

9 Signs of a Toxic Workplace (and How to Fix It With Trauma-Informed Care)



[SHENANDOAH CHEVALO](#) 20 HOURS AGO

A safe and healthy workplace is the goal—but there is a concerning number of toxic workplaces out there. Is yours one of them?

There's a common dynamic where executive teams turn a blind eye to problems while those without power can see the glaring issues of a toxic workplace unfolding before their eyes.

Today, we discuss nine common signs of a toxic workplace—and how to solve each issue with a trauma-informed approach.

9 SIGNS OF A TOXIC WORKPLACE

✦ AND HOW TO FIX IT ✦

HIGH TURNOVER

Decrease worker dissatisfaction by opening lines of communication.

FEAR OF RETRIBUTION

Praise employees for providing feedback and move towards a flat system.

GOSSIP

Ritualize discussions of change to transform gossip into constructive dialog.

AVOIDING REFLECTION

Hold regular 1-on-1 and group reflection meetings.

LACK OF PARTICIPATION

Encourage self-expression & creativity with a safe & welcoming environment.

LACK OF DIVERSITY

Make space for everyone & foster curiosity, intention & awareness.

LACK OF MUTAL TRUST

Establish, practice & demonstrate trauma-informed values.

UNHEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Create a culture of clarity & healthy relationships.

LACK OF SAFETY

Develop & implement an organizational safety plan.



CHEFALO CONSULTING
TRAUMA-INFORMED SPECIALIST

1 High Turnover Rates

Usually, when an employee leaves a job, it's not because they hated the job they were assigned to do—it's because they couldn't stand the people they worked with or the management they worked under.

If your workplace can't seem to keep employees around, ask yourself why. There are likely some unaddressed problems causing major dissatisfaction at work.

The Best Tool to Combat High Turnover: Healthy Communication

Keeping employees around doesn't need to be difficult. If a job pays a living wage and the people working that job feel safe at work, they're likely to stick around for a while.

But if you're already struggling with high turnover, ask your employees what could change to make their lives easier. What can you do that would make them want to stay with your company for longer?

And vice versa. If you're not happy at work, consider communicating that in a healthy and respectful way to your employer.

Opening lines of communication can go a long way toward increasing employee satisfaction and lowering turnover rates.

2 Fear of Retribution

If you've ever wanted to leave a job because it was toxic, then you know that not every manager will be receptive to feedback—and this is another red flag of a toxic workplace.

Many employees keep their thoughts and feedback to themselves because they fear retribution. If they're honest about how they feel at work, they fear that they may lose their job, tarnish their reputation, or face other fallouts at work.

The sad part is that these fears are not unfounded.

The Best Tool to Combat Fear of Retaliation: Structural Change

If you're on a management team, the obvious solution is to not fire or punish employees who are honest about their dissatisfaction with certain aspects of your management style.

As a trauma-informed coach, I always encourage organizations to take it a step further by moving their organizational structure from a hierarchal system to a flat system.

Most organizational structures operate with the immense power imbalances of a hierarchal system. A flat system removes some or all of these power structures to create a safer, more level environment where employees and management feel safe and seen. Of course, certain roles still have distinct responsibilities. The key difference is how the power dynamics shift towards a more equitable system.

3 Gossip

When workers feel unsafe communicating their dissatisfaction to management, they often bring their complaints to others who exist on the same level as them (especially when they operate within a rigid hierarchical power system).

Since no one in the discussion feels as though they have the power to create lasting change regarding the issues at hand, what could be an environment of constructive feedback is seen instead as useless complaining and workplace gossip.

However, imagine if someone with the power to create change was included in the conversation. Now, imagine if they implemented change after the conversation. Instead of gossip, we now have constructive dialog.

By now, you can probably see how all these issues are coming full circle—and how the solutions are interconnected.

The Best Tool to Combat Unaddressed Complaints: Ritualizing Discussions of Change

Communication is essential in any relationship—especially professional ones.

But in any relationship, communicating about conflict and negative experiences can be especially difficult.

That's why I encourage and coach organizations on ritualizing discussions of change. By creating a habit of opening up a safe space to address complaints, we can transform gossip into constructive change.

And in that process, we also prove to our team members that their needs matter, that we value their ideas and that we appreciate their feedback.

4 Avoiding Reflection

It's common for organizations to always be pushing forward. In these environments, we're constantly discussing the future: allocating tasks to be done, creating goals, reaching quotas, chugging along on the never-ending to-do list.

However, if we become too future-focused, we forget to set aside time to reflect on the past. If your workplace never sits down to discuss and reflect, it could be a toxic environment.

The Best Tools to Establish Retrospective Thinking: Focused 1-on-1 & Group Reflection Meetings

If you want to create a healthy and safe working environment where retrospection contributes to positive change, set aside dedicated time to reflect.

Reflection time can become a part of your regular 1-on-1 meetings, and you can establish monthly group meetings with the sole purpose of reflection.

These retrospective moments give your team a dedicated time to celebrate wins, acknowledge everyone's hard work, and highlight achievements.

They also create a space where your team can look back and ask what could have been done better. This includes addressing conflict in a healthy way, speaking up about mistakes, and encouraging employees to ask for help in areas they're struggling in.

5 Lack of Participation

In a toxic workplace that discourages open and honest communication and operates on the basis of fear, disengagement is extremely common. If employees seem "checked out" or resistant to participation, it's likely because their creativity is stifled or they don't feel safe expressing their ideas.