**C3Advantage Leader Insights by Cheryl Scanlan**

**How a Toxic vs a Healthy Environment Impacts the Business**

Expectation for corporate environments that are healthy and free of toxicity is front and center on the workplace stage. We routinely hear about CEOs cleaning up after the fallout of a toxic employee who has been allowed to poison the environment. That clean-up is not fun, especially when the actions of the person fueling the toxic environment cast a shadow of doubt on the leadership along with the values and mission they stand for.    
  
In reading about how poison and toxins effect a company, I came across an [article at Science Hub](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2536) that details how chemical poisons and toxins effect people. Interestingly, some of the findings are similar to how a poisonous and toxic person effects the work environment, taking sections from the Science Hub article, notice the similarities of how poison works: 

***"Poisons are substances that cause harm to organisms when sufficient quantities are absorbed, inhaled or ingested. A toxin is a poisonous substance produced within living cells or organisms."***Science Hub

In the very same way, an employee can cause harm to your organization when they spread seemingly harmless gossip, engage in defamation of character, engage in unethical behavior or work against the company values.  These and other poisonous behaviors can happen a little at a time, creating a toxic environment that if not dealt with, will become insidious with far-reaching consequences. 

***"Some poisons make an organism sick, others may cause it to die and yet others may lead to subtle changes in health that may not be noticed for years."***Science Hub

In respect to your company, poison in the form of a toxic employee or team member can cause harm when their actions slowly seep into the normal workings of your business. As with poison, this can make an organization sick or even cause it to die as it goes unchecked possibly for years. 

***"In science, a toxin is often considered a specific type of poison – a poisonous substance produced within living cells or organisms."*** Science Hub

Notice that a poison can cause a toxin to be produced *within* the living cell or organism. When a poison is outside of the company, it cannot create a toxin in the whole.   
  
Let’s say you have a contractor or vendor that visits your company a few times a year. That person may be negative, divisive or they simply may not believe in your vision, but they get the job done and they leave. In most cases, they take their attitude with them without damage to the team or the whole. If their presence happens to rattle your team, you can address it expediently and move on. The day to day operations are not impacted.   
  
When you have someone from within producing the toxin, they may complain that they don’t like how things are going and they don’t support the leadership. They don’t keep their thoughts quiet, but rather they go about freely sharing them with others. They resist responsibilities they don’t like even though it’s their job to get things done. They let their disruptive opinions be known to co-workers and those inside and outside of the company. Potentially more risky and damaging to the business is if those verbal expressions of contrary attitude turn into actions that do not align with the values/vision of your business.    
  
You might think an employee like this would just leave the team, but often they don’t. They stay and quietly infuse the environment with their opinions, complaints, back-biting and/or negativity. They do this while blending in with the rest of the team making it difficult to spot their behavior. Like a chameleon they may change their ways depending on who they are speaking with, and it may take a while for you to notice what’s going on.   
  
It may take time to root out the "hot spot" of discord or misalignment. It’s possible that the environment changes before you notice what’s causing that change. This is what it means in ***Song of Solomon 2:15*** regarding the little foxes. They are little, possibly cute and harmless in appearance, yet they covertly cause damage.   
  
**The "little foxes" are ruining the vineyard while it is in bloom.**  
Dr. Roger Barrier writes in his article [What are the Little Foxes in Song of Solomon 2:15](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2537)? According to Dr. Barrier, these are some of the little foxes that can get in our vineyards (companies):

* Quarreling with other Christians ([**First Corinthians 3:1-3**](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2538))
* Pride ([**Proverb 16:18**](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2539))
* Simmering bitterness ([**Ephesians 5:21**](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2540))
* Sexual immorality ([**Colossians 3:5**](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2541))
* Materialism ([**Colossians 3:5**](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2541))
* Prayerlessness ([**James 4:2**](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2542)**)**
* Filthy language ([**Colossians 3:8**](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2543))
* Envy ([**Galatians 5:21**](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2544))

While little foxes can exhibit all kinds of behaviors, he is pointing out the behaviors of personal character and how they can show up as little destructive foxes.   
What would you add to this list?

