



Combating Toxic Traits in the Workplace for Stronger Engagement and Retention



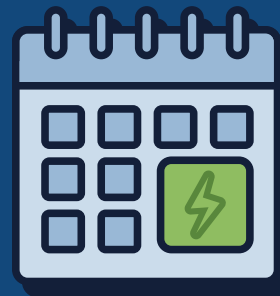
Introduction

If you've ever had an employee call out sick, there's nearly a 1 in 3 chance that that employee was avoiding work due to something toxic in your workplace. Sound extreme? While most workplaces are not entirely toxic, **many workplaces contain at least one aspect of toxicity that contributes to dwindling engagement, productivity, and retention.**



In our recent report in partnership with Workplace Intelligence, we revealed what employees want—opportunities for growth with support from their managers—and that by responding to these needs, employees are more likely to stay, be engaged, and progress in their careers. For this report—also created in collaboration with Workplace Intelligence—we surveyed the same 1600 employees and HR leaders in the U.S. to learn more about what makes a workplace toxic and what would help create a positive work environment that leads to greater job satisfaction, better performance, and higher retention.

The research found that **77% of employees and 79% of HR leaders** reported experiencing at least one characteristic of a toxic workplace. The good news is there are actions every business can take to reduce this toxicity and create a more inclusive, motivating workplace for all.



44% of employees have used vacation/personal leave to avoid their toxic work environment

Key Findings

Toxicity in the workplace is symptomatic of and fosters disconnection between the employer and employee

44% of employees who have experienced workplace toxicity have used vacation/personal leave and **33% say they've used sick leave (i.e., faked being sick) to avoid it.**

35% of employees who have experienced workplace toxicity say they would **accept a pay cut to work for a company with a less toxic work environment.**

1/2 Almost half of employees who have experienced workplace toxicity believe their company will take **"very little" or "no" action to address their toxic work environment.**

Perception Is as Dangerous as Reality

Engagement, productivity, performance, and retention are at risk whether or not these perceptions accurately reflect what's going on in the workplace. How employees feel about their employer can either help or harm business, making each of these learnings worth reflecting on.

Areas of Opportunity for Improvement

Listening, transparency, and clarity

1/3 About 1/3 of employees and HR leaders say transparency and communication with the workforce would create a more positive workplace.

42% of employees say managers or leaders ignoring employee feedback have contributed to their workplace toxicity.

Equal opportunities for all employees

46% of employees report experiencing managers showing favoritism towards certain employees, which is the top factor contributing to toxic workplaces.

24% of employees and **26%** of HR leaders say having opportunities for growth within the organization would reduce workplace toxicity.

Fairness and ethics

1/3 Around 1/3 of employees who have experienced workplace toxicity say managers or leaders acting unethically and unfair treatment of employees are top factors.

What Makes a Workplace **Toxic**?

Workplace toxicity is something no one wants to be associated with. Yet even great employers can develop toxic workplace traits as a result of rapid growth or reductions in headcount, reorganization, and a host of other common organizational experiences. So, while it's safe to say most workplaces aren't blatantly toxic, consider whether your workplace exhibits some or even one of these negative traits. Later, we'll show you some ways you can address these concerns or challenges.

What HR Says

Only 45% of HR leaders say their organization seeks out and uses employee feedback

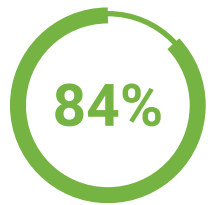


77% of employees and 79% of HR leaders said they had experienced at least one characteristic of a toxic workplace. Among those employees, the **following characteristics of toxic workplaces** were reported, ranked from most to least affecting, with as many as 46% experiencing the top reported behaviors:

- 1. Managers exhibiting favoritism** with certain employees
- 2.** Office politics
- 3.** Office gossip or rumors
- 4.** Managers or leaders **ignoring employee feedback**
- 5.** Managers ignoring employees' **work-life balance**
- 6.** Managers **overworking** employees
- 7.** Managers or leaders **acting unethically**
- 8. Unfair treatment** of employees
- 9.** Managers or leaders **acting aggressively** or in a **cutthroat manner**
- 10.** Bullying, harassment, or abusive behaviors

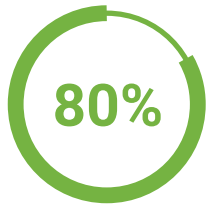
An Engaged Workforce Is **Essential** to Organizational Success

However, toxicity is **hampering this potential...**



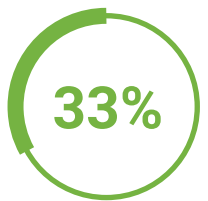
84% of employees who have experienced workplace toxicity say it has been detrimental to their engagement and commitment to their employer, and 79% say it has negatively impacted their productivity.

and **harming employees...**



8 out of 10 employees who have experienced workplace toxicity say it has negatively affected their mental health, and nearly 3 out of 4 say it has hurt their physical health.

leading to **absenteeism and turnover.**



33% of employees who have experienced workplace toxicity say they've used sick leave (i.e., faked being sick) to avoid it, and 44% have used vacation/personal leave. More than half would rather make at least one sacrifice to work for a company with a less toxic environment; in fact, 35% would go as far as accepting a pay cut.

When employees don't feel psychologically safe, don't trust their employer, are burned out, or feel disconnected from the organization's goals, their engagement can be low.

