Chances are, if you are reading this, you suspect you have a toxic team on your hands, and are probably feeling pretty bad. You go home at the end of the day feeling wiped out and defeated. You wake up in the middle of the night thinking about something that happened at work and what you should have said. You get up in the morning dreading the thought of going to work. Even worse, as a leader on this team, you know that you should be doing something, but are at a loss to know what that might be.

We have written this paper because we know firsthand how trying this experience can be, how much it can tax your patience, how it rattles your confidence and how it contributes to a sense of failure. Leaders of troubled teams often feel completely alone and at sea. So we’d like to assure you that:

- **You are not alone.** Toxic teams are sadly common experiences.
- **There is hope.** Teams can be turned around.
- **You are not helpless.** There are concrete ways of addressing such problems.

So how do you handle a toxic team? First, here’s what not to do:

- **Don’t do nothing.** The worst thing you can do is curl up in a fetal position and hope it will all go away. It won’t. Without decisive action, toxic teams only get worse and spread their dysfunction to others in the organization.

- **Don’t rush into it.** While a sense of urgency is a good thing, it’s easy to inadvertently make things worse if you haven’t really thought things through.
Instead, we encourage you to consider this adaptable approach to dealing with toxic teams. It is designed to greatly increase your chance of success. Before getting into what to do, it’s important that you understand these two essential concepts that underlie the approach.

- How teams become toxic
- Why you need to rethink blame

Then, you’ll be ready to follow the four-step process for intervening in toxic teams. We’ll walk you through the how and why of each step.

1. Find the toxic behaviors and their impact
2. Claim and assign responsibility
3. Choose your interventions
4. Implement and monitor

Two essentials

How teams become toxic

Very few teams start out toxic. They devolve into that state over time. And in order to turn them around, it’s important for you to understand how they transform from positive and productive to toxic and dysfunctional.

It always starts with a behavior. And it’s not necessarily bad behavior. It’s just that someone on the team behaves in a manner inconsistent with the rest of the team’s expectations of how things should happen. The triggering behavior may be blatant and enraging or subtle and pass nearly unnoticed.

Perhaps a meeting resulted in raised voices and the loudest one won the point. Or the developers were left out of the decision-making process and were forced to cut quality corners. Maybe someone on the team was shamed in public. Or maybe the project manager always shows up 10 minutes late to meetings.

The important thing about this behavior is that everyone sees it. It is objectively verifiable and observable. These behaviors then trigger negative emotional responses in the rest of the team. Although most people on technical teams, being geeks, don’t express these emotions, they are there nonetheless. They seethe with anger at injustice or recoil with shame.

What if you’re not in a leadership role?

If you are not in a leadership position, formal or informal, you have regrettably limited options. You can leave, and this may well be your best option. If you stay too long, it can permanently damage your self-esteem and your career.

But before you run for the hills, there are a couple of things you can try.

You can encourage your leaders to make changes. But this is a tricky business. Too often leaders stuck in a toxic cycle mistake suggestions for criticism and respond defensively rather than positively.

Or you struggle on and hope it gets better, which we don’t recommend unless you believe that your leaders are likely to make major changes. Your life is too short and your talents too valuable to wallow in a toxic environment. You need to protect yourself.

But even if there is not much you can personally do to fix the problems of your current team, it’s worth your time to read on. One way to avoid suffering unnecessarily is to better understand the problems around you. And chances are that someday, you’ll be in a leadership position and have to deal with these problems when it is your responsibility to fix them.
Witnesses to bad behavior come to their own conclusions about what that behavior means. Sometimes these conclusions are merely harsh personal judgments, such as “That guy is an idiot!” Sometimes, more insidiously, these judgments solidify into assumptions about the very nature of the team and the organization. When one person develops negative assumptions, it’s a problem for that person. But when they spread to the rest of the team and beyond, they become virulently toxic. Here are some examples of assumptions commonly held on toxic teams:

- It’s not okay to be wrong. Mistakes are unacceptable.
- Avoid blame at all costs.
- Excellence is not rewarded. Mediocrity is safer.
- Sharing ideas gets me punished. All management wants is compliance.
- I’m only responsible for technology. People aren’t my problem.
- We serve at the whims of ignorant dictators.
- Management doesn’t look out for our interests, so we need take care of ourselves.
- You win here by tearing others down rather than doing good work.
- Users are the enemy.
- My work doesn’t matter.
These toxic assumptions become deeply entrenched and validated when negative behaviors are tolerated and seemingly rewarded. People give Bob what he wants just to make him stop whining. The screaming manager gets promoted. The guy who hides his technical information survives the layoffs when better team players are let go.

What happens next is that the people who were at the receiving end of the behavior respond in kind. They behave in ways consistent with their new negative beliefs. And that prompts others on the project to reinforce their negative feelings and assumptions and ultimately generate more.

This is how teams become toxic. They transform bad experiences into toxic assumptions through a cycle of negativity. The behavior is the trigger that gets the cycle going. The emotion is the fuel that propels a negative event into an escalating cycle and the negative assumptions are the toxic vector that spreads throughout the team.

Ultimately, these negative assumptions are at the core of what makes a team toxic.

A toxic team is one that is trapped in an intensifying cycle of negative behavior, beliefs and emotions.

The reason that toxic teams are so dangerous is that they infect other teams. Of course, it’s a problem if they fail to deliver on their own project goals. But the real danger is in the damage they can do to the organization as a whole. They enlist others in their battles. They share their negative assumptions. And others see the negative behavior being rewarded or tolerated. This is why you need to act. Toxic teams don’t get better by themselves. It’s like ignoring an outbreak of Ebola. It starts small, but grows fast and is unlikely to stop spreading without thoughtfully targeted interventions.
Rethink Blame

As social animals, we seem to be innately wired to want things to be fair and just. It’s part of what allows us to trust each other, to band together and collaborate rather than compete. So instinctively, whenever anything bad happens, our first questions are:

- Who’s to blame?
- How to punish them?

And while blame and punishment can be effective in maintaining social order, they are not effective in focusing the creative energy of a technical team. It may be instinctively rewarding to mete out blame and punishment when a team goes off the rails, but it doesn’t unleash the potential of the team. Here’s why:

1. **Blame focuses attention on the negative past rather than the hopeful future.** It engages the team’s minds in thinking about the past. They invest their emotional energy in replaying the past, justifying their own behavior or being outraged by others’ behavior.

2. **Blame encourages maladaptive behavior.** When people see that being blamed for something is bad, they go out of their way to avoid accepting it in the future. They position themselves, not for the greatest achievement, but to avoid being blamed for failure. They become risk averse and defensive.

3. **Blame fails to account for the systemic nature of toxic teams.** As we will see in more detail later, often the most apparent negative behaviors represent only a fraction of the actual toxic dynamic. Teams don’t become toxic by the presence of one bad person.

4. **Blame is particularly painful for geeks.** As a group, we geeks see the world through rather binary lenses. You’re either good or bad, and we avoid being bad at all costs. Being blamed for something is akin to being labeled a bad human being and quite painful.

To fix a toxic team, instead of assigning blame, you need to focus on accepting and assigning responsibility for behavior and its results.

What’s the difference? Responsibility is less about judgment and more about recognizing agency and acknowledging who behaves in ways that need to change. The purpose of acknowledging responsibility is to chart a path to a better future, to find the behaviors that need to be changed.

Keep this in mind as we discuss what to do about your toxic team.
4 Steps for Dealing with a Toxic Team

So once you realize that you may have a toxic team, what do you do? This simple four-step process will get you going in the right direction.

These steps are:

1. Find the toxic behaviors and their impact
2. Claim and assign responsibility
3. Choose your interventions
4. Implement and monitor

