



How to Banish Toxicity and Promote Psychological Health in the Workplace

Philip Atkinson.

“Too many organisations exhibit a high degree of toxicity apparent to the workforce, which can also seep out to users, clients, customers and stakeholders. In this article, Philip Atkinson explores toxicity, its key causes and the strategies and actions that can be taken to promote a psychologically healthy culture.”

Post-Pandemic Effectiveness Requires Radical Organisational Change

The pandemic has created a nightmare for how businesses deliver their services. Some organisations are no longer relevant,

and their customer or user base has migrated elsewhere or found an alternative way to meet their needs. To improve competitive advantage and overall effectiveness, many senior management teams (SMTs) are reviewing their direction and methods of operation. The traditional formal approach to this uses diagnostics to examine the efficacy of those things that drive performance and profitability. This usually means exploring market identity, organisational goals, and the strategies, structures and systems applied to achieve those goals. The results do not give a complete picture of what causes, helps and hinders performance.

In this article, Philip Atkinson highlights the real drivers behind performance, which relate to the softer side of the business – often referred to as climate and culture. We maintain that the real drivers that cause business and performance improvement relate to assessing and restoring the psychological health of the organisation.

However, the fundamental drivers for change reside within the more complex climate and culture. In this article, he says that using various diagnostic tools can aid in analysing the relative psychological health of their business or organisation. Moreover, he examines these factors that hinder organisational health and highlights the presence of toxicity inherent in the culture, how it manifests itself and the action that can be taken to move beyond the research in psychological safety, to build a robust culture founded upon psychological health. Philip discusses some of the diagnostics available and the strategies that can be actioned to bring about this positive change.

Issues: Organisational Toxicity

A culture's relative degree of toxicity will inhibit business performance, growth, climate and culture. Central to this is the concept of psychological health. To explore toxicity further, it is critical to discuss the following issues:

1. What is organisational toxicity, and how does it rate in terms of psychological health?
2. How does toxicity exhibit itself, and what are the roots of toxicity?
3. Who does toxicity impact?
4. What action can we take to remove toxicity?
5. How to create a culture of psychological health, and how does climate and culture change fit within this model?

1. What is Organisational Toxicity, and how does it rate in terms of Psychological Health?

It is critical to think of toxicity as it impacts teams and organisations along a continuum. Psychological health is at the left of the continuum, and as you move towards the right, you experience relative degrees of toxicity. We can not describe it in precise terms, but from the examples presented, you can assess it currently. The research into psychological health started with the work of Edgar Schein¹ and Warren Bennis. Still, it was first termed 'psychological safety', defining it as 'an atmosphere where one can take chances (which experimentalism implies) without fear and with sufficient protection.' They further developed the positive concept as a 'climate which encourages provisional tries, and tolerates failure without retaliation, renunciation, or guilt.'

Psychologically health rather than safety is the preferred end state

We use many of Schein's ideas on organisational culture and climate. Still, I prefer to use the term psychological health rather than psychological safety because safety implies an 'away from motivation' and conveys a negative emotional state of must-have protection, whereas 'health' portrays a more positive, compelling vision and emotional state that is achievable and desirable.

Deming also points this out in his 14 points of Management (1982)², where he draws attention to point 8: 'Drive out fear so that everyone may work effectively for the company'. This develops a much more compelling vision for organisational

change, which is well-rounded and fits in with the principles of the Toyota Production System (TPS), which was central to the quality revolution of the 1990s that swept Japan, Europe and the USA. At this time, the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) award was founded by leading companies promoting organisational excellence as being beyond production capabilities and profitability. Notable among its defined criteria for excellence were the culture and leadership drivers of the soft side of the business.

Although we have understood and developed a plethora of methodologies, tools and diagnostics to assess and evaluate the relative health of the culture, many organisations still do not display or promote building a healthy culture and climate. In fact, in recent years, our eyes may have been taken off the cultural ball in favour of keeping our heads above the water, maintaining drive, positioning in a complex and ever-changing economic and commercial world since Brexit, dealing with and trying to recover from the business fallout of the COVID pandemic, the Russian War with Ukraine, and the resulting economic and cost of living crisis.

2. How does Toxicity Exhibit Itself, and What are the Roots of Toxicity?

Toxicity is a direct reflection of the existing culture. Toxicity can exhibit itself in many forms but typically is driven by a lack of leadership and the existence and acceptance of destructive behaviours being condoned by upper levels of management. A significant issue is that most senior managers do not understand how to build a resilient and reliable culture.

