

Toxic Work Environment Can Be Tamed

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



From the outside, many businesses appear to be efficiently run companies with happy, compatible workers. But those on the inside often know the perception may be a dream rather than reality. The work force is filled with diversity – age, gender, race, sex...just to name a few. This often creates a boiling pot of conflicting differences, spiced with life's challenges.

Most of us have experienced the boss who makes our lives miserable; the dramatic co-worker, who is so preoccupied with his/her troubles that s/he actually does little work; or the back-stabber, who claims credit for our achievements and tries to sabotage our careers.

As a consultant, I've spoken with many people who complain that their work environments are stressful and discouraging because of their co-workers' or managers' behavior, and the company's inability or unwillingness to act. In essence, they've become emotionally trapped or "hooked." And this limits workers' ability to move ahead.

Over time, a pattern has emerged: Employees and managers often don't know how to resolve a "tough situation" at work. The more stressful the times become – *and today's economy has heaped plenty of stress on workers and companies* – the more difficult the work environment can become.

In 2006, Katherine Crowley, a psychotherapist who helps workers deal with stress, and Kathi Elster, a consultant who provides management and strategic planning training, teamed up to write "Working With You Is Killing Me."

Their spot-on identification of work place problems and steps people can take to "unhook" from difficult bosses and co-workers resonated with what I was encountering among companies of all sizes.

As a result, we incorporated many of Crowley's and Elster's recommendations into a workshop, "Working With You Is Killing Me," that conveys the simple message: You're not helpless if you find yourself caught in the behavior of an abusive boss, dishonest co-worker, "dysfunctional" subordinate, or demanding customer.

You can "unhook" from the problem! Here's how:

Unhook physically – When you feel your head on the verge of exploding, step away. Go for a walk, get some exercise. Take a deep breath.

Unhook mentally – Ask yourself a series of questions: What’s happening? What are the facts? What’s my part? What are my options and their consequences?

Unhook verbally –What can you say that will resolve a problem, rather than perpetuate it?

Unhook with a business tool – The business tool may be a memo, updated report, employee evaluation, or strategic plan. Likely there is an existing “business tool” within your organization that will provide you with a concrete way to articulate and implement a solution.

Consider a composite case created to illustrate how these steps work. Workers’ names and their company have been changed to protect the challenged!

James is the second-in-command in the production department of a Bakersfield oil company. He has worked at the company for 10 years and has been well-regarded. His boss has given him freedom and flexibility. In return, James has given the company a high level of performance. The company’s earnings, production and innovation are recognized in the industry.

James’ boss was promoted to another position within the company and Brad was named head of the Bakersfield production department. Thus, Brad became James’ new boss.

Brad’s style was different. He was much more “hands on.” James described him as being a micromanager. James was required to prepare daily update reports on his progress and oversight of field operations. James complained that his time was being consumed by report-writing, rather than productive “real work.”

James developed an obsessive hatred of his new boss and his job. He complained bitterly and constantly to his family, friends and co-workers. His health was deteriorating and he became depressed. James realized he had to get a grip! So, he “unhooked.”

Unhooked physically – James began running. The daily routine helped clear his head and release stress.

Unhooked mentally – He asked:

What’s happening? I have a new boss, who has a management style I dislike.

What are the facts? I believe the daily reports are unnecessary time-wasters.

What’s my part? I refuse to see value in Brad’s management approach.

What are my options? Quit; stay and be miserable; or try to make Brad’s approach work.

In answering these questions, James acknowledged the earlier hands-off management of his department had resulted in some field accidents and financial setbacks. Perhaps more control was needed, and Brad’s approach wasn’t a bad idea.

Unhooked verbally – James conveyed to Brad that he recognized and accepted his more hands-on approach.

Unhooked with a business tool – James prepared and discussed the daily reports as Brad requested. After three months – *after Brad and James became more comfortable with their work relationship* – James requested that the daily reports become weekly ones to give him more time to perform other necessary duties.

By systematically evaluating problems and developing response plans, we can break free of the traps that bind us. And who better than Helen Keller to remind us that “A happy life consists not in the absence, but in the mastery of hardships.”

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