



How to Prevent Toxic Leadership from Creating a Toxic Workplace



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A toxic workplace sometimes starts at the top. Difficult, abrasive leaders can create a culture of tension, fear, and abusive behavior at every organizational level.

Those types of leaders may produce results, but their actions also lead to dysfunction, a toxic workplace and employee turnover.

Ending the pattern of toxicity starts with companies recognizing red flags, coming up with new principles of management behavior, and holding leaders accountable for their actions, says Dr. Katrina Burrus, author of *Managing Brilliant Jerks: How Organizations and Coaches Can Transform Difficult Leaders into Powerful Visionaries*.

“Organizations often overlook abrasive behavior or see it as a necessary means to an end,” Burrus says. “This sends employees the message that such behavior is acceptable and to be imitated to skyrocket up the corporate ladder. Then it’s like a virus that continues to spread.

“All too often, companies are overly results-oriented. Leaders tend to be preoccupied with what needs to be done and what key performance indicators to monitor, but they rarely pay attention to how the work is to be done and whether employees are using acceptable behaviors to achieve those results. This focus on outcome over methods allows toxic behaviors to remain unchecked for years.”

Burrus suggests the following ways businesses can encourage leaders to engage in healthy behavior and detoxify the culture:

Establish specific codes of conduct.

Burrus says correcting or preventing abusive behavior by leaders means first establishing a code of conduct – with management principles – as an essential part of the corporate culture. “Communicate to all employees, including supervisors, managers, and executives, that the organization will not tolerate bullying to any degree,” Burrus says. “Post these codes everywhere – in company manuals, in meeting rooms, on the

website – and discuss them at kickoff meetings and conferences. The codes of conduct should explicitly state that employees who violate this principle will be disciplined and may be terminated. Organization heads should communicate to their brilliant jerks that they are valued for their brilliance, but that misbehavior has consequences, which will be applied.”

Expand evaluations.

“Leaders should be evaluated not only on what results they are achieving, but also on how they are performing as overall leaders,” Burrus says. “Performance reviews should also consider the quality of interactions with employees. It’s important in this evaluation process that employees should have an opportunity to evaluate their manager’s leadership in annual or semi-annual reviews.”

Offer coaching and support.

“If they are receptive,” Burrus says, “brilliant jerks should be offered the support of a customized coaching program to help them change their destructive behaviors and leverage their strengths. They need to be shown how their outstanding abilities that help the company are being undermined by a lack of interpersonal skills. All too often, leaders think an authoritative, demonstrative style is largely responsible for their success, when an argument can be made that it’s just as responsible for driving good people away, and for planting the seeds of their own future derailment.”

“Management needs to keep behavior principles in mind and reference them every day,” Burrus says. “Otherwise, the company’s values and leadership principles are just talk, and it risks creating cynics throughout the organization.”