor investment of one’s life. How I wish she could have accepted the reality that the world is unfair and invested those fifteen years in doing something significant.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *Have you worked in a setting you experienced as toxic?*
- *If so, what about the workplace or relationships were unhealthy?*
- *What factors do you think should be considered to decide if it’s time to leave an unhealthy work environment?*