

Are You a Toxic Leader? 4 Warning Signs to Watch

By Nicole Fallon Taylor, Business News Daily Managing Editor
November 29, 2016 03:02 pm EST



Credit: Stokkete/Shutterstock

Your employees haven't been on their game lately. They're coming in late and leaving early; they're taking sick days; they're not getting their work done; they've stopped contributing in meetings.

At a certain point, you have to wonder: What if you're the problem?

It's easy to blame poor morale and results on individual team members, but their attitudes may be a direct reaction to the way they're being managed. Here's how you can tell if you're a "toxic" leader, and if so, how to change your behavior and improve your team dynamic. [See Related Story: [Toxic Co-Worker Test: How to Identify and Avoid Them](#)]

Are you a toxic leader?

If any of these warning signs apply to you or your team, your own leadership style could be the reason your employees are unmotivated, unproductive or unhappy.

1. Your team keeps disappearing.

Whether they're calling out sick, shirking their duties or even resigning from their jobs, it's never a good sign when your team members are avoiding their work, said Samantha Lambert, director of human resources at [Blue Fountain Media](#).

"Requests to transfer to another team, a lack of professional growth and stagnant skillsets, and overall low performance from your team could all stem from a 'toxic' manager," she said.

Anna Conrad, principal at [Impact Leadership Solutions](#) and author of "[\(R\)evolution: One Man's Leadership Journey](#)" (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), said it's

particularly telling when a significant percentage of your staff decides to leave the company.

"Turnover is expected to an extent, especially to seek greater challenges and opportunity, but if a disproportionate amount of your staff exits, a message is being sent," Conrad told Business News Daily.

2. People don't look to you for guidance.

As a leader, a primary part of your job is helping your team accomplish their goals. If your employees, or even leaders from other teams and departments, tend to avoid asking for your input, there might be a good reason for it.

"Staff members [of toxic leaders] don't ask for clarification on tasks," said Conrad. "Although this may seem insignificant, it can be a message that they are afraid to appear incompetent or uncertain of your response."

Similarly, Tom Schoenfelder, Ph.D., and senior vice president of research and development at [Caliper](#), a provider of talent management solutions, noted that toxic managers often get defensive or reactive in the face of criticism, thus prompting their staff and colleagues to look elsewhere for advice.

Toxic leaders "take things personally, exhibit a 'thin skin' and make just about every situation about themselves," Schoenfelder said. "In more extreme cases, we witness an 'externalization' [of feedback, which] ... results in a blaming climate that is detrimental to just about all aspects of work life."

3. You frequently have negative emotional reactions to work situations.

Schoenfelder said effective leaders often exhibit high emotional intelligence, meaning they can recognize emotional triggers in themselves and others, and respond appropriately to improve a situation. A toxic leader, on the other hand, may not be very aware or in control of their emotional reactions, especially negative ones.

"Toxic leaders often do not recognize causes of emotional reactions in themselves and others, and often exhibit maladaptive behaviors such as anger and belittling in their quest to process their own negative emotionality," Schoenfelder said.

This tendency towards emotional outbursts also leads toxic managers to make impulsive, emotion-driven decisions that may not be in the organization's best interest, he added.

4. You feel the need to control all aspects of your team's operations.

Micromanaging your team is almost guaranteed to put a damper on their spirits. According to Conrad, if you often dictate very specific instructions for tasks, or if your team automatically defers to you without discussion, you might be creating a negative work environment.

Schoenfelder added that toxic leaders are typically motivated by a need for personal power and influence over others.

"Those who strive for personal power have a strong desire to control others ... which makes them much more likely to take advantage of others to achieve their own ends," he said. "[They] often feel that they must prevail in arguments, obsess about competition and winning, and desire status and recognition at a greater rate than others."

Fixing your behavior

Do any of the above scenarios sound familiar? Self-awareness is the first and foremost step in changing course if you believe you might be a toxic leader.

"Strengthening your self-awareness of how you may be contributing to a negative work environment through your own leadership behaviors is a critical step in mitigating the negative impact on organizational outcomes, employees' well-being [and] your own career," Schoenfelder said.

If you've realized you're bringing your team down with your words and behaviors, the best thing you can do is own up to it, Lambert said.

"Be humble and acknowledge past mistakes or poor decisions," she said. "Create an open forum where you ask for feedback from your team and then apply it forward. Set personal goals for yourself and share them with your team — and hold yourself accountable."

Conrad agreed, noting that her company's coaching clients engage in a "360-degree feedback" assessment to gather their colleagues' perceptions of them, and understand the impact they have on others.

"Ask yourself what you are doing to contribute to the person's perception," Conrad said.

To do this, she has clients choose a question to ask themselves before and during conversations:

- "What is my role in this?"
- "What message am I sending by saying/doing this?"
- "How do I want them to feel?"

Finally, Conrad advised leaders to check the assumptions they make about their staff and colleagues. For example, she said, if you believe an employee will be angry with you about something, you will be defensive and closed off from that person, waiting for proof.

Conrad said the best way to challenge your own assumptions is to write them down, review each one, and cross out any that aren't 100 percent true: "If you write down these stories and assumptions ... and look at them for what they are — your perceptions — your mannerisms will change."

Originally published on [Business News Daily](#).