

Member's Quarterly

Winter 2023 Edition

Ask The Expert

The Toxic Boss Has Left the Organization: The Aftermath

Establishing the "new normal"**Gail Boone**
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Q | You have finally gotten rid of a toxic boss. You notice that the remaining team members aren't as exuberant as you anticipated. How do you make things right?

A | Toxic workplaces are unfortunately all too common. Their effects are profound. Some employees need a paid or unpaid absence from work to deal with the impact of the toxicity. Others leave work altogether. When a supervisor has fueled the toxicity, it can be challenging for employees to find a safe place to regularly escape the trauma they experience. Typically, the higher the rank of the official, the more difficult it is to get help. How do you go about rebuilding trust and supporting the team that has survived a toxic boss?.

Learn about trauma and do your own work. Trauma is more than the deeply distressing or disturbing event or series of events that precipitate it. Essentially, you know what it is once you experience it. It can result in an impaired ability to cope, decreased resilience and physiological and psychological illness. Healing trauma is possible with the support of trained trauma professionals.

Understand that employees have experienced trauma. Abuse in the workplace elicits the flight, fight or freeze response and can cause individuals to experience dysregulation of the nervous system, psychological trauma and complex post-traumatic disorders. According to trauma expert Peter Levine, "people who are more in touch with their natural selves tend to fare better when it comes to trauma." Depending on an employee's ability to meet and deal with threats to their well-being, the effects can be severe.

Speak one on one with everyone. Listen deeply and acknowledge your awareness of what happened; account for the lack of psychological or physical safety and commit to leading in a different way.

Expect increased absenteeism. The effects of trauma can be intense, varied and serious. Posttraumatic symptoms can take months to manifest. Employees may experience a disruption in their physiological, psychological, spiritual, emotional, social and mental wellbeing affecting many areas of their life.

Ensure access to EAP with a professional who is certified to deal with trauma. Trauma healing requires therapists skilled in somatic work. The process from trauma toward healing takes expertise capable of guiding the necessary steps in safety and at a slow pace.

Arrange a grief ritual. Secure the services of a professional to lead a release and reclaim ritual so that individuals and the team as a whole can begin to understand what they have lost, what to reintegrate and how to self-regulate. Do not make this session mandatory. Depending on an individual's response to the trauma, speaking about experiences in a group setting can feel like reliving it. For some, it will be too much to manage as they work through their healing process.

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Be mindful of your language, tone and non-verbal communication. Learn as much as you can about your energy and its impact on others. Words matter. Both what you say and how you say it will be noticed. Learn about minimizing language and phrases such as 'well, that shouldn't take so long,' or 'you are too sensitive.' Such expressions are often used to demean others

Work together to establish a positive vision for the team. Use a team-building exercise to generate a comprehensive and compelling outlook. More than a one-liner, this narrative should serve as a guiding light toward the future. Outline, for example, the team's desired outcomes, behaviours, reputation, ways of interacting, approach to customers and what it can be counted on to deliver.

Create agreements between all parties. Start with a question that determines what is reasonable. What is reasonable for the manager to expect of employees, of employees to expect of the manager and then of employees to expect from their peers? Engage each party in answering in the first person.

Provide continuing education on effective interpersonal skills. These should include: establishing and managing boundaries, addressing differences, non-verbal communication, emotional and social intelligence and managing emotion.

Check in frequently. Host one-on-one conversations to ensure employees are getting the help they need. If an employee is absent for an extended period, ensure their place at work for when they can return. Also, make sure to notice changes in how employees are coping.

Address any incivility immediately. Make use of honest and respectful boundary-setting conversations. It's critical to lead by example so that employees can trust your response to difficult situations.

Celebrate the small stuff. Make sure to, as author Ken Blanchard says, "Catch Them Doing Something Right." Make time to communicate positive and productive gains.

Turning the toxic into the terrific will take focused effort and leading from the heart. Healing trauma is possible with time, the right resources and a commitment to improvement.

Check out Peter Levine's books: 'Waking the Tiger', 'Healing Trauma' and 'In an Unspoken Voice'. Also, see Bessel Van der Kolk's work in 'The Body Keeps the Score'.

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