

## How do workplaces turn toxic and what can be done to fix them?

ABC Radio Perth / By Emma Wynne

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When workplaces turn toxic, energy levels can plummet. (*Unsplash: Christina Wocintechchat*)

A good workplace, according to Tasha Broomhall, director of workplace mental health consultancy Blooming Minds, is one where we can "come to work, participate fully, be our authentic self and not have to ... feel psychologically unsafe at work".

By contrast, a toxic workplace has a host of red flags, Professor Gary Martin, chief executive at the Australian Institute of Management WA, told Geoff Hutchison on [ABC Radio Perth](#).

He said one of the first signs of a potentially problematic workplace is high staff turnover.

"That can be a sign that a workplace is turning toxic," he said.



What are the warning signs that a workplace is becoming toxic and if you work in one, how do you fix it?

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Other signs include low morale, unrealistic expectations of employees, lack of communication, gossiping and innuendo, and excessive or cutthroat internal competition.

"It's a workplace where public humiliation and criticism are tolerated," Professor Martin said.

"Complaints of bullying and harassment are often ignored or buried in a workplace that is toxic and lip service only paid to matters of diversity and inclusion."

## Respect comes from the top

Both experts agreed that creating a healthy, psychologically safe workplace was the responsibility of managers and the leadership team in an organisation.

"I think it comes down to the emotional intelligence of people in a leadership or management type of position," Professor Martin said.

"If people know how to get the best out of people and can relate to people and acknowledge their concerns, the whole thing changes.

"Where people don't listen, and their actions come across as aggressive and disrespectful it does get people's backs up."

Ms Broomhall said employees needed to feel that they could disagree on ideas or raise issues with their boss, without it having negative consequences for them.

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While codes of conduct can help, they have to be applied and enforced. (Supplied: iStockPhoto)

## Policies must be practised

Ms Broomhall also said workplace policies and codes of conduct could make a difference, but only if they were enacted and did not simply exist on paper.

"[Codes of conduct specify] what are the behaviours that are allowed and what are the behaviours that if we see them, we're going to call them out," she said.

"They also say how we safely call it out at whatever level in the organisation.

"So, we disempower the negative behaviours and we actually empower staff to address whatever they see at whatever level."

Professor Martin said healthy workplaces were those where staff felt they could give honest feedback and raise concerns without it leading to complaints of bullying or troublemaking.

"I think that if you're in a workplace that is supportive you can have a robust discussion and people don't take offence," he said.

"If you've got the right culture in the workplace rather than there being these massive cracks in a culture, you can have those discussions, you can give feedback."





Staff turnover and stress claims can be a sign of a toxic workplace. (Unsplash: Lily Banse)

## Toxicity saps energy levels

Professor Martin said leaders should be concerned about workplaces turning toxic as it was highly detrimental to productivity.

"It saps the energy, so you do not have the energy to devote to the work that you do," he said.

"Everything seems a drain and gloomy and as a result of that, if you're in that sort of environment, energy levels and your productivity just plunge."

Even isolated complaints of bullying or disrespectful behaviour should be taken very seriously, as workplaces take time to turn toxic.

"Just the minor sniff of problems in the workplace should be taken seriously because it might show that we're not actually adhering to the code of conduct and things are going wrong," Professor Martin said.

"The more you let things go and slip the bigger they become.

"That's why any case of bullying in the workplace — or anywhere else — should serve as a warning to anybody in a leadership role because these things don't happen overnight."

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- [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 551 800
- [MensLine Australia](#) on 1300 789 978
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) on 1300 659 467
- [Beyond Blue](#) on 1300 224 636
- [Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890
- [ReachOut](#) at [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com)
- [Care Leavers Australasia Network \(CLAN\)](#) on 1800 008 774

Ms Broomhall said business leaders needed to pay closer attention to issues of workplace culture and toxicity if they wanted to perform at their best.

"One of the things I'm fascinated by is why more boards don't actually look at their rates of turnover, stress claims etc and actually go and assess the culture and intervene on the culture," she said.

"That's where we sometimes need to be intervening and there's a real gap there.

"People aren't leaving good jobs and good workplaces, so what's the story that we're missing there?"