

## Ways to Tame a Toxic Workplace



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There's been a lot of reporting this year on harassment in the workplace. While some conduct falls well outside the bounds of what is legally or socially acceptable, many people are working in more subtle, but still toxic, work environments, where caustic, disrespectful and/or belittling attitudes and behaviors are tolerated.

There are those who can't (or perhaps won't) quit their jobs, but they are still trying their best to thrive and stay sane. **Anna Conrad, the founder of Impact Leadership Solutions, and author of “(R)evolution: One Man's Leadership Journey,”** has some helpful advice for making things more bearable. Her professional development firm specializes in executive coaching, leadership programs and succession planning — all arenas where overcoming toxicity is often the key to success.

Here are her ways to try to make things better:

### **1. Look inward**

When it comes to navigating a toxic environment, understanding your place in the work culture ecosystem is key.

“It is important to ask yourself what your role is in the situation,” Conrad says. “What are you doing, if anything, that is contributing to the toxic environment?” While some people are genuinely victims, often it takes two to tango.

“I have my clients ask themselves questions when conversations or conditions get rough. Some of these questions include: 'What is my role in this?' 'What message am I sending?' and 'How do I want this person to feel about me?’“ Understanding the entire interaction can help you identify how you may unintentionally be contributing to the situation, or at least reveal paths toward how to change it.

## **2. Are you seeing what is really there?**

Conrad continues with the theme of self-reflection.

“Examine the stories you tell yourself that may get you worked up. Do you know they are 100 percent true? For example, do you know that there is a round of layoffs coming, or is this something that you only fear will happen? I have my coaching clients do an exercise that is usually life-changing: before they have any challenging conversation, I instruct them to write down all of the stories and assumptions they tell themselves, such as, 'He will yell at me,' 'He thinks I am incompetent,' etc. Then, I have them cross off anything that they are not certain is 100 percent true, even if it is 'probable' or 99% true in their opinion.”

As you can imagine, the list gets considerably shorter — changing your thoughts can change the dynamic.

“These stories determine your behavior. If you think you are going to get yelled at, you will be defensive or closed off. By getting rid of these thoughts, you are more likely to be open and help the conversation go down a different path. It's magic!”

## **3. Don't vent**

If you are trying to rise above the fray, it is important that you don't contribute to it.

“Everyone needs someone to talk to, but it's important to find someone who is not involved in the company. First, complaints may get back to management and you may be labeled as a trouble-maker. Second, your venting may actually contribute to the toxic environment of suspicion and aggression.”

To be more creative, you need to think good thoughts and make sure you are not invested in the negative atmosphere in the office. This takes discipline, but it can make your work life much smoother and happier.

## **4. Remember, it's just a job**

“Although most of us spend more waking hours at work than anywhere else, a job should not be the most important thing in your life,” Conrad says. “Before you respond to the toxicity, remind yourself that you ought to save your energy for what really matters in life: family, friends, your hobbies — whatever excites and delights you.”

By redirecting your energy away from negativity, you free yourself for greater happiness in the workplace, too. Focus on the fun stuff at work and don't get too invested in the interpersonal dynamics.

### **5. Be an anthropologist**

“Consider yourself an anthropologist. Make it your primary responsibility — besides, of course, doing your work — to observe the culture around you,” Conrad suggests. This mindset helps you step back emotionally from negativity. “By removing emotional ties to the politics of the workplace, you will become more observant and less likely to react. Instead, grab some virtual popcorn, sit back and enjoy the show!”

### **6. Learn from it**

Conrad points out that most companies go through “periods of toxicity, especially during times of drastic growth, reorganization, or economic downturn.” However, she adds, to get the most out of the experience and be better equipped to stay positive and creative in the future, reflection is key.

“At the end of the week, perform a postmortem: ask yourself what worked and what didn't work. Avoid using names and placing blame. Focus on the dynamics involved, instead. The purpose of this activity is to brainstorm about how you can do things better, not who is at fault.”

Anyone feeling harassed, discriminated against or otherwise bullied at work should immediately speak up — to human resources, a lawyer, a boss. But for run-of-the-mill pettiness, changing your mindset can be the key to feeling better and doing better on the job.

By following Conrad's advice, you can disconnect from drama, distance yourself from recriminations and reconnect with and make space for your most creative self.

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