This leads to higher turnover, low productivity, and damage to company performance.



Opportunity and Communication Drive Engagement, **but Without Them, Engagement Isn't All You'll Lose**

Many employees aren't getting a fair shot.

The top factor contributing to toxic workplaces is managers showing favoritism towards certain employees, **according to 46% of employees.**

24% of employees and 26% of HR leaders say having opportunities for growth within the organization would reduce workplace toxicity.

As mentioned in our previous report, **1 in 4 employees say they'll quit within six months** because their employer doesn't support their career development.

Employees need to feel **connected to their employer** to be engaged.

This connection is made possible through more than just fair pay; there needs to be shared values and purpose, an alignment with business objectives, opportunity for growth, and recognition for achievements.

And feel they aren't being heard.

Employees who have experienced workplace toxicity feel that the leaders at their company ignore employee feedback about the toxic work environment (**52%**) and won't do anything about it (**54%**).

What HR Says

Less than half of HR leaders say their organization ensures their employees have career growth or learning opportunities



Also, employees feel more committed to the organization when their feedback is received, acknowledged, and actioned (when appropriate).

Creating a **Positive Company Culture**

A positive culture exists when employees work in harmony with one another and their employer to achieve organizational objectives while achieving their own professional success. This kind of synergy can be incredibly motivating, as employees understand what is expected of them and what their accomplishments can achieve for the company. **When they know how they can influence the business's outcomes—and are recognized for doing so—they're more engaged, energized, and excited to continue on that path.**

What influences a more **positive workplace**?

HR leaders and employees who say their workplace has these traits are less likely to feel it is toxic when there is/are:

1. Learning & skills building opportunities
2. Discipline for employees, managers, or leaders who break the rules
3. Penalties for employees, managers, or leaders who underperform
4. Opportunities for career growth
5. Recognition for employee performance
6. Transparency and communication with employees

The numbers show there's **room for improvement.**

While 90% of employees who've experienced workplace toxicity say their employer should take action to reduce it, less than half report that their company is taking these individual steps:

- ensuring employees have career growth opportunities **(46%)**
- ensuring employees have learning opportunities **(46%)**
- prioritizing DE&I programs **(46%)**
- seeking out and using employee feedback **(45%)**
- putting policies in place around work-life boundaries **(40%)**
- offering coaching/training for managers **(40%)**
- offering team-building activities **(40%)**
- and holding leaders more accountable **(38%)**

What HR Says

50% of HR feel that the leaders at their company **don't realize that the work environment is toxic.**



What steps can an employer take to **improve the culture?**

With transparency and communication, employee recognition, and opportunities for career growth and learning at the top of the list of elements contributing to a positive organizational culture, companies would be wise to prioritize them.

However...



About 1 in 3 employees says their workplace lacks transparency and communication with employees



About 1 in 3 employees says their organization doesn't prioritize employee recognition



About 1 in 4 employees says their organization lacks opportunities for career growth

Steps to take for a **more positive culture:**

- Be transparent with organizational updates
- Communicate expectations
- Listen to employee feedback, respond, and take action

Steps to take for a **more positive culture:**

- Demonstrate your appreciation by investing in their development
- Recognize employees for their efforts
- Acknowledge how employees have contributed to organizational success

Steps to take for a **more positive culture:**

- Offer resources to help employees learn and grow
- Have regular career conversations with employees to understand and support their goals
- Give equal opportunity to all employees

Conclusion

No one sets out to create a workplace where employees don't feel **valued, empowered, safe, or supported**.

Sometimes, despite good intentions, toxic traits emerge that impact a few team members, a department, a division, or more. Efforts, such as the ones recommended in this report, to prevent or reverse these issues are more than worthwhile.

Creating institutional processes and fostering behaviors that encourage transparency and communication, employee recognition and growth, equal opportunity, and work-life balance produce **a workforce that works not only for you but with you**—eagerly and committed—to achieve your goals.

Methodology

Research findings are based on a survey conducted by INTOO and Workplace Intelligence between November 19–December 2, 2023. In total, 1,600 U.S.-based employees between the ages of 21–67 completed the survey. This included 800 HR leaders and 800 workers in non-management roles. All respondents were employed full-time in salaried roles.

- **Gen Z (ages 21–26):** 18% of Employees
- **Millennials (ages 27–42):** 32% of Employees
- **Gen X (ages 43–58):** 31% of Employees
- **Baby Boomers (ages 59+):** 19% of Employees

About INTOO

INTOO is the award-winning career development and outplacement flagship for Gi Group Holding, a global leader in HR and talent solutions with decades of experience in delivering high-touch, people-focused programs to more than 20,000 companies around the world. To support and benefit employers' organizational objectives, we apply research-based, best-in-class methodologies to coaching, training, technology, and assessments designed to help every candidate, current employee, or exiting team member identify and achieve their professional goals. Our flexible, scalable solutions enable organizations of all sizes and in every industry to increase engagement, improve retention, nurture talent, drive optimal performance, develop leadership, and protect their brand.

About Workplace Intelligence

Workplace Intelligence is an award-winning thought leadership and research agency focused on the world of work. We help companies and their executives tell their workplace story in a meaningful, relevant, and impactful way using primary data, insights, and interviews. For more information, go to our [website](#) and subscribe to our [Insider newsletter](#).

