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Coping with a toxic work environment

Negativity in the workplace can bring everyone down, but there are some simple steps that managers and supervisors can take to help reps rise above it.

A toxic work environment usually involves one of three principal components, says Paul White, a psychologist and coauthor of *Rising Above a Toxic Workplace*.

The first could be described as a “sick system,” where there are problems with how decisions are made, with how information is communicated, and with policies and procedures, all of which contribute to an overall sense of confusion and frustration.

The second potential contributor to workplace toxicity, says White, is the “toxic leader.” This leader is selfish and narcissistic, and believes that everything revolves around him, to the point of using others to obtain their own goals. And “toxic leaders” don’t have to be at the top of the organization to have a negative effect. They can appear anywhere along the organizational hierarchy.

The third potential contributor to a toxic work environment is what White calls “dysfunctional colleagues,” and by this he means people in the workplace with attitude, relationship, or other issues that get in the way of their doing their jobs. Their characteristics, he adds, are that they don’t take responsibility for their own actions, they tend to blame others and make excuses, and they are really good at provoking a negative attitude in others.

Add to this the stress of working in customer service, where calls come one after another and can frequently turn negative and antagonistic, and you have a recipe for a toxic workplace.

How a toxic workplace affects reps

A toxic workplace can be damaging to the people who work there, “and one of the first places you see its effect is in the physical health of employees,” White says. “They don’t sleep as well, they wake up in the middle of the night worrying about work-related issues, and they can suffer from physical symptoms like muscle tightness, stomach upset, and other issues as a result of the stress. And emotionally, it can get to the point in a toxic environment where you are really angry, anxious, or depressed.”

And that can impact customer interactions. “If reps have a baseline anger or anxiety going, people are going to seem more demanding, whatever their request. And even a normal customer request can sometimes seem overblown and provoke a negative response from the customer service rep,” White says.

And on an organizational level, problems get passed on and customers are kept waiting because frontline reps feel too overworked or overwrought to handle them, or they aren’t willing to contribute the emotional energy that might be required, so they pass the customer on to others up the line.

Promote a more positive workplace

One of the most important things that a manager can do to promote a more positive work environment, White says, is to model the behavior that you are looking for in your reps. Be positive, offer





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compliments, show appreciation for the efforts of your team. Let people know that their work is valued. Keep the balance of your comments to reps on the positive side, even when you have some constructive criticism to offer.

And in a more general sense, says White, “Keep the conversation focused on more positive things. And it doesn’t have to be about work — ask about a rep’s weekend, talk about the good weather or the latest win by the local sports team. Just try to have a positive demeanor and smile and laugh. And help people to see the humor in situations.”

Managers should also take a cue from what they teach their service reps and listen actively to their reps to understand what is bothering them and help them find realistic ways of dealing with those issues. “You have to actively listen and let reps know that you hear and understand them — and then do what you can to help them,” White says.

He adds that traditional advice like “put yourself in the customer’s shoes,” or “they are not angry with you, they are angry with the situation,” are not going to work unless the employee feels understood on an emotional level. ■



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