

# Do You Have a **PSYCHOPATH AT YOUR WORK?**

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**Brandon was surprised when he arrived at work one day to find his big office filled with hundreds of colorful balloons.** It was his 10th year anniversary at Acme Corp. and all four departments despite their years-long strained relationships with each other had managed to team up for the first time to surprise and celebrate him.

Brandon had joined the company as a warehouse worker and had worked his way up to director of sales. He was smart, dedicated, and very charming. Although Managers at Acme only socialized with other managers, he socialized with employees of all levels. In fact, Brandon was so well-liked and trusted by everyone that throughout the years, he had become the communication link between various departments and the management team.

Acme, a successful company that has been in business for 25 years, had great products, good customer service, and above-average sales. Despite its external success and good reputation in the industry, Acme was on the verge of an internal implosion.

The turnover rate at Acme was at its highest, over 50%, and the company struggled to hold on to its talent, despite the competitive salaries and benefits it offered. **The culprit: Acme suffered from an extremely toxic workplace. At exit interviews, each departing employee blamed other employees as the reason for leaving.**

Employees at Acme were burnt out, felt under-appreciated, and disliked each other.

At any given time, about 20% of the employees were on sick or stress leave. There were always complaints that various employees of each department had it out for the employees of other departments.

Investigation after investigation, the Human Resources (HR) could never figure out who the responsible offenders were for creating such toxicity. Each time they thought they identified and eliminated the problem employee, nothing changed and at times it even got worse.

Despite the company's repeated efforts in bringing third-party professionals to build camaraderie among its various departments, each department remained a stand-alone with little to no teamwork with others. Acme was losing millions of dollars in opportunity costs by slowly losing its market share. In fact, it had gotten so bad that without Brandon as the intermediary, no one was willing to deal with anyone from another department. Acme's one person Human Resources had grown to three persons in five years despite the number of employees in each department remaining the same. Even HR was having trouble keeping its talent because dealing with one drama after another required long hours and was exhausting. Things had gotten so bad that Brandon had even become the glue that kept HR connected to the employees.

No one knew how to fix the problem other than getting Brandon involved. The management revered him

and labeled him, "the employee whisperer." Brandon loved his role as a mediator and did not mind the extra work, long hours, or the stress of dealing with complaining employees. In fact, he seemed to thrive in stress, chaos, and turmoil.

Brandon loved his job and enjoyed being needed so much that he had never taken time off for vacation since he had joined the company. To reward him, for his 10th year anniversary, Acme gave Brandon a substantial pay raise and a two-week vacation package to Hawaii so he could spend some quality time with his family.

Acme embraced itself for a tough two weeks in absence of Brandon but was hopeful that he would come back refreshed to continue his efforts in bridging the communication gaps between the various departments. Almost immediately after Brandon departed for Hawaii, HR was inundated with petty complaints from employees about each other. Each department refused to work with or communicate with other departments without HR as the interim intermediary. In one short week, the company came to a standstill and no one in management knew how to solve the problem other than to pray for Brandon's quick and safe return.

A week before Brandon was scheduled to return, Jennie from the service department attended her cousin's wedding. At the wedding, she was shocked to be seated at a table next to Kevin, her archenemy from the shipping department.

Kevin was the groom's cousin and had no idea that Jennie was related to the bride. Jennie and Kevin hated each other and often butt heads at work when they interacted. By the end of the night, the inebriated Jennie confronted Kevin about his spreading rumors about her at work. Kevin confronted Jennie in return about disparaging him and his department. After some colorful and heated back-and-forth, neither one was ready to admit to any wrongdoing and continued to blame the other.

The following Monday, Kevin and Jennie continued their argument at work but this time, Jennie was armed with emails Kevin had written to Brandon which he had forwarded to her. Once Kevin looked at the emails, he was shocked by the content and denied writing them. To prove it, he showed Jennie the actual emails he had sent to Brandon. That is when they came to a shocking realization that Brandon had been altering each of their emails and making them appear derogatory and unkind. For example, Jennie had sent Brandon an email to share with Kevin: "When will they ship this out?" Kevin had responded, "We can't ship more products to this customer unless accounting confirms receipt of funds for their last shipment. The program will not allow us to input the new shipment without a manual bypass which is against company policy, and I won't do that because it would be STUPID." However, the email Brandon forwarded to Jennie from Kevin simply read, "I won't do that, she is STUPID."

**As they continued to compare more emails and rumors, they came to an undeniable conclusion: Brandon was playing each side against the other.**

Jennie and Kevin felt a deep sense of betrayal because each considered Brandon a trusted friend with whom they had shared personal and confidential information. Soon, each department began to compare notes with other departments, and it became painfully clear that **Brandon for many years had single-handedly and covertly created a toxic work environment for everyone.**

It was equally shocking to management to find out that it was their golden boy, Brandon, who had been covertly spreading gossip and false rumors about everyone and in the process making others a contributor to office gossip by repeating what they had heard from him. These systematic and calculated negative communications among various departments had adversely affected everyone's relationship with each other, resulting in years of malicious tit-for-tat behaviors.

By ingratiating himself to everyone, Brandon had gained their trust which had allowed him to isolate each department from the others so he could become their only mouthpiece. Once he controlled all communication, he then selectively manipulated the information and at times even fabricated information to turn every department against each other.