An organisational culture can be shaped and remodelled to become extremely powerful by understanding its composition and how it can be changed. At any one time, it isn't easy to establish precisely what it is within any business culture that produces a specific outcome or event. Only by studying the major 'drivers' that shape the culture can we fully understand the action required to orchestrate events. Later we will explain the key determinants of corporate culture and the steps to take to build a strong culture.

A culture's relative degree of toxicity will inhibit business performance, growth, climate and culture.

Table 1: Cultural Drivers

Mission	How to establish our relevance for future clients, users and stakeholders
Shared Vision	Know precisely where we are going and how we are going to get there, and communicate this to all stakeholders
Values	Create defined values that actively demonstrate what we stand for and what we do not
Leadership	Define key leadership behaviours based on core values
Behaviours	Rigorously implement key behaviours and act on those that do not support our mission and vision
Continual Improvement	Strive for never-ending improvement in all processes and behaviours

Table 2: Comparison of Toxic and Psychologically Healthy Cultures

Toxic Attitudes & Behaviours	Promoted Attitudes & Behaviours
Failing to provide strategic leadership	Focused direction and shared plan
Unnecessary command and control style	Flexibility in management style
Bullying leadership style	Clear demonstration of desired behaviour
Dishonesty	Candour and openness
Cabals in decision-making	Participation when desired
Inter team conflict and silo mentality	Boundaryless organisation and teamwork
Win-lose	Win-win
Harassment of any form	Calling people to account for behaviours
Aggression and hostility	Assertive behaviours
Failure to project diversity	Maintain legal relationships and behaviours
Lack of Honesty	Transparency
Nepotism and favouritism	Failure Project diversity
Hostility and lack of trust	Trusting and open
Humiliating staff at all levels	Promote kind behaviours
Sexual innuendo	Adhering to the moral compass

Multiple organisational cultures

Interestingly, any organisation may have a central dominant culture or many diverse cultures. Multiple cultures will exist at any time and be driven by specific circumstances. What is important is if an organisation does have many varied and diverse cultures, then the ability to manage the ambiguity which can arise is the core challenge to the management team. It is clear that there are many factors shaping the formation of a particular cultural hinterland and any journey is to find out more about what can be done to create a culture which supports a change plan for promoting health and banishing hostility and toxicity.

Culture; Good or Bad; Positive or Negative; Strong or Weak

Business cultures can be categorised along several dimensions; they may be perceived as strong or weak, positive or negative, and team or process driven. Some cultures are strong and forceful whilst also being positive and portray psychological health.

Key cultural drivers are outlined below. The critical point about the culture is that people, users, and clients need to recognise the culture, and it should be simple to understand

Cultural drivers

The bottom line in this example (Table 1) is that if you don't know where you are going, you never know where you are and will fail to communicate this to your colleagues and stakeholders. Further, it would be best to have positive values to guide specific behaviours, which must be demonstrated and rewarded. It would be best if you had a constant stream of learning and continuous improvement to retain your best staff and grow for the future.

Comparison of toxic and psychologically healthy Cultures

It is impossible and perhaps undesirable to list every type of unacceptable behaviour, but here are some examples in Table 2.

3. Who does Toxicity Impact?

Toxicity can travel well beyond the confines of the organisation. It does not just impact staff, but bullying behaviour can be projected onto the supply chain and pressure put on them to conform to the demands of the purchasing organisation. This can even result in collusion in purchasing goods and services and illegal behaviour regarding the employment and retention of staff.

Barometer of trust and honesty

How well does the average organisation create a barometer of trust in relationships with their end users, clients, suppliers and key stakeholders? People take trust for granted in a commercial or contractual relationship – but when that trust turns to toxicity, the organisation's viability is at risk.

Critical events in recent years tell us that a lack of trust has become toxic, a fundamental challenge to overcome, and a component of everyday life. The level of trust in many institutions has radically declined, and toxicity increased in recent years. Many organisations' reputations and fortunes have been put at severe risk simply because the level of trust with the public has been broken. Once that has been broken, it is difficult, if not impossible, to repair. The broken or betrayed trust associated with large organisations featured in the worldwide financial crisis in 2008 has impacted the fortunes of those companies till even today.

Many do not expect that they will ever recover. Until public and private confidence is won, the share prices of the majority of these companies in the banking and finance sector suffer.

Auto manufacturers are under investigation after the disclosure that data on emission levels have been falsified in specific geographies for commercial gain has resulted in continuing legal action. FIFA was under investigation for corrupt practices around vote-rigging associated with hosting the World Cup in Qatar in 2022. Many international and national sports organisations are under investigation because of the failure to disclose data from drug testing and unusual biometric readings of leading world-class athletes in a wide range of sports.

