



# Toxic leadership behaviour – the poison pill for the future of work

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**38 articles**

The future of work presents a growing number of challenges to organisations, and at the same time there are many “voices” in HR that discuss ideas and solutions to tackle these challenges. What is often overlooked is the impact of toxic leadership on the workforce, and how it can be the detrimental killer aspect of many good ideas and solutions for the future of work.

You can find an almost endless amount of literature and trainings that deal with how effective leadership works and what characteristics a successful leader should develop. However, the dark side of leadership behaviour is not often discussed. In this article I want to highlight the importance of this topic, define it, explain its ill effect on organisations, and make an attempt to look at potential solutions to the issue.

I attend a lot of events and consume an ample amount of publications and webinars on the future of work. Here are some topics and buzzwords that are discussed when it comes to the future of work:

- Attract & retain
- Net promoter scores, employer branding
- EX – Employee Experience
- Digitization
- Next Gen
- Culture
- Agile organisations
- Employee engagement
- Diversity and inclusion
- Vertical and horizontal inclusion
- Collaboration
- Empowerment
- Purpose & values
- Networks of teams
- Self-organised teams
- Distributed authority
- Flexible working
- Flexible workforce / gig economy
- Lifelong learning

While this list is by far not comprehensive, every topic should have their right for existence in an organisation. They all aim to achieve successful and sustainable businesses in our changing world. What they all have in common is that toxic leadership behaviour can compromise all efforts that are put into the pursuit of these ideas. This is why I call toxic leadership the poison pill for the future of work.

We can see more articles and impactful posts from influencers like Simon Sinek and Gary Vaynerchuck on the topic. From my own experiences, I understand that discussing toxic leadership is a sensitive topic for many. Even the consultants who write HR surveys, might be reluctant to discuss the topic when they need a sign-off from a boss, whose dysfunctional behaviour is described in their report. Same goes for HR and Talent Management functions, who might face the same issue when they want to address the topic with top management. This itself shows how treacherous toxic behaviour is, and how it defends itself even from being addressed.

A common understanding of how a toxic workplace behaviour is defined, is in a classic saying that holds some truth: “People don’t leave their jobs, they leave their bosses”.

Employees who show toxic behaviour demean and disrespect you. They blame you for their failures, might steal credit for your successes, invade your privacy, break their promises, bad-mouth you, scream at you and/or belittle you. Some intentionally do not let people below themselves grow as they are afraid that they may advance past them or even hire talent that does not endanger their position – which can also be considered to be toxic. To quote an organisational psychologist: “they treat you like dirt, and either they don’t know it or they don’t care.”

I hear in my network far too many stories of unacceptable leadership behaviour and have experienced my own share of it during my 20 years of having multiple bosses and looking into hundreds of companies as an adviser. Thankfully, there were also great leaders who inspired and respected the talent they worked with. What they had in common is that they were fulfilling their needs without violating the needs of their employees.

Wikipedia states that Toxicity can be measured by the effect the substance has on an organism. Toxic leadership comes in different levels. Some employees and leaders do not act toxic all the time, but only from time to time. Specific people are super toxic and others only in a subtle way, like never appreciating what you have achieved. Do you feel familiar with such behaviour, have you experienced it?

If so, then you will be able to relate to the obvious consequences that it has on employees. Engagement levels drop and exit considerations are made. In these days with [Glassdoor](#) and similar platforms, the damage to your employee net promoter score and in turn your employer branding is significant. Just read some of the genuine comments made on Glassdoor and it becomes apparent that the problem is for real. Treating talent with dignity and supporting them to bring out the best in them is lacking in many leadership agendas.

Attract & retain, the C-level issue #1 is compromised and we do not need to be surprised that [Gallup](#) is presenting year after year poor engagement figures in our global workforce. It would of course be wrong to relate low engagement exclusively to experiencing toxic behaviour, but my own experience tells me that it is a top contributing factor.

Looking at Next Gen employees, many surveys prove that they select their employers for great working cultures and inspiring bosses. Older generations are far more resilient and used to toxic behaviour than Next Gen talent. They will not tolerate being shouted at or being ignored; they will walk out of the door right away.

Google's [Aristotle study](#) supports it, when it found out that psychological safety is the number 1 predictor of team performance. Psychological safety is a shared belief that the team, respectively the employee, is safe for interpersonal risk taking. It can be defined as "being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career". Toxic behaviour comes often with unpredictability and simply destroys psychological safety, respectively never allows it even to be created.

