



HIGH-YIELD METHODS

Designing process for service & front/back office environments

Toxic Office Employees: Are They Born or “Made” By Bad Process Design?

Every company except the smallest has them. They cause untold amounts of damage. And many masquerade as top performers, which many appear to be. Unless, of course, you subtract their negative impact, which almost inevitably leaves them as losers, sometimes big enough losers to break the department—or even the company.

Yet many companies tolerate toxic behavior—even rationalize it. Why?

Very often because they're coy enough to explode “down” with people who can't fight back, or “out” at customers, who'd rather take their business elsewhere than complain. But most of all, because we can't readily see the damage they cause, which has covert rather than overt effects on employees. While superiors may be praising them for “being driven” or “accepting nothing less than perfection” or “refusing to lose a deal,” these toxic employees are causing others below and around them to do less, do it less well, do it more slowly and quite often, going out to find another job.

What's the impact of not addressing toxic behavior?

Two “workplace anthropologists,” Christine Porath, PhD and Christine Pearson, PhD, have been studying toxic workplace behavior for eight years. While their resulting book describing study outcomes, *The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility is Damaging Your Business and What to Do About It*, is not scheduled for release for several months (Summer of 2009), the authors have shared some high-level data, including one remarkable dataset that singed my eyebrows.

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Here's how over two thousand employees surveyed reported their reactions to being victims of toxic behavior:

80%	Lost work time worrying about the incident
78%	Felt less commitment to the organization
68%	Experienced performance decline
63%	Lost time avoiding the offender
48%	Decreased their work effort
47%	Decreased their time at work
38%	Did lower quality work

Now that puts the toxins in toxic.

Worse yet, many of these effects take time to wear off, even without repeat instances—a rarity because most toxic behavior is repetitive by nature. Further, many “toxic incidents” affect multiple people, sometimes entire departments. The sum total of lost or less effective work is stunning.

The book will tie out the above data to dollars lost, but just by themselves, these numbers should cause supervisors of toxic employees to suck wind.

Toxic behavior more concentrated in the front office

Based on our experience designing both back and front office process, toxicity often skews towards the front office. And if we carve IT out of the back office, toxicity almost always skews towards the front office. Perhaps because of the nature of work, “problem” back office people are more inclined towards passive/aggressive behavior, exaggerated self-importance and snippiness than to explosions, abuse, narcissism and other truly “toxic” afflictions—which is why we’ll lean on front office examples.

Sales: You’ve probably experienced salespeople going ballistic on you when you tell them they’re not getting the deal. At my age, I’ve been verbally assaulted many a time. Just recently an auto industry software rep called me “a fool” (no comments from the peanut gallery, please) along with a slew of other unpleasant invectives when told we’d advised our client to select an alternative CRM solution, which they did. Too bad for him that not *all* customers go away quietly, I relayed this bloke’s sentiments our client sponsor – a

very plugged in fellow who very routinely checks in with counterparts at other dealer networks across the country. Don't think this vendor didn't get "checked out" of some future deals, which tend to be very large deals.

Speaking of retail automotive, how many of you have taken abuse from a sales guy angry you've selected another car? Some of these folks follow you right out to your car if you don't buy, dissing your decision the whole way. Or they call you incessantly until you finally give up, pick up, and give them the bad word—at which point some go on rants as if you've taken the bread right out of their children's mouths.

Thankfully, this stuff is on the decline as auto dealers are making concerted efforts to clean up their acts customer-wise.

Now here's one for you. Kevin Stirtz's weekly "Amazing Service Tips" hit my inbox while just finishing this section. In peaceful, almost idyllic Eau Claire, Wisconsin a man tried to return a purchase to a Radio Shack store. When the store clerk refused to take it back, the customer asked to speak to the manager. At which point the clerk reared back and cold-cocked the customer. Well, almost. Another customer had to call 911 for reinforcements. Guess this clerk blew his cover, eh?

Service: Ever have contact center reps blame you when they can't solve your problem with their product? If not, you haven't been calling enough software companies for support. In my admittedly narrow range of experience, Intuit reps are the most prone to go off on people. Because no one has trained their offshore reps in basic bookkeeping, they don't have a clue what you need to do. So some reps get very irritated and offended—not to mention sometimes ugly—when you don't accept their proposed workarounds, some of which violate every IRS regulation known to man.

Hey, my wife, got blasted the other day. A bank made a processing error on our account (in guess whose favor?). So she called customer service to straighten it out. The first rep started off denying basic processing rules before getting really rude—to the point where my much more patient than me wife stopped the conversation and demanded to speak to a supervisor. Yes, the bank had made an error. Considering the supervisor's diametrically opposed demeanor, bet the first line rep had an even worse day after that. She too blew her cover.