Trust in politicians is at an all-time low. Since the Chilcott enquiry into the Iraq War, journalists have exposed the expenses scandal of politicians and MPs, and revealed Partygate during the COVID pandemic. There is some disquiet about the exposure of 'whistle blowers' in the NHS and the NHS's ability to cover up enquiries into unnecessary deaths in care homes. We also have the continual saga of the Catholic Church, various charities, including Oxfam, providing less than charitable services, the Armed Forces, the Police, and many of our formerly trusted institutions no longer enjoy that trust. We have witnessed behaviours since Brexit, such as PPI contracts and dismissing climate change as a real existential threat. We have seen this toxicity creep into world affairs with the behaviour of Russia in promoting an unnecessary conflict and war with Ukraine. Where does the toxicity start being replaced by creating a climate of trust at every level?

4. What Action Can We Take to Remove Toxicity and Promote Psychological Health?

All meaningful change starts with changing what people focus upon and begins with intent. We have to examine the purpose and direction of our business and organisations and ensure we imprint positive behaviours to instal the best behaviours in our people when they work and transact business with others. It all starts with creating desirable corporate values. These should reflect the core behaviours we expect our people to display. These should be of the highest standards and not a cheap exercise in developing fancy strap lines and phrases that sound worthy but do not direct people's behaviour. You need to put your best people and most accomplished facilitators or consultants to work on changing core behaviours

This means undertaking a corporate health check and look for shortfalls in service delivery and performance at all levels with all stakeholders. It means asking questions which are going to generate embarrassing responses. It means asking the right questions, listening, and acting to remove negative behaviours.

Sometimes it's not comfortable to look in the corporate mirror and see what comes back in terms of feedback – but it is what you have to do.

We use a variety of diagnostics – Table 3 highlights those aspects of the culture that we view as important.

Now that we have examined the critical criteria for assessing your current culture decide which drivers are essential for your business. If you are a COO of a state-funded bureaucracy, you may choose different criteria than if you run a retail store, a training agency or an FMCG company. Let's move on to the core steps in making this happen using a straightforward model called FFA or force field analysis.

Your goal is to promote psychological health which means improving the climate and the culture where people can speak openly without fear of recrimination.



Table 3: Cultural Diagnostics – Key Criteria

Shared vision and philosophy of the future for the business	Focus and understand long-term goals, a commitment to a common purpose, vision of the future communicated by the senior managers
Leadership as a driving force for change	Leaders inspiring new performance goals, focusing on mastering staff and team potential, lead by example using praise, reward and recognition to enhance improvement
Change implementation is a natural part of our development	Challenge and improve performance and learning, shared by all, planned rationally and driven and valued by staff at all levels
Intrinsic nature of work	Rewarding work contributes positively to personal development, enjoying and valuing one's contribution, high degree of job satisfaction
Superior performance	Set high standards, expect extraordinary efforts by colleagues, believe in being the best in their field
Taking thoughtful Risks	Focus on continuous improvement, and calculated risks are valued and worth taking, look at new ways, encouraged to take action
Value People	Genuinely value people, valued and respected as a resource, personal contribution valued individually
Service to staff, users and clients	Personal responsibility for quality, only accepting the highest standard, striving to improve and provide superior service
Value Communication	Freedom to communicate and discuss solutions, share information, and use informal contacts to achieve results
Focus on being successful as a business and tracking measures of success	Measured performance improvement and effectiveness, striving to improve and use financial measures to chart progress
Conscientiousness and attention to detail	Move towards improvement and perfection, practise accuracy, zero defects and error-free work
Leaders as doers and team facilitators	Those who lead are competent to do the job and manage, with no status differences – work with others, focus on teamwork with no demarcation
Decision-making dispersed across the organisation	Participate in decisions which impact self. Confident that their views and opinions, even those that challenge, are valued and incorporated into decision-making
Cross organisation working – achieving results across the organisation, not just through functional silos	Contribute in a variety of roles across functions to a broader 'team' without boundaries to focus on results through relationships
Red Tape – the focus on moving away from bureaucracy	Reduce red tape, bureaucracy, time-wasting and non-value-added activity, improving response times, empowering staff to achieve customer satisfaction

Based on the original Deal and Kennedy's research.

5. How to Create a Culture of Psychological Health, and How Does Climate and Culture Change Fit Within this Model?

FFA can support all your efforts. It is based on Kurt Lewin's work³, which used personal and organisational change work. It is focused on identifying behaviour that is not valued or welcomed and runs counter to the objectives of the person, team or business. In any situation where you are implementing stages to build psychological health, first identify barriers to achieving your outcome and identify those behaviours that will support you. Most people focus too much on supporting or helping forces rather than depleting behaviours which are not supporting the change.