Even older than Google's Aristotle study and more comprehensive are the findings of Amy C. Edmondson, shared in her wonderful book "[The fearless organization](#)" about the scientifically proven benefits of psychological safety at the workplace. Look at the below list of benefits and imagine how toxic behaviour could compromise these:

- Safer workplace / less mistakes
- More innovation & creativity
- Higher retention
- Better inclusion
- Higher resilience
- Higher engagement & performance

I remember a powerful quote in the book from an interview with an employee: “Nobody has ever been fired for not saying something”. That describes to me very well how an atmosphere of fear instead of psychological safety prevents employees from giving their best.

The question that we are facing is what can be done to tackle toxic workplace behaviour. First, we need to find a feasible way to assess / identify it, and then create a process to see how it can be addressed. A Swiss bank e.g. has changed their performance criteria and weighting to reflect both interpersonal skills and performance results, so that an employee with better results, but poor interpersonal skills might end up with a lower bonus than someone with lesser results and better interpersonal skills. Is that enough?

When it comes to consequences, I spoke with the Heads of HR for two large Multinationals in Europe, and they are having top management agreement to sanction toxic leadership behaviour categorically, which ultimately leads to the exit of toxic leaders.

There is a financial business case for removing toxic leaders which should resonate well with boards and management teams. The cost of replacing even a leader who delivers positive results is cheaper than the damage that is done by their toxic behaviour toward the people they lead. The cost of bringing down employee engagement, increasing fluctuation, compromising the employer branding and many more performance related factors is definitely higher than the replacement cost.

A collateral effect of firing a toxic leader is a message that is sent into an organisation and the subsequent awareness that toxic behaviour will not be tolerated. It has by now been firmly established and proven that the performance of organisations is dependent on all of their employee talent, not only on their leaders. Higher engagement levels will drive performance and even share price.

I cannot conclude if awareness is enough to remove toxic behaviour or if strict sanctions like exiting toxic leaders (which creates awareness) is the right answer. We should keep in mind that it was our organisation that created these “certified jerks & bullies” by tolerating their behaviour and promoting them despite their behaviour into leadership roles. There was a time when organisations did not focus on engaging, retaining or developing their own employees, or creating an environment to warrant creative and empowered employees. This time has come to an end.

When it comes to toxic behaviour, we are talking mindsets. They will not be changed by a training intervention or an online course. Company values and code of conducts which promote respectful treatment of everyone have failed too. If the leader has other strong qualities, then perhaps it should be considered what can be done to educate and “rewire” the toxic leader. Is it coaching and mentoring support? Are coaches and mentors on board with this idea? Usually this would entail external support and the buy in of the toxic leader. If the leader does not understand there is an issue with his/her approach to employees, then there will never be change. It takes a strong and authentic leader to see that he has areas he needs to improve on, which can be hard to admit as well. Everybody can immediately think of someone they consider toxic. Do we ourselves also take a look into the mirror?

**Servant leadership** celebrates its 50th anniversary next year and it seems to be a management approach that should be revisited. Robert Greenleaf stated in 1970 that a

servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong.

Who is responsible for tackling this challenge, is it HR? They are a victim when their initiatives for the future of work are compromised. Should top management simply understand the financial business case and act on it? They won't fire themselves for sure. How can we measure toxic behaviour? Is awareness enough to change behaviour?

Awareness is certainly a good start to come to a point where this topic can reach a wider audience and is being discussed in the circles where it counts. As in most cases, in some organisations it will take longer until the issue is addressed while others are already dealing with it. You could start creating awareness by sharing this article with the people who need to see it. But do you dare?

I strongly believe that some organisations first must feel the pain before they act. When their talent is leaving and they are no longer able to attract and engage top talent, they will only then realise that they cannot sustain their market position and growth anymore. When it comes to that point, do not only look if you have implemented any possible idea or solution to make your company and its talent future proof, also be on the lookout for toxic behaviour that might be sabotaging your efforts.

## **About the author**

Chris Debner is an award-winning Talent Mobility Thought Leader and frequent speaker on the future of HR and International HR who is providing Strategic Global Mobility Advisory and Coaching Services. He has more than 20 years of experience in international HR advisory and worked in over 35 countries across all industries. Chris runs his own consultancy for Strategic Talent Mobility Advisory out of Zurich, Switzerland.