

Unmasking toxic leadership - Why organisations can no longer turn a blind eye



Toxic leadership and a culture of overwork are increasingly jeopardising employee wellbeing—forcing organisations to reassess their approach to workplace health.

SHAWN LIEW
JANUARY 2, 2025

In an engaging yet sombre discussion, HRM Asia recently spoke with author, writer, C-level mentor, and keynote speaker Avi Liran, on the impact of toxic behaviour in the workplace.

Depending on who you speak with, employees will invariably hold differing interpretations of what work means to them.

Some, while striving to give their best at work, believe in prioritising their health and wellbeing by creating clear work-life boundaries. Others, invested in the belief that the amount of work they put in is commensurate with rewards, choose to devote time beyond regular hours to their work.

Without understanding the unique circumstances and needs of each and every employee, it is nearly impossible to provide an objective evaluation of which approach is correct, and which is not.

However, the tragic death of an employee of a major accounting firm earlier this year has raised some uncomfortable truths.

While it is premature to draw any definitive conclusions as investigations continue into the exact details leading to the employee's demise, it is perhaps time for organisations to sit up and notice if there is a pervading overworked culture that is marginalising employee wellbeing within their own ranks.

Are employees getting the support they need to address the challenges they are facing in the workplace, or is a toxic work culture that prioritises the bottom line driving employees into despair?

While there should be no doubt that toxic behaviour can adversely affect employees and the organisation, what is perhaps even more worrying is whether a toxic workplace is being perpetrated by a toxic leader.

Toxic leadership can manifest itself in a myriad of ways. Egotistical leaders who self-proclaim to be know-it-alls do not react well to feedback, even those of a constructive nature and see this as a challenge to their authority. Yet, they are usually the first to claim credit for a job well done, without acknowledging the work put in by others.

Manipulative leaders spin narratives that suit their own needs and pay false homage to employee wellbeing. They encourage a culture of non-transparency and second guessing that inevitably pits employees against one another, and constantly make bewildering decisions that often contradict with precious instructions set by themselves. These leaders, unfortunately, tend to engage in pathological lying and only have their self-interest at heart.

Emotional leaders seldom make objective decisions that benefit the organisation and employees, despite claims to the contrary. Instead, they make subjective decisions driven by emotions and bias, with little regard for factual accuracy.

These leaders are also likely to come with a bullying streak, employing tactics such as blaming, isolation, and exclusion to deal with employees who do not conform to their demands (my way or the highway, anyone?).

These examples, however, may represent but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to eradicating toxic behaviour in the workplace.

While Avi's article is a great resource for identifying the symptoms of toxic behaviour in the workplace, the onus is truly on responsible organisations to identify toxic leadership and address it before it is allowed to fester into an irretrievable sepsis.

And why should they not? For all intents and purposes, the costs of maintaining a toxic workplace are far too high for any organisation to ignore. By recognising the signs of toxicity and taking positive steps to address them, organisations can create a healthier, more productive, and more positive work environment.

Investing in the well-being of employees is not only the right thing to do but is arguably critical for the long-term success and sustainability of any organisation.

While employees are free to choose the way they approach their work or career, nobody should be subjected to a major health breakdown brought about by people in the workplace, and even more starkly, no parent, spouse, or child should have to lose a loved one because of toxic behaviour in the workplace.

If toxicity exists in your organisation, what are you doing to address the issue, and where does the buck stop?

About the Author:



Avi Liran **is an author, writer, C-level mentor, and one of Asia's top motivational and inspirational keynote speakers. Avi is a thought leader and expert in creating delightful customer and employee experiences, fostering appreciation, and building authentic resilience.**