

10 Systems Strategies to Offset Toxic, Uncivil Behaviors

Part 1: Research Blows Intuition Out of the Waters!

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Day in and day out, OD professionals are often left with problems managers either don't have the time to deal with or don't know how to resolve. One such problem apparent to OD professionals that has often gone under the radar screen is how to deal with toxic, uncivil, and disruptive behaviors. Or to frame it more positively—how to establish organizational communities of respectful engagement, such that control freaks, narcissists, manipulators, bullies, and prima donnas don't get away with tyranny!

Not surprisingly, our research confirmed some typical expectations about toxic and uncivil behaviors. But it also refuted the instincts most leaders have about how best to deal with these behaviors. So, in this first part of this article, let's discuss just what our research found and how it shattered the way most people think about toxic, disruptive behaviors.

Our study of over 400 leaders took two years of our time. Using structured interviews and an 82-item online survey, we were literally blown away with the results. For example, we not only had return rate of 42% (considered very respectable in survey research) but even more importantly, these respondents gave us 72 pages of single-spaced text on top of the 82 multiple-choice items. We found this pretty revealing about the pain suffered, as two of the following quotes from our study indicated:

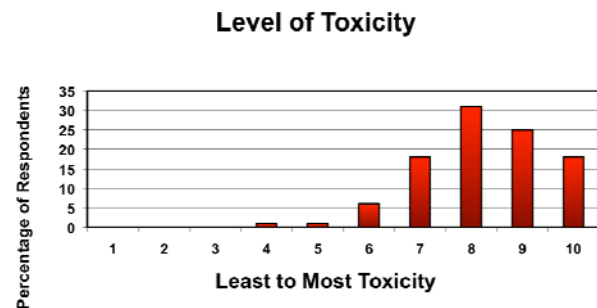
"The day this person left our company is considered an annual holiday!"

"This person's toxic behaviors and poor decisions caused the organization to drop from #1 to #3 in our industry in 2 years!"

We are all affected by toxic, uncivil behaviors. In fact, 94% of our leaders said they were affected by these individuals.



And to what degree. On a scale of 1 to 10, 92% of our respondents reported the severity of the behaviors being anywhere from 7 to 10!



In the other part of our study—the in-depth interviews—we discovered that this was often the first time these leaders talked openly about this problem with someone understood the ravages they were enduring. And because it was a research study, we couldn't help them problem-solve. We felt our hands were tied. We wanted to do more. And here's the intuitive rub. What we would have done before

we had the results of our study would have been to help them understand how to give good feedback to the toxic person, how to document effectively, and how to hold them accountable. All actions that really don't make much of a difference, we discovered.

So, now let's talk specifically about some of the myths that are out there about these behaviors and how our research debunks these myths:

Myth #1: Don't mess with uncivil, toxic persons who are successful.

Many *are* successful. But are you aware that, according other researchers, 12% of victims of these folks quit. And human resource metrics show that it costs anywhere from 1.5 to 3 times their salary to find a replacement. Consider also that 68% of targeted victims decline in performance and 78% are less committed to the organization. So, we suggest to leaders who say their hands are tied because these are some of their most productive employees, that they look at the aftermath of toxic behaviors on the organization. This seminar will focus on how you deal with these individuals *and* the folks who protect them, enabling their behaviors to continue!

Myth #2: Give them feedback.

Ah yes, venerable feedback. We as OD professionals have been trained in how to give good feedback. But it doesn't always work. Why? Because many toxic people are clueless they are toxic and, when confronted, have many defense mechanisms built up. Like: "I'm the only who has the guts to stand up to...." or "If you were as committed as I am, you'd be doing this too!" And so on... This workshop will help you understand how to use feedback effectively within a systems approach, not as an isolated strategy.

Myth #3: Most people won't put up with toxic behaviors.

They certainly will. And our research discovered that some for up to 30 years! The critical juncture here is how to put a halt to this. We focus on this in our seminar.

Myth #4: Fire them to resolve the issue.

Well, how do you fire those who are productive but get away with mayhem? We will show how OD professionals help leaders match what we call "task work" with "values work." Why both are important to bottom-line success. And it's beyond intuition. It's about productivity and bottom-line results. We'll show you how to demonstrate this to key leaders in your organization. And even if you fire the productive, toxic ones, what happens to those left behind. We have discovered that they often start behaving like the toxic person in an effort to survive. Without an effective healing process, the team suffers in the long run. We'll teach you how to engage this healing process for real results.

Myth 5: Toxic behavior is a solo act.

Enablers do more than enabling. They get what we call "secondary gain" out of this. Just think about what your lives would be like if you couldn't talk about how "ain't it awful" at the water cooler!

Myth 6: Leaders see the overall systemic effects of these behaviors .

Well, hopefully some do. Others don't. Why? Because these clever chameleons are very adept at "kissing up and kicking down." We'll show you how to rearrange this situation with something we call "skip-level evaluations."

Finally, we'd like to point out one thing to you. In reading this article, we'll bet you know exactly what we're talking about. Even though we never defied "toxic behaviors"! Well, just to set the record straight, our research did discover a definition we have used worldwide: "Toxic behaviors are the demonstration of a pattern of uncivil, inappropriate, and disruptive actions that seriously debilitate individuals, teams, and/or organizations over the long-term." It's not just about someone having a bad day. It's something much more serious. And it's a habitual pattern.

Next month, we'll share part 2 of this article. What to do as OD professionals from a systems perspective to establish organizational communities of respectful engagement. We'll help you understand what to do from two perspectives—proactive and reactive.