Leading Through Toxicity

Strategies for Addressing Difficult Workplace Behaviors and Protecting Team Performance

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Advanced Leadership Session

Toxic behaviors are not merely interpersonal problems. They are performance, culture, and leadership issues.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the session, participants will be able to...

Analyze impact

Assess how toxic workplace behaviors affect well-being, team functioning, culture, and performance.

Apply leadership strategies

Use communication, boundaries, documentation, coaching, conflict management, and accountability practices.

Evaluate case studies

Select leadership and organizational responses that protect psychological safety and improve team outcomes.

Session commitment

Move from frustration to disciplined leadership action.



How happy are we, really?



PollEv.com/matthewshupp525

What Do We Mean by “Toxicity”?

Focus on repeated behaviors and harmful impact—not personality labels

Toxicity is a pattern of behavior that erodes trust, safety, collaboration, or performance.

Behavioral examples

Incivility · bullying · gossip · manipulation · chronic negativity · passive aggression · undermining · withholding information

Leadership distinction

The goal is not diagnosis. The goal is to identify observable actions, measurable impact, and required change.

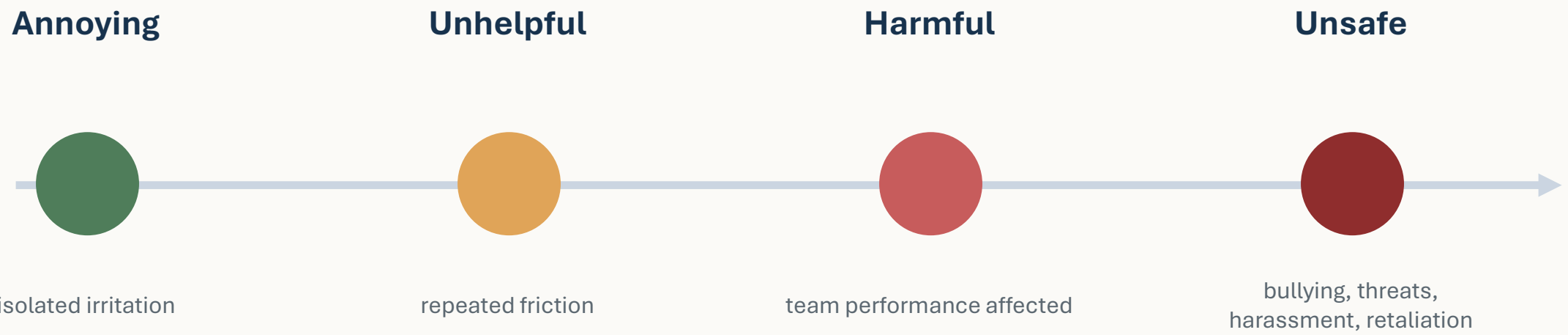
Replace labels with evidence

Instead of: “She is toxic.”

Say: “In three meetings, she interrupted colleagues, dismissed their ideas as naïve, and later sent emails questioning their competence. Two team members stopped contributing.”

The Toxicity Spectrum

Not every difficult interaction requires the same response



Leadership moves depend on severity, frequency, evidence, power dynamics, and risk.

Remind you of anyone???



Why Toxicity Is a Performance Issue

The damage rarely stays contained

Well-being

Stress, burnout, withdrawal, anxiety, reduced sense of belonging, increased emotional labor.

Team functioning

Lower trust, less candor, avoidance, side conversations, conflict escalation, cliques.

Organizational outcomes

Reduced quality, slower decisions, turnover risk, reputational harm, leader credibility loss.

Toxicity taxes the entire system.

The longer leaders wait, the more the team learns that the behavior is tolerated.


The thing is, Bob, it's not that I'm lazy.
It's that I just don't care.

Early Warning Signs Leaders Should Not Ignore

Patterns usually show up before a crisis

- Meetings become quieter after one person speaks
- People route around a colleague instead of collaborating directly
- Feedback becomes “anonymous” because trust is low
- High performers disengage, transfer, or stop offering ideas
- A person is consistently charming upward and harmful laterally or downward

Ask yourself

“Who changes their behavior to avoid this person, and what does that avoidance cost the team?”