* Division?
* Gossip?
* Comparison or competition?
* Insecurity?
* Negativity?
* Meanness?

Character matters in work and in our life in Christ. The more we are conformed to the image of Christ, the more we exhibit His nature and character.   
  
**Preventing a Toxic Environment**  
What’s the best way to prevent a toxic environment?   
  
First, understand your role as peacemaker in your business. Jesus said, my peace I give you, my peace I leave you. Only one with supreme authority can declare peace. God declared peace into the warring places of hearts through Jesus. And through Jesus, peace is now the expression of the rule and reign of God’s supreme authority in our life. Our first step is to return to that place of deep and authoritative peace in our own hearts. It is when peace rules in you that you can you then encourage peace to rule and reign in your business (Col 3:15) (1Thess 5:23).  
  
Second, build awareness in yourself and others about what it means to be a healthy organization. What does healthy versus toxic behavior look like? Or another way for the C-Level to ask this question is – what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable in your company?    
  
This awareness leads to a third step - creating a clear plan towards a course of action that empowers employees to act appropriately.  The plan would address the toxic behavior *before* it has time to take root and become poisonous for your people. An ounce of prevention is key here. Being proactive and positive in the designed approach protects even the plan itself from becoming toxic. Clarity in setting up our expectations on the front end, could pre-emptively resolve many potential toxic behaviors that could come from previous work environments, homelife or employees’ culture outside of the workspace, which is just normal behavior for them up to this point.  
  
Subtle unprofessional behaviors can act like a poison or little foxes, threatening your business by influencing the people around them. I don’t think most toxic people set out to be that way. They may be experiencing life changes, physical illness or have encountered their own hurts or disappointments that cause them to operate from generally a broken place instead of peace. Perhaps instead of causing disruption, they are trying to get their needs for belonging or connection met the best way they know how. Maybe they need encouragement, help or something else they don’t know how to ask for.   
  
Be careful as you work through situations, that you watch for the following fox to encroach on your territory – I like to call it the "fault finding fox."  
  
**Whose Fault is It?**  
Did that stir you when you read that? "Whose fault is it?" according to Predictive Index, a talent resource and HR company, we all can play a part in fostering a toxic environment. 

***"At the end of the day, we each play a role in contributing to or taking away from a healthy work environment. If your company is not where you’d like it to be, that’s an opportunity to create change within each level of the organization to improve engagement and workplace quality. It starts with a simple awareness of where things are at, digging into why and how they got that way, then taking the action steps above to change course."***[Predictiveindex.com](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2545) 

The question, "Whose fault is it?" sets a trap for the entire team. The question in and of itself generates a toxic environment of blaming and pointing fingers. We need to change our question to "what part did I play in this?"  In the absence of clearly defined expectations, your people will model leader behavior. What behavior are you modeling when there is a problem needing resolution? That will be the behavior you see moving down the ranks of your business, very quickly.  
  
**Action Step as a Preventive Measure**  
By a measuring system, I mean a standard that your company lives by that provides the opportunity to review behavior based on that standard. A measuring system drives prevention when it comes to your environment.   
  
You want to believe the best about your team and the work they do each day.  In fact, I encourage that in my clients!  Yet, while you may hold onto your positive belief, it’s important to expose and address negative behavior when it’s in play.  A measuring system will help to proactively address while simultaneously depersonalize potentially uncomfortable situations.   
  