Once Brandon returned from his vacation, he met with HR and was asked to resign immediately or be terminated. Brandon, realizing the jig was up, shrunk into himself, and opted out to quietly resign. Almost immediately after Brandon's departure, relationships at Acme began to improve. In a few short months, all departments began collaborating with each other and functioned as a team. Acme saw an immediate increase in its sales, even without ever filling Brandon's position.

If this story seems far-fetched, think again! Although the names have been changed to protect the company, the facts have not. Six months ago, I was hired to conduct an internal investigation for a company after the sales director was forced to resign. What I found was shocking to be sure, but also more common than one would expect. The real question should be why would someone like Brandon intentionally create chaos at work?

The mental health professionals will likely

label Brandon as a workplace psychopath. The word psychopath may conjure an image of a diabolical and deranged serial killer that we see in scary movies or hear about from prison or mental institutions. Although these people suffer from severe psychopathy that affects about 1% of the population, research suggests that close to 30% of American workers have some level of psychopathic traits. Employees on the psychopathy spectrum are impaired but exactly where a person lies on the spectrum depends upon just how devoid of empathy they are and what other problematic traits they also possess. Most are extremely smart, deceitful, manipulative, smooth-talking, and charming. They see themselves as superior and will isolate and pry on those they regard as inferior, even if they hold higher positions than they do.

It is important to understand that psychopathy is a personality disorder, not a mental illness. According to research, a psychopath's brain is wired to seek rewards at almost any cost. In response to a reward, their brains can release up to four times as much dopamine as non-psychopaths.

Although these types of employees likely do not want to murder us in our sleep, they can drive us to depths of despair and dysfunction, and on exceedingly rare occasions even to suicide or homicide.

The Bureau of Labor of Statistics on occupational fatalities states that more people are killed in the workplace than ever before because of their inability to cope with the stress of a toxic work environment. In extreme situations, people suffering from severe workplace toxicity turn their anger and frustration inward by hurting themselves but sometimes they can also turn on their coworkers before taking their own lives.

Employees like Brandon need to retain special status and power by controlling people. They maintain multiple personas throughout the organization, presenting each colleague with a different version of themselves. They gain their peers' trust and use the confidential information they gather from them to quietly undermine them. They spread or encourage the spread of rumors about their colleagues to create resentment among them and later feign friendship with their affected peers, elevating their status with them. When people dislike each other at work, they refuse to work as a team and even can go as far as sabotaging each other's work which creates tremendous distrust, stress, and anxiety at work.

I have learned that workplace sensitivity training is entirely insufficient to stop a toxic work environment.

To stop or prevent it we must recognize the signs exhibited by a personality type responsible for it: These people are world-class liars and will even lie for you; they love hearing, making, and spreading gossip; they emotionally manipulate others; they are control freaks; they are very charming and fun to be around; they gaslight their subordinates and make them second guess themselves; they are narcissists but appear warm, considerate and even helpful when you are useful to them or when it makes them look good to others; they never accept responsibility for mistakes or poor behavior. They also do not experience normal emotions like regret, shame, fear, or disgust but can act like they do if it meets their agenda. They are great risk takers and thrive in chaos and uncertainty. They are mostly power-hungry and have a desperate need to be liked at least until they reach the top of the food chain at which time they enjoy being feared.

Perhaps you have been lucky and never had to work with a psychopath, but maybe you have, and just like me had no idea. Psychopaths are smooth talkers who initially charm their way into your heart while doing severe damage to your practice and if allowed can even jeopardize your reputation or your license. Managing or working alongside a psychopath could also take a serious toll on your or your staff's mental and emotional well-being.

Being proactive about your approach in detecting them can help reduce some of the damage. The following are some signs to watch for in detecting this personality trait.

- 1 Psychopaths are experts at presenting themselves well. They are charming and great conversationalists who can easily engage in chit chat and witty comebacks. They always share relevant convincing stories that make themselves look good and more relatable.
- 2 They see themselves as the center of the universe and will go to great lengths to make you dependent on them by creating chaos that only they can control. They are control freaks!
- 3 They have an overabundance of confidence and often subtly or overtly boast about how great they are to others. At the same time, they will undermine and spread rumors about others to make them look bad while appearing to be supportive of them.
- 4 They are pathological liars and exceptionally good at it. They will convincingly lie and will easily cover up one lie with another. They will lie to you, about you, and even for you to gain your trust. They should never be put in charge of your trust account or your reputation.
- 5 They are single-minded. They only think of themselves and what would benefit them — like a parasite. They may seem loyal and dedicated when it suits their needs but will not hesitate to turn their back on you without a moment's notice.
- 6 They are masters of manipulation, deflection, and deception. They're very apt to accept credit for something when it goes right, but when something goes wrong, they look for a scapegoat to take the blame.
- 7 They don't feel emotions like normal people but can mimic their responses accordingly when it suits their needs. They are often bored and restless when everything at work is running smoothly. They are risk-takers and thrive in chaos because drama excites them, especially if they can be the hero in the end.

Workplace psychopaths can do enormous damage to small businesses, especially when they are in trusted roles. Their actions often cause a ripple effect throughout an organization and will have detrimental effects such as bullying, gaslighting, relentless gossiping, conflicts, stress, low morale, high staff turnover, absenteeism, and reduction in productivity. Toxic employees affect everyone around, and when they spread negativity with a smile at work, other employees get affected, leading to emotional and physical illnesses and overall loss of revenue.