



Could You be a Toxic Employee

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Yet another employee is quitting her position as a staff member at the office. Although Ann has only been at employed for 6 months, she is already “fed up” with the workload and emotional climate at a job she took to supplement her family income.

“It doesn’t matter how broke we are,” Ann tells her manager, Jane, when she hands in her resignation. “All the money in the world wouldn’t keep me here. This place is crazy!”

“Really?” Jane responds. Just yesterday, Sue, another staff member, complained that Ann, in fact, was “erratic” and “unreliable.”

“Yes, really. That Sue is impossible to work with—among others.”

What Jane doesn’t know is that during the previous evening shift when Ann, Sue, and Jack, all complained about her management style.

“Jane needs to get her act together. Everyone knows she only got a promotion because of her husband,” Sue had smirked.

“You know it,” Ann added. “And that fancy ‘know nothing’ degree Jane finished makes people think she is actually qualified to run this place!”

“It’s not her fault,” Jack says. “It’s this place. No one cares. Why should Jane?”

Who in this scenario is the “toxic employee”?

- Ann, who feels pressure to work and may not be especially committed her career?
- Jane, the manager, who isn’t effectively managing her fragmented staff?
- Sue, who seems to involve herself in indiscriminate gossiping and complaining?
- Jack, who can’t be convinced his employer really cares about the “little people,” i.e., him?

Or could it be that all four employees using toxic behaviors such as sarcasm, gossip, cynicism, and relational aggression?

Scenarios such as these are all too common in the workplace. Often, it's not quite clear whether one person or many are creating toxicity. It behooves us to examine our own behavior and ask: Could I be a toxic employee?

Assessment Quiz:

Could You Be a Toxic Employee?

Answer each question below honestly. Then, calculate your score by adding up the number of "Yes," "No," and "Maybe" responses.

1. I'm more likely to be irritated than intrigued by my coworkers.
Yes No Maybe
2. I believe that management is not likely to be successful in making things better around here.
Yes No Maybe
3. When I hear gossip about a coworker, I don't see any harm in repeating it.
Yes No Maybe
4. I have a growing loss of basic trust for my unit/institution, so I don't feel any obligation to do more than the minimum.
Yes No Maybe
5. I believe that many of the people responsible for making changes around here do not have the skills needed to do their jobs.
Yes No Maybe
6. I often find myself in the middle of controversies between other coworkers—and I join in because others have done the same to me.
Yes No Maybe
7. The only reason I continue to work for this organization is that leaving would require considerable personal sacrifice; another organization may not match the overall benefits I have here.
Yes No Maybe
8. Most of my colleagues—including myself, really—are mainly just out for themselves. We are all just trying to keep our heads above water.
Yes No Maybe
9. The people responsible for solving problems at my organization don't try hard enough to solve problems, so employees have to cope through "gripe sessions" that allow us to vent. I see nothing wrong with complaining when the situation is bad.
Yes No Maybe
10. I routinely share negative feelings about co-workers and managers to others, including colleagues.
Yes No Maybe

If you answered “yes” to most of the questions above, you are using behaviors that lead to being a toxic employee. You might not be aware of how you impact others, but look at those items you agreed with, and explore whether a change is needed.

Are you a “maybe” person? If your answers were mostly “maybe,” you’re at risk for becoming a toxic employee. Take a hard look at how you contribute to the emotional climate of your unit, and see if your behavior needs to change.

If your answers are mostly “no,” reach out to your colleagues and help them detoxify behaviors that may be poisoning your workplace.

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