

# The Cost of a Toxic Co-Worker

As managers are aware, the right employee or team member is crucial in taking organisations along its evolutionary path. Literature is abound with examples of the role that co-workers play to ensure organisations achieve their objectives of both profitability and employee satisfaction.

There is little dispute that the right people are key drivers of organisational success. However, what happens when organisations hire the wrong individual?

The wrong people have implications beyond just production outputs and numbers. One key implication is that toxic co-workers can cause employee departures. An unwelcoming work atmosphere that is riddled with attempts to alienate other employees is likely to encourage turnover. Some colleagues perceive co-workers as threats to their own positions and develop insecurities. These insecurities are manifested in many ways - from assigning menial or demeaning tasks to ridiculing the employee and even intentionally leaving them out of departmental or team festivities. Talented employees who work with such colleagues are more likely to brush up their resumes in search of greener pastures or a workplace that values their contributions. Organisations of today compete best when they have the right talent and when insecurities drive away talent, it is time to consider pruning the branches to make way for better employees.

Another consequence is that employees become disengaged and disenchanted- that is they are not emotionally or psychologically connected to the workplace. While often times disengagement is attributed to managerial styles, evidence is emerging that



## MANAGING PEOPLE

BY  
VIJAYA MALAR  
ARUMUGAM  
Senior Teaching Fellow  
School of Hospitality,  
Sunway University

colleagues also affect the emotional commitment employees have towards the workplace. As employees spend more time at work with colleagues, informal relationships are of great significance. Toxic co-workers undermine others in small but persistent ways. For example, a toxic co-worker is likely to withhold information. Such workers hoard information and enjoy playing information gatekeeper or enjoying doling out the information one bit at a time. The frustration of their colleagues gives these toxic co-workers a feeling of power. An Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement report by the Society for Human Resource Management in 2016 showed that relationship with co-workers was identified as a top driver of employee engagement. The report found that 77% of the respondents listed this element as a priority. Therefore, the lack of a relationship-centric or collegial work environment would create selfish workers who are only interested in personal achievements rather than team or departmental outcomes, and this detracts from the achievement of organisational objectives. The seriousness of disengagement is underlined by the results of a Gallup poll in 2017 that estimated the financial cost of disengagement in the United States is believed to be more than \$450 billion annually. Are organisations willing to accept such a high cost of disregarding toxicity?

A toxic co-worker decries the positive values espoused by an organisation. Integrity, teamwork, pride in the work undertaken and being supportive of others in the work environment are ideal values, however some of our co-workers do not demonstrate any of these. Instead they trigger conflict through constant gossiping, dissemination of rumours, demonstrate passive-aggressive behaviour and are generally

negative about any and all departmental or organisational initiatives. They are quick to point out the problems and extra work that employees are going to be saddled with. These types of co-workers can drain the energy of others, causing demotivation. Newer employees are likely to perceive the work environment as one that is not supportive or feel helpless in the face of constant toxicity. The consequence of this is two-fold: either they leave the environment (a loss for the organisation) or adopt the negative practices of these toxic co-workers - a 'if you can't beat them, join them' mentality emerges. Both these consequences damage morale and productivity.

Toxic co-workers decrease morale, decrease productivity, increase stress and increase distractions that stymie a positive culture. They undermine the efforts of other, more engaged colleagues.

To pre-empt such scenarios, be strenuous in your hiring, promotions and appraisals. Do your homework. Do not just look at the numbers and achievements stated on the resume, after all, everyone polishes their resume to appear appealing to potential employers. Instead, delve into the people management skills, relationship building and team development efforts that the potential employee demonstrates. Ask for specific evidence of such initiatives and interventions. Do a thorough background and reference check and listen to both the answers and the omissions. Do not be afraid to ask the tough questions. A toxic employee today may very well mean a depleted talent pool in your organisation in the future. Don't forget: toxicity is highly contagious, so start the detoxification process for a healthier organisation. As Drucker aptly pointed out: "Hire Hard, Manage Easy." ■