

# How to fix a toxic culture

## INTRODUCTION

There is much conversation in the media about toxic cultures, with high profile court cases and founders being asked to leave. It hurts the people, it hurts the company and their bottom line.

The legacy of UBER Founder/CEO Travis Kalanick and his 'bro culture' cost the company an estimated 23% of its IPO value, approximately \$17bn and led to him [resigning](#) as the CEO.

The earliest references to a [toxic workplace](#) were as late as 2010-11, and talked about toxic workers, rather than a toxic culture.

The work on the [importance of psychological safety](#) in understanding team effectiveness has brought the awareness to the mainstream.

MIT Sloan estimate that a toxic culture is more than ten times (10.4) more likely to be the reason you [leave a company](#) than your salary.

It is easy to name something. The term 'toxic culture' seems to stick. A search in early 2022 for 'toxic culture' brings up 3 trillion results

Which leads to the question; **What is a toxic culture and what can we do, as change agents, to fix one?**

## WHY

As change agents, we work in the most emotionally charged environments of any organisation. We should **lead by example**, creating a **positive culture** in the changes we work in.

Being able to spot a toxic culture and mitigate its effects is an important skill in deliver a successful outcome.

## IMPACT

The impact a toxic culture has on the people who work within them is huge; emotionally, intellectually and physically.

With humans as one of your most flexible sources of competitive advantage, a toxic culture quickly removes that benefit.

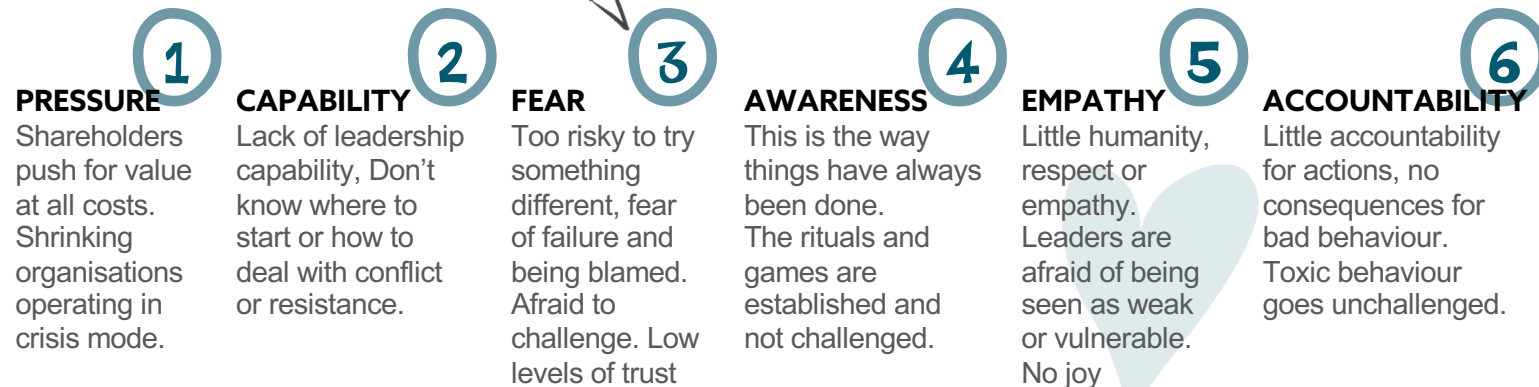
This paper will help you spot a toxic culture, gives you the **six causes** of a toxic culture, and offers **eight areas** that make the most difference in **fixing** a toxic culture.

## IN SUMMARY

### EIGHT tactics to fix a toxic culture



### SIX causes of a toxic culture



# How to fix a toxic culture

We identified **eight areas** that make the most difference in **fixing** a toxic culture. As change agents we should **lead by example**, creating a **positive culture** in the changes we work in.

1

## GIVE CLARITY

Lean into your **purpose, values** and **vision**. Be **consistent** in your actions. Your communications should be **regular, consistent, transparent** and **proactive**. Assess the **impact** of your culture on your results, or lost opportunity.

2

## OWN IT

Accept **responsibility**. Ask yourself: am I the cause, am I contributing? **Call it out**, name it so that it can be addressed. Do what you say you are going to do and be **self aware** of the consequences of your actions and words. **Think before you act**, until it becomes habit

3

## BE OPEN MINDED

Seek to **understand** rather than **judge**, ask **questions**, and **listen** to the answers. Encourage **feedback** and give the benefit of the doubt.

4

## BE HUMAN

Build **relationships**, Become great at **listening**. Encourage **compassion** and **kindness**, a sense of caring. Practice **emotional intelligence**. Create the space and bring **laughter** and **happiness** into the workplace, smile.

5

## DECISIVE ACTION

Take action and quickly, in the moment. Address poor performers. if necessary change or exit those unwilling to change, Define, measure and act to focus on positive behaviours  
Let leaders know the uncomfortable truth, use simple phrases.