Remove that which hinders first

It is simple. Whatever you identify as supporting or helping you, whether defining a solid vision statement or committing to serious leadership and team working behaviour, no investment (or overinvestment) in your solutions will work until you eliminate those focused on working against you. If you increase the intensity of those things supporting you, you will intensify the power and force of things which are hindering improvement.

You can develop a sharp strategic plan and sell it to your SMT. On the surface, they may buy in, but underneath their apparent approval and support, there may be lingering doubts, even contradictory agendas.

Step 1 – Strategy or implementing a culture of psychological health

Your goal is to promote psychological health which means improving the climate and the culture where people can speak openly without fear of recrimination. It is about creating a safe environment where people can share their thoughts and feelings while fearing that their views will be considered and their reputation and standing will not be damaged. It is a shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks without being ridiculed or shamed by those wanting others to conform to the old ways. This would be a tall order if your organisation scored pretty high on the toxicity barometer.

Step 2 – Communicate that plan

Most organisations believe they do a pretty good job communicating to their people, their supply chain, their users and clients and their stakeholders. Most don't know how to improve because they either fail to ask or only listen to 50% of the answer. We could all do better at communicating. Most of us want to fill the space and get our message over when really we need to actively listen and respond to what we hear. We have yet to find an organisation that overcommunicates its plans. We can always do better. Communication effectiveness is seen from the viewpoint of those who have received rather than those who have sent the message.

The message must be tailored for who is going to receive it, their apparent motivation to listen and respond, and what their grievances and wants are for any reason at any point in time. Time invested in tailoring your communication to your particular and different audiences is well invested. When we undertake diagnostic work, clients are always intrigued by how we got their respective audiences to open up. We do this

through the use of focus group questionnaires and group or individual Zoom calls. From this feedback, we create a comprehensive implementation plan, whether we are building a platform on toxicity (internal and external to stakeholders), customer retention, user trust, leadership or culture change.

Step 3 – Deplete any form of resistance and defensiveness to your plan

Do not under emphasise the importance of passive and active resistance to any change. People do not like changing their habits. Look at recent adverts on UK TV targeted at men who should start assessing the impact their comments have on others, especially females. It is all about reviewing conversations or words (internal self-talk) you will convey to others. It is best to do this internally with self before expressing them to others. This is at the heart of bullying behaviour. It is best to examine self and personal attitudes before exposing them to the broader world.

Step 4 – Develop a model for learning and re-education

Much of this work with depleting the culture of toxicity is based on creating a series of Learning Workshops similar to those used with assertiveness and conflict resolution training. It is about developing models so people can self-reflect on the impact of their behaviour on others. Asking self-reflective questions such as 'what is it like receiving my attitude and my words on a bad day?' 'What must it be like to communicate with me when I am in a bad mood?'

The whole process of reducing toxicity starts with the self.

Action Summary

You may be interested in learning more about the toxicity culture, which is prevalent in too many organisations today. I have highlighted how complex pressures such as Brexit, the pandemic and the cost of living crisis have not helped reduce toxicity. The complexity and the force of change have been difficult for both people and organisations to process. It is difficult to focus on improving organisational culture when most people worry about their future and living standards.

I have addressed some critical issues about the nature and cause of toxicity and how it evolves. I have also explained how it permeates our supply chain, clients, end users and stakeholders. I have described a four-step process for battling this and reversing this trend using force field analysis.

The bottom line is you must ask yourself and your colleagues what behaviours you must start, stop and continue to display to reduce the degree of toxicity in the workplace.

And as usual, change in organisations starts with the self.

References

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2. *W Edwards Deming, Out of the Crisis, MIT, 1982.*
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About the Author

Philip Atkinson specialises in strategic cultural and behavioural change. For the last 25 years, he has been a consultant supporting organisations in strategic development, leadership, organisational design, post-acquisition integration, lean six-sigma, quality management and culture change. He has partnered with various blue-chip companies in industries ranging from pharmaceutical to genetics, the automotive sector to finance and banking, and NHS bodies to Local Authorities. He regularly presents at conferences and workshop sessions and has written seven books on change management; his articles and books are accessed at www.philipatkinson.com Philip is Director of Philip Atkinson & Co Ltd and Director of Learning Strategies International Ltd. Email philip@philipatkinson.com or T: 0131 346 1276 M: 07779 799286.