**Key elements of a preventative measuring system:**

* Open communication channels with your team: If something feels off to them, invite them to talk about it in appropriate ways as defined by you.  For example, not in the break room as gossip, but to employees in leadership so they can help the team member gain clarity about it and provide support for resolving issues.
* Be mindful of your emotions and attachment to the person causing the toxic environment: It may be coming from someone you are fond of or even someone considered to be a friend. Leadership is about the individual and the whole at the same time. Allowing a toxic worker to remain without addressing it because of a relationship you have with them sends a message to the rest of the team that they are not as important to you as that person. This subtle attitude of favoritism is a breeding ground for little foxes and toxins.
* Be clear about the company standards and values as well as confident that the entire team understands the meaning behind the value and what is expected. When the team works in alignment with the values, it will be easy to spot when a someone is doing something a little different. This means your values must go beyond being posted on a wall, on the website or distributed in a newsletter. They must be lived by everyone in the company.  To understand how this might work, [watch](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2546) this video about Maupin Travel’s CEO Trevor Smith.
* Start at the top to be sure your leadership isn’t sending mixed messages to the team: Confused team members are unhappy team members. Guard against blaming a team member as you assess the situation.
* Slow down: Being too busy is no excuse for allowing a toxic environment. It’s your responsibility to care for the people running the business inside and out. Take care of your people and the bottom line will take care of itself.
* Consider evaluating the company’s operation systems for possible gaps. If you know there is a part of your operation system that is broken or not working properly, fix it and fix it quickly.
* Make sure that all team members are in the communication loop. Without realizing it, you may be leaving out front line team members thinking they don’t need to know about changes or new information in the company. Being intentional to make meaningful connections with your team on a regular basis can go a long way achieving a healthy workplace environment.

**What’s the Cost of a Toxic Environment?**  
In the study by *Cornerstone OnDemand*: [Toxic Employees in the Workplace, The Hidden cost and How to Spot Them](https://wayoflifecoaching.acemlna.com/lt.php?s=ef5c8fd973874e4257227f2645437111&i=411A447A18A2547) they found that:

**"**Good employees are 54 percent more likely to quit when they work with a toxic employee"

"Replacement costs rise greatly as a result. Hiring a single toxic employee into a team of 20 costs approximately $12,800 whereas hiring a non-toxic employee costs an average of $4,000."

***In the study they also explore the following questions:***

* Can one bad apple really spoil the whole bunch?
* Can employers identify toxic employees before it’s too late?
* Is toxic behavior contagious?

What are your answers to these questions?   
  
**A Toxic Environment Puts a Heavy Burden on Others**  
People come to work to contribute their skills, talents and ideas. They need a healthy environment for this to happen. It’s our job as leaders to drive out the things that put a burden on people and clear the way of so that they can reach their greatest potential and contribute at the highest level from a place of joy and freedom.   
  
When you spot severe toxicity, drive it out and be thoughtful, yet resolute about taking action for the sake of your company and the team. When Jesus turned over the tables in the temple, I believe He did so because of the burden it put on the people and how it changed the environment from what was meant to be a place of worship to something that didn’t honor God or the people . 

***"Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves."* Matthew 21:12**

The money changers created an opportunistic environment for themselves while disregarding the people. Jesus, our fierce defender, wanted no part of that and set out to restore a place of peaceful worship and fellowship. That is the heart of a leader who guides by love and care for the whole and who wants to protect the environment for the frontline worker to the C-level executive.   
  
**Poison, Toxins or Little Foxes - the Damage is the Same**  
It only takes a little to impact the whole negatively or positively. You don’t have to experience the fallout from a toxic environment when you put systems in place to prevent it or drastically reduce the possibility of it happening. If it does, your proactive approach will save you time, energy, money and people. 

***Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom"*(Song of Songs 2:15)**

Your business is in bloom, be mindful of the little foxes.

About Cheryl Scanlan

Cheryl Scanlan, MCC, CMCC, BCC is president of C3Advantage. She has worked with CEOs that are in Fortune 100 through next generation small business owners. Having also run a multi-million dollar firm in New York, Cheryl knows the importance of business goals and the impact of teams. Cheryl's thought partnering method helps leaders see clearly what is fuzzy, articulate what is currently unintelligible, and generate coherent and executable strategy.