As long as we're on financial services, a credit card transaction processor recently charged me twice for the same internet order. Not wanting to dance the "credit card two-step" for months getting the issuer to reverse the charges, I called the processor's 800# listed on my statement. The woman I reached (offshore again) tried telling me I *must* have made two purchases because their system *couldn't possibly* make such an error. When I said otherwise (and I'm always so nice over the phone), she started screaming at me. The expletives may have been deleted, but I could hear them anyway. When I wouldn't back down, she finally said "I have to go talk to someone," and left me on hold for five minutes. I thought I heard her huff as she walked away. When she finally came back, she spit out something like, "We'll cancel the second charge,"

So I called the seller and reported what happened. The reception I received indicated this wasn't the first reported abuse. In fact, rarely are these incidents one-time eruptions. And worse yet, when one person starts going off on customers, others may think it's permissible and join in. It's that culture thing. Once a negative tone gets set, it tends to drag down everyone's performance.

Hey, contact centers get fired for toxic calls. I know because we've had several outsource contact center clients. The good ones take even a single incident very seriously—because every reported incident tends to shorten the term of the relationship.

Marketing: Don't think for a minute marketing toxicity can't seep out to the customer level. In a previous lifetime I was CEO of a good-sized marketing agency, which meant managing a creative staff; and account managers who fought with creative; and production managers who fought with account managers; and traffic managers who fought with production. Nature of the beasts who work in agencies. Volatile people, including some narcissistic and feeling entitled to dump on anyone or anything in their way. Hey, larger agencies are viper pits—and the work they create that reaches customers can reflect that.

If you stop and think for a bit, you can probably recall promotional campaigns disrespectful to the very people they target. And they weren't all targeting seniors. One emblazoned in my mind came from an agency known for winning awards first, second and third—screw the client and the customer. The client was Holiday Inn. Holiday Inn's customers tend towards blue collar and what agencies then termed "no collar" (between

white and blue) guests. So for this audience, the agency created a Super Bowl ad featuring famed transvestite Rue Paul. What the hell did they expect customer reaction to be? Do you want to hide under your covers at a Holiday Inn fearing Rue Paul is about to knock on your door?

The agency didn't care. And Holiday Inn fired them that week (along with, I assume, the internal people who approved this farce). But at least the ad ran so they could enter it in awards shows.

Disrespect for anyone but yourself (alias, narcissism) is among the most common toxic behaviors. And it's a common condition in the agency world.

But let's not omit corporate marketers (many of whom come from agencies). Classic, toxic behavior occurs with unfortunate frequency in B2B marketing functions—but most of it directed inward, not at customers. Marketing generates sales inquiries. Marketing ships raw inquiries straight to sales. Then marketing calculates cost-per-inquiry, pats itself on the back, and calls its job done. Now, marketing knows good and well that sales will throw away damn near all these inquiries, because most are from "tire kickers" with no intent to buy. But not following them up is "sales' fault," because sales is "too lazy" to pick up the phone and qualify. Hey, have you ever tried to sell and qualify at the same time? I did, decades ago, until I started flushing every inquiry I received from marketing in self-defense.

Disrespect again. But are marketing people, whether agency or in-house, inherently narcissistic? No. But poorly designed work process encourages that behavior. And lead-gen programs exhibit some of the worst process known to business.

To draw a big circle around all three front office functions, toxic behavior occurs with more than sufficient frequency to cost companies dearly.

Dealing with it

When it comes to dealing with workplace toxicity, regardless of front or back office, Porath and Pearson recommend "zero tolerance." They recommend focusing almost entirely on the toxic employee—offering coaching followed by immediate termination if coaching doesn't work. And that feels correct at first blush because we're predisposed to believe that toxic behavior comes from naturally toxic people. People born that way with

toxicity part of their genetic map. But in most cases of toxic behavior in the workplace, that's untrue. In our experience, most toxic employees are "made" toxic by poorly designed work that creates friction and conflicting goals. Dysfunctional marketing/sales relationships are a classic example.

The majority of toxic workers are "made," not born.

No doubt, "made" toxic behavior is a magnification of "rough edges" inherent to affected employees. However, the stimulus creating toxic behaviors is coming from outside, not inside (although the Radio Shack slugger sure does appear to have been internally motivated). Agreed, some toxic employees have psychological problems such as anger management, narcissism, delusions of grandeur, abusive behavior patterns, bi-polar disorder and very unfortunately, but with increasing frequency, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in the U.S.–all of which can require termination of employment as part of risk management. But not all toxic employees walk in the door with these deep-seated issues. Not even a majority of them. Hence, when dealing with toxic behavior we absolutely must look first for bad process that may be driving toxic behaviors, rather than immediately blaming individuals exhibiting the behaviors.

Toxic employees already cost companies gobs of money. No sense losing even more by firing the symptom rather than the cause.