6

## VALUE EACH OTHER

Establish a sense of **safety** and **security**, no fear of reprisals. Create a **safe** method for escalating issues. Re-establish **trust**. Highlight pockets where good examples exists.  
Offer **positive feedback**, recognise good behaviours and work. If needed, use a third party to de-escalate conflicts

7

## SELF TALK

Change the way teams **talk about** each other. Shift language to **positive**; failure to learning, reduce drama. Assume **positive intent**, avoid language that blames. Seek out and **reframe** the emotional tone setters

8

## LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Know and live your core values.  
Recognise the impact and consequences of your behaviour and actions.  
Be open to learning, develop your capability. Build bridges with other leaders to reduce silos, barriers and conflicts

# What are the signs your culture is toxic?

A toxic culture has a wide ranging impact on those working within it. It can be easy to name, but what are the **signs** that your culture really is toxic?

## WELLBEING

- Deadlines are more important than wellbeing. There are high levels of stress, burnout, sickness and drama
- People are checked out, demotivated, disengaged and exhausted
- No recognition, or positive feedback. There is a fear of being blamed
- Attrition rate and turnover are high
- You never hear the sound of laughter

## COMPETITION

- There is little trust, others steal your ideas and take the credit. It feels competitive, war-like
- Challenge is common, it is aggressive and designed to belittle you or others
- You are expected to put the company ahead of your own needs, whatever it takes.
- People focus on saving themselves (and their teams). In fighting between teams is common.
- The focus is on performance first, the *what*, at all costs, not the *how*.
- Failure is not tolerated, public scapegoats are common, the worst is assumed

## CLARITY

- Lack of vision, direction, clarity leads to confusion and conflicting agendas
- Decision making is inconsistent and unclear
- Practices have little in common with the stated values
- Personal agendas flourish
- Gossip is common
- What good looks like is subjective, depending on the person

## SILOS

- Teams build barriers, silos form quickly, defences are up and you don't know who to trust, little collaboration
- Communications become transactional, in writing or email. Cameras are turned off.
- Cliques form, favouritism is common. If you are in, you are in, exclusion is common.
- Expectations vary depending on who you are
- Risk of punishment or exclusion if you challenge the beliefs

## MEETINGS

- Hostile atmosphere, people talk over each other, little respect
- Few speak up, one or two may dominate
- No-one asks questions
- Focused on blame, the negatives, it quickly becomes personal

## FEAR

- Fear of speaking up, or having a different opinion
- Fear of failure, which is not tolerated
- Fear of not knowing the answer
- Fear of being blamed
- Fear that others are against you

## IS MY CULTURE TOXIC?

How many of the following do you observe in your environment?

- All communications are in writing, transactional
- Everyone leaves their screens off in meetings, afraid to be visible
- No-one speaks up if they disagree
- There are barriers between teams, little collaboration
- The turnover of colleagues is high
- In meetings, people talk over each other, and a few dominate
- If there is an failure, we are quick to point fingers and assign blame
- No-one dares to ask questions
- Everything and everyone is focused on performance
- Teams are demotivated, checked out, exhausted
- Your work or thinking is challenged aggressively, it feels attacking
- You are expected to put the company ahead of your needs 24/7
- Others steal your credit or ideas, there is little trust
- There are conflicting priorities, it is hard to work out where to focus
- The direction is confusing, personal agendas flourish
- People focus on saving and protecting themselves
- You feel the need to be defensive, you avoid being noticed
- Favouritism and different rules for different people is the norm
- You never hear the sound of laughter
- There are high levels of sickness, burnout and exhaustion

Add up the total, out of 20. How did you score?

# What causes a toxic culture?

1

## PRESSURE

Shareholders push for value at all costs. Shrinking organisations are expected to do the same with less, high pressure to achieve. There is no time to stop and think, crisis mode. Often leading to a short term focus and an uncertain future

2

## CAPABILITY

Lack of leadership capability, often promoted without the right support or training. Have not experienced a leader who role model the right behaviours. Don't know where to start in turning things around, or how to deal with potential conflict or resistance. Lead with ego.

3

## FEAR

Too risky to try something different, fear of failure and being blamed. Expected to fit into expectations, not rock the boat. Afraid to challenge what is happening. May be threatened by factional leadership groups, leading to low levels of trust, and the need to defend

4

## AWARENESS

This is the way things have always been done. The rituals and games have been established and are not challenged. History of a command and control, directive style environment. Leaders are unaware of the damage they cause

5

## EMPATHY

Little humanity, respect or empathy. The barriers between teams and people are high. Humans are treated as robots to run a process. Leaders are afraid of being seen as weak or vulnerable

6

## ACCOUNTABILITY

Little accountability for actions, there are no consequences for bad behaviour. The toxic behaviour of good performers goes unchallenged. Bullying, aggression, intimidation and oppressive behaviours are accepted. Blame is common. HR turn a blind eye

## CONTEXT

The **changeXchange** takes on change-related challenges, using our combined creativity offer solutions to help those in the profession.

### Challenge: How to fix a toxic culture.

Driven by the increase in cultures being labelled toxic, we set out to establish what a toxic culture is, what causes it and what we, as change agents can do.

We asked **four** questions

- How do you know you are in a **toxic culture**?
- What **causes** a toxic culture?
- Why do leaders **perpetuate** a Toxic Culture?
- Best **tactics** to **fix** a toxic culture?

This paper combines the insights and offers eight areas to consider when designing your change strategy.

If you would like to read more about the **changeXchange** and its activities, see our [website](#). For previous papers see our **changeXchange** [LinkedIn](#) page.

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