

HR SUPPORT IN TOXIC COMPANY CULTURES

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MOST OF US have worked in or come across toxic cultures at some time in our career. Sometimes we find it in an isolated department, led by an autocratic boss. Sometimes the entire company is infected with a mantra of 'step on or be stepped on' which filters through the hierarchy and reaches every team along the way.

Realising too late that the recruitment process didn't reveal the true nature of your new company's culture, here you are, in the HR team tasked with supporting the operational managers. What can you do to help your clients survive and perhaps even thrive in such a toxic environment?

Two areas of support summarised as resilience and preparation will help focus your efforts.

Resilience refers to their ability to cope psychologically with the toxic environment.

Preparation refers to fostering personal growth of the type that will allow managers to deal more creatively with the challenges they face. Preparation may also help them find alternative ways to get on in the company when the norm is to be negatively competitive.

At the very least, it will help them find alternative employment, if that is what they need.

Interestingly, focusing on the preparation


activities will automatically build resilience, but specific resilience-focused interventions are also warranted.

BUILDING RESILIENCE

In any company, networks are essential, but in toxic cultures these take on a more significant supporting role. Support networks may be within the company, or be found outside. Either way, it should be a network that managers can call upon to talk through issues, problem solve and find encouragement.

Managers may just need to vent their frustrations every now and then. Encourage your managers to network, pointing them to books, guidance on the intranet or appropriate skills development workshops.

Another network too often overlooked is family and friends. Encourage your managers to talk about their concerns or frustrations. Advise them to only speak with people who have no conflict of interest with the employing company and are truly trusted. Those with a pessimistic outlook or who like to share secrets should be avoided.

If financially viable, sourcing coaches and mentors for your managers can provide an additional, confidential source of support. The right coach or mentor can also help with preparation, our second 





area of focus, but more on that later. For financially strapped companies, mentors can be found on a pro-bono basis.

If the stress is intense, counselling may be an option for some of your managers. It is important they don't think you are indicating they have a 'mental illness.' This is about learning coping strategies to prevent the possibility of issues arising at some time in the future.

A relatively new but quickly growing area of support can be found in mindfulness. There is plenty of scientific evidence available to convince your more sceptical managers that this is worth a look. It doesn't have to be about holding hands and chanting mantras. Mindfulness comes in many forms and can be adapted to suit just about any style of learning or level of personal comfort.

There are plenty of freely-available resources covering mindfulness and resilience more broadly on the Internet. Take some time to review these and pick some that you think will resonate with your managers. Share them on a one-to-one basis or run some drop-in workshops. If you can, set up a page on your company's intranet.

Workshops or lunchtime 'drop-ins' are also a great way to create safe places for managers to extend their networks and find support, or provide support to others. Creating communities

of practice centred on areas of specialism or Action Learning Sets can often peek the interest of managers who then naturally develop their networks and find support.

Of course, you too are a manager within the company. You too may be in need of support and in need of developing your resilience. All of the above activities can be useful to you too.

Also, given some focused study and free guidance from friendly suppliers, there is no reason why you can't be the counsellor, coach, mentor, facilitator, trusted colleague or friend. That way you and your managers benefit together. Trusted advisor is a term often used to describe the role of HR. This is your opportunity to live up to that expectation, develop your own resilience and provide much-needed support to others.

BEING PREPARED

Seneca The Younger is thought to have coined the phrase "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." I take preparation in this sense to mean improving self-awareness, building skills and developing a radar for opportunity.

This is where the preparation activities can help build resilience. A corner-stone of resilience is self-confidence. Developing an awareness of strengths, values and ethical perspectives



develops confidence and the determination not to compromise.

It also allows alternative opportunities to be viewed more clearly. In fact, more opportunities will be seen as just that, opportunities and not impossible dreams.

Space can be scheduled into team meetings and work shops for reflection, discussion and skills development. There is a plethora of materials freely available on the internet designed for short amounts of time. Friendly suppliers might offer the odd freebie or coach you on facilitating such events. Your L&D or OD colleagues may be available if you then offer to buy them lunch.

Promoting a book club would be a good place to start. Pick books that challenge mindsets and offer advice on the sorts of skills your managers are interested in developing. Use the book club as a catalyst to start conversations and then suggest groups get together to role play or practice the skills being reviewed.

Promote discussions about opportunities for new roles within and outside the company. The latter is not something many within HR want to be seen doing. Be brave and give it a go. The purpose is to keep the managers grounded in their perspectives. Discussing opportunities on the other side of the fence will highlight where the grass isn't greener

as much as it where it is.

In preparing for alternative employment, you can encourage the managers to think about how they are currently making a positive impact. They will need to hone their skills and prove to a future employer they have made a difference where they are right now.

As with resilience, remember that this preparation will be just as useful to you and your career goals. Creating these opportunities and facilitating these interventions will broaden your skills set and develop your confidence. Both will be attractive to future employers.

ESPRIT DE CORPS

Through the activities that develop resilience and preparation, the priority will be to create an esprit de corps within your management team that allows freedom of expression, exploration of self and learning.

This isn't about creating an 'us and them' mentality that creates rifts. Keep it positive. The team still need to deliver the business as usual. This is about creating a self-sustaining environment of learning and support that would be just as useful in a positive, developmental culture. In the toxic company culture, an esprit de corps isn't just useful, it's essential. ■