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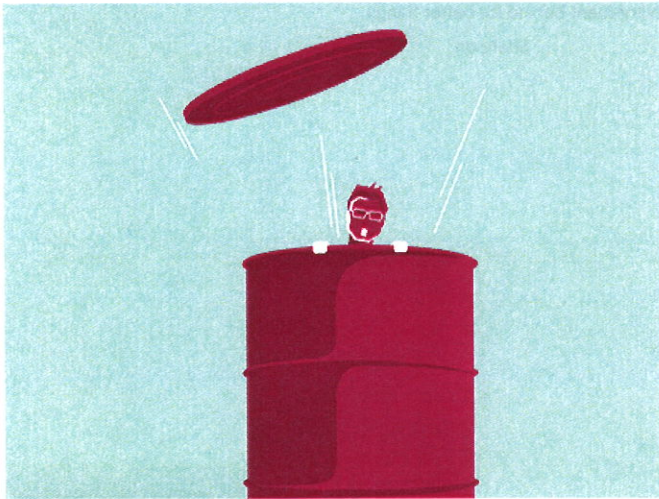


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Toxic work environments

Andrew Brassleay

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Andrew Brassleay on what you should do if you work for a toxic organisation

Congratulations! You have a new job - a management position for a company making lots of money. In you march on your first day, settle in, and call a team meeting to get to know everyone and to find out the secret to this company's success.

That's when the trouble starts - it seems like the picture painted at the interview doesn't quite fit reality. Your team are demotivated. Within minutes you've heard the company has grown its profit margins by not giving anyone in the department a pay rise for six years. It looks like you're not going to get one soon either. There's a pile of empty desks in the corner which, the team says, were previously

used by colleagues who have been made redundant. That shortage has meant longer hours for those who remain. The only time they hear from the MD is in the occasional company-wide email which invariably starts: "Due to difficult trading conditions...". Any ideas your staff have for the company fall on deaf ears further up the chain.

They've tried looking elsewhere for work, they say, but the company has pleaded poverty and says they are unable to invest in training resources. This has meant they don't have the skill set required to move elsewhere and the longer hours have made it difficult to join evening classes to learn. With the reduced head count (your role, apparently, is one of the few that have been filled), promotions opportunities are few and far between.

Returning shell-shocked to the office, you log back in to your computer and realise the main software packages have copyright notices from the turn of the century. Without training or up-to-date equipment, no wonder these people can't find anywhere else to go. And what will happen to you if you stay too long here?

What do you do when you find yourself managing in a toxic company? The obvious answer is to get out: quick. Your career, happiness and health are too vital to be messed around by a company that values none of these things. And there is a very real danger of being trapped there.

However, until then, there are still bills to pay and you do have a job to do. And you may as well find ways to turn the situation to your advantage and improve the skills and motivation of you and your team to boost your employability elsewhere.

Mark Eagle is a Management and Leadership Training Consultant at [Thales Learning & Development \(http://thales-ld.com\)](http://thales-ld.com). His advice is to remain positive - a manager should not allow themselves to wallow in a spiral of negativity.

"There is no benefit to manager or employee of the manager openly criticising the business or complaining about their situation," Mark says. "While managers cannot control the situation higher up, they can influence their team, and it is their responsibility to do so in a constructive way."

Georgette Stewart of [NSK Consultants \(https://www.nskconsultants.com/\)](https://www.nskconsultants.com/), an IT recruitment agency, agrees that even if the picture in the wider company is not a good one, a manager should ensure their team has the conditions for a positive outlook:

She says: "Managers are able to maintain and grow the emotional levels of their team, focus on positivity and praise strengths often, this will motivate your team and boost productivity. Choose your mindset and attitude," say Mandy Flint and Elisabet Vinberg Hearn authors of [Leading Teams \(https://www.amazon.co.uk/Books-Leading-Teams-10-Challenges-Solutions/dp/1292083085/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1464168818&sr=1-1&keywords=elisabet+vinberg\)](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Books-Leading-Teams-10-Challenges-Solutions/dp/1292083085/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1464168818&sr=1-1&keywords=elisabet+vinberg) (FT Publishing); "choose your thoughts to be optimistic, focused on opportunities for growth. Even the most annoying, frustrating, demotivating situations have something to offer - if you look for it. Ask yourself, ask the team: How can we grow from this situation? It may feel laughable if it's really bad, but laughing could also actually help to diffuse some of the bad feelings and create space for new thoughts and ideas."

Once this approach is collectively understood, a leader can foster that culture so their team can support themselves and others, to improve and learn around the company's excessive demands and lack of support.

Georgette says: "Organise for feedback in areas that are within their control in order to boost morale and increase staff appreciation. Rather than training, skills that need to be developed can be discussed at these meetings. Monthly reviews are a great way to do this, but also don't neglect immediate performance reviews. If someone did well in a presentation let them know straight away."

Tony Nicholls (<http://tonynicholls.net>), a specialist in the field of organisational development says: "Space can be scheduled into team meetings and work shops to build in time for reflection, discussion and skills development. There is a plethora of materials freely available on the internet designed for short amounts of time. Simply starting a book club would be a good start.

Don't ignore the small details. Reward and recognition schemes can be set up. Mark says this "doesn't have to mean money, it could be employee of the month or something similar," while Georgette says: "Small gestures like celebrating birthdays can help lighten the mood in the work place and will make your staff feel valued if it's lacking elsewhere."

And sharing skills will be vital too - job swaps, assignments and projects can be encouraged between team members or departments to gain a better understanding of different roles.

Georgette says: "Mini training sessions between departments will mean the company's knowledge will grow as will morale."

Mandy and Elisabet add: "Build morale by turning everyone's attention to the unique contribution of strengths (talents, experience, skills etc) that each person contributes to the team. Most people have "strengths blind spots", they just can't see them in themselves and hence they are not fully utilised. Awareness and utilisation of strengths provides a great source of energy, engagement and success. It also boosts self-esteem."

Acas also have a helpline to phone for workplace advice. Call 0300 123 1100 or visit acas.org.uk (<http://acas.org.uk>).

And with a bit of hard work - and good fortune - you and your team may leave this environment behind for better things.

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