

Do You Have a Secretly Toxic Employee Problem?



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Toxic employees are people who poison the culture at work. Some of them are outright toxic, vocal in communicating it. There is another group, however, that is far more sinister than these loud mouthed bad apples: The secretly toxic employees.

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These types are critical to locate and eradicate from your culture to promote a better work environment that can create an excellent Customer Experience.

What makes a toxic employee?

Toxic employees are people that may or may not work hard, but create an environment of antagonism in their wake. They are not on board with management's vision for the future. They don't engage with the vision or feel any ownership in its deployment. They often disguise their toxicity as "constructive criticism" or calling themselves "realists." According to [Entrepreneur.com](https://www.entrepreneur.com), toxic employees can cause the following symptoms in your organization:

Decrease in overall productivity

Loss of morale

comments and attacks

More arguments between employees

High frustration levels accompanied by negative antagonistic attitudes and negative

Unwillingness to work overtime or work late

Lack of effort to do more than necessary and encouraging coworkers to do the same

[Inc.com](#) published an article last month about secretly toxic employees. They included the following four types of employees:

The Chameleon: Describes the employee who is on many projects, but doesn't contribute to any of them, shirking responsibility whenever possible but quick to claim accolades for his or her contribution to the project's success.

The Ornament: A term that refers to an employee who is easy on the eyes but lacks the skills and experience to perform the job they have, relying on their good looks to get others to do their work for them.

The Ball and Chain: These employees are risk averse and will seed any new idea with doubt, often playing the role as "devil's advocate," causing others in the organization to waffle on taking on new ventures.

The Vampire: While these employees tend to be popular and well connected within the organization, they adeptly introduce negativity into any situation and thrive on draining the energy from the room, or sucking the blood out of any good momentum.

Toxic Employees Are Contagious

You know the old saying that, "Misery loves company?" Well, Toxic employees tend to be miserable, so they are going to make sure they have company. When they do this, it's like they are infecting others with their condition. These other employees might have been happy at one time, but now have joined the dark side.

Some experts on workplace culture refer to toxic employees like weeds in a flower bed or a virus. Others say they taint the others around them, much like a clean shirt will smell if you throw it in the dirty laundry. Most people agree, however that the importance of eliminating toxic employees is paramount to your Employee Experience. Now obviously this is easy to do when the toxic employee is brazen about it. It is more complicated, however, when an employee is more secretly toxic. The truth is that of these secretly toxic employees might not even know that they are. In fact, you could be one yourself.

The Antidote for Toxicity

Clearly, the best thing to do when you have a secretly toxic employee is to fire them. This strategy is problematic, however, if you don't know the source. It's also a problem if you have such a culture problem that toxicity continues to manifest, no matter how many times you try to remove it from your organization.

The antidote for toxicity is threefold.

Define what you want your Employee Culture to be. I cannot overemphasize the importance of having a defined culture for your organization. There is an old saying that says, "If you don't know where you are going, any path will take you there." Well, if you haven't defined the path of where you want your Employees to take at work, they could well end up on a path of toxicity. Disney is masterful at defining the path for their "cast members." We often take clients on a tour of Disney where you will learn that their mantra is that their culture is, "Well defined, by design and clear to all."

Recruit and Hire Employees that are best for the position. Employees have certain skills. Be sure that they are suited for the position you are filling. For Customer-facing employees, it is important to [hire those with a high EQ](#) (emotional intelligence), so that they can use those skills to manage the situations to the outcome you want. Be sure that employees that don't want to be Customer-facing aren't. In my first book, I describe how we discovered that over 50 percent of our client's staff were in a Customer-facing position and didn't have the skills or desire to be. How many of the people in your organization are in the same position?

Keep your Employee Ambassadors happy. If there are toxic employees in your culture, hopefully you also have what we call Employee Ambassadors. My colleague, Michael Lowenstein, defines Employee Ambassadors as, "Employees that score high on commitment to the company, the value proposition, and the Customer." These Ambassadors have the opposite effect as Toxic employees do, encouraging more employees to embrace the company vision and do more for the Customer to deliver on the brand promise. Once you find an Ambassador, keep them happy.

Toxic employees, whether they are secretly so or not, are bound to bring down your company culture. They will spread like a virus or a weed, destroying the culture of your organization and poisoning the Customer Experience. Be sure to invest in creating the antidote to these toxic employees by defining the culture you want, recruiting the right talent to promote it and to reward the ambassadors of your vision. Employing this threefold strategy will create a culture at your organization that you want and not the one that secretly toxic employees would give you.

Have you worked with toxic employees? I would love to hear how you manage them in the comments below.

If you enjoyed this post, you might be interested in the following blogs:

[Employee Retention, Engagement, and Ambassadorship Go Hand-In-Hand in Successful Companies](#)

[Hire People with a High EQ](#)

[Disney Continues to Deliver Magical Experiences](#)

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