Roadmap to Increased Positive Interactions

A practical progression from recognition to intervention

1 Name the behavior

Distinguish patterns from isolated incidents.

2 Assess the impact

Map effects on people, performance, and culture.

3 Intervene early

Use direct communication, boundaries, coaching, and documentation.

4 Escalate wisely

Partner with HR and apply progressive accountability.

5 Repair the system

Rebuild trust and prevent recurrence.

Core habit: observe behavior → describe impact → set expectations → follow through.

The Leadership Stance: Firm, Fair, and Evidence-Informed

Effective leaders combine care with accountability

Firm

Set clear expectations and consequences.

Fair

Use consistent standards and avoid personal attacks.

Curious

Seek context without excusing harm.

Documented

Track behavior, impact, actions, and follow-up.

Care without accountability enables harm. Accountability without care can escalate defensiveness. Effective leadership needs both.

The CLEAR Response Model

A structured way to intervene without escalating unnecessarily

C

Clarify

What happened?
What is observable?

L

Link

How did it affect people, work, or culture?

E

Expect

What must change, by when, and to what standard?

A

Assist

What coaching, resources, or support are appropriate?

R

Review

How will progress be monitored and documented?

Use CLEAR before, during, and after difficult conversations.
Might this work at your place of employment? Why or why not?

Difficult Conversation Structure

Use direct language that stays behavior-based

“When [specific behavior] happens, the impact is [team/work/culture impact]. Going forward, I expect [specific behavior]. We will revisit this on [date].”

Avoid

“You are toxic.”
“You always make things difficult.”
“Everyone is upset with you.”

Use

“In the past two meetings, you interrupted three colleagues and dismissed their proposals before they finished. The impact is that people stopped contributing.”

Direct is kind. Vague is risky.

Roll with resistance.

Boundary Setting: Protecting the Team (and YOUR peace) Without Over-Functioning

Boundaries tell people what will happen next

Time boundary

"I can discuss this for 15 minutes. Then we need to return to the agenda."

Communication boundary

"Concerns should be raised directly and respectfully, not through side conversations."

Behavior boundary

"If interruptions continue, I will pause the meeting and redirect participation."

Access boundary

"I will not continue this conversation while you are yelling. We can resume when we can speak professionally."

Decision boundary

"Your input has been heard. The decision has been made, and I expect support for implementation."

Time – Communication – Behavior – Access - Decision

Documentation That Supports Accountability

Document facts, impact, expectations, support, and follow-up

What happened?

Dates, times, specific statements or behaviors, who was present, relevant policy or expectation.

Why it matters?

Impact on team climate, work quality, deadlines, morale, psychological safety, or service.

What happened next?

Leadership response, employee response, support offered, agreed expectations, review date.

Documentation is not punishment.
It is memory, fairness, risk management, and continuity.

Coaching or Progressive Accountability?

Match the response to willingness, severity, and risk

Coaching is appropriate when...

The behavior is lower risk, the employee shows insight, harm is limited, and there is willingness to change.

Accountability is necessary when...

The behavior is severe, repeated, retaliatory, policy-related, or the person refuses responsibility.

Key leadership question

“What response protects the team and gives the employee a fair opportunity to change?”

Partnering with HR and Organizational Supports

Escalation is not failure; it is responsible leadership

- Consult early when behavior is severe, repeated, discriminatory, threatening, retaliatory, or policy-related
- Bring behavior-based documentation and specific questions
- Clarify available options: coaching memo, performance plan, investigation, mediation, reassignment, discipline
- Protect confidentiality and avoid triangulation
- Align next steps with policy, contract language, and institutional process

Bring HR a clean signal

Not: “What do I do about this toxic person?”

Better: “Here is the pattern, impact, expectations already communicated, employee response, and risk I am seeing.”

Case Study Method

Participants practice structured decision-making

Read

What do you know?

Diagnose

What behavior pattern is present?

Assess

What is the risk and impact?

Respond

What should the leader do next?

Debrief

What could prevent recurrence?

Use the CLEAR model and document your rationale.

Case Study 1: The Passive-Aggressive High Performer

High competence, low trust

A senior employee consistently completes excellent individual work but undermines decisions after meetings, uses sarcasm with newer staff, and withholds information until deadlines are at risk. Peers avoid asking for help because they fear being embarrassed.

Discussion prompts

1. What is observable?
2. What is the team impact?
3. What would you say in the first conversation?
4. What would you document?
5. When would this move beyond coaching?

Leader risk

Overvaluing technical performance and tolerating behavior that damages shared performance.

Possible response

Name the pattern, define collaboration expectations, set a review date, and monitor whether information-sharing improves.

Case Study 2: The Bullying Supervisor

Power dynamics increase risk

A supervisor frequently undermines employees in front of others, assigns undesirable tasks to staff who question decisions, and says “people are too sensitive these days.” Exit interviews mention fear of retaliation, but no one has filed a formal complaint.

Discussion prompts

1. What raises the risk level?
2. What immediate steps protect staff?
3. Who must be consulted?
4. What documentation exists or is needed?
5. What should not be handled informally?

Leader risk

Treating bullying as a “style issue” rather than a safety, retention, and organizational risk.

Possible response

Consult HR immediately, assess retaliation risk, protect reporting channels, gather documentation, and follow institutional process.

Case Study 3: Chronic Negativity in a Change Initiative

Resistance becomes contagious when unaddressed

During a major systems change, one team member repeatedly predicts failure, rolls their eyes in meetings, discourages colleagues from attending training, and sends long emails questioning leadership motives. Some concerns are legitimate, but the tone is draining the team.

Discussion prompts

1. Which concerns may be valid?
2. Where does skepticism become harmful?
3. How do you separate content from conduct?
4. What boundaries are needed?
5. How do you preserve dissent without tolerating derailment?

Leader risk

Silencing dissent or tolerating destructive conduct because the person occasionally raises valid issues.

Possible response

Acknowledge legitimate concerns, redirect conduct, set meeting norms, and create structured channels for feedback.

Case Study 4: The Charming Manipulator

Managing up while damaging peers

A staff member is highly responsive to senior leaders and frequently volunteers for visible projects. Peers report that the person takes credit for shared work, privately criticizes colleagues, and frames any feedback as jealousy or hostility. Leaders receive conflicting stories.

Discussion prompts

1. How do you avoid being captured by one narrative?
2. What evidence would you seek?
3. How do you protect peers from retaliation?
4. What expectations should be set?
5. What patterns would trigger escalation?

Leader risk

Rewarding visibility while ignoring peer-level harm and inequitable credit-taking.

Possible response

Triangulate evidence, define collaboration and credit norms, document patterns, and monitor retaliation risk.

After Intervention: Rebuilding Psychological Safety

Addressing one person is only part of the work

Name norms

Re-establish expectations for respect, candor, disagreement, and collaboration.

Repair trust

Acknowledge team impact without sharing confidential personnel details.

Create channels

Offer safe ways to raise concerns, ask questions, and surface retaliation risk.

Monitor patterns

Watch for withdrawal, side conversations, persistent fear, or repeated harm.

Reinforce healthy behavior

Recognize constructive conflict, collaboration, and accountability.

Rebuilding positive workplace culture takes time and effort!

Prevention: Build a Culture That Does Not Reward Toxicity

Culture is shaped by what leaders tolerate, reward, and ignore

- Hire and promote for collaboration, not just results
- Use behavioral expectations in performance conversations
- Set meeting norms that protect voice and respectful disagreement
- Act quickly on early patterns rather than waiting for a crisis
- Reward people who raise concerns constructively and share credit
- Train leaders to document, coach, and partner with HR effectively

Culture question

“What behavior currently gets rewarded here, even unintentionally?”

Leader Action Plan

Turn insight into next steps

1. One pattern I need to address

Name a repeated behavior, not a person label.

2. Evidence I need to gather

What facts, dates, examples, or policies matter?

3. Conversation I need to have

What is the behavior-impact-expectation statement?

4. Support or partner needed

Who should I consult: HR, supervisor, legal, EAP, ombudsperson?

5. Follow-through date

When will I review behavior, document progress, and decide next steps?

Commit to one leadership action within the next 7 days.

Closing Reflection

Toxicity is addressed through clarity, courage, consistency, and care.

Final prompt

What is one behavior you will stop tolerating silently—and what is the first responsible action you will take?

Thank you ~ mrshupp@ship.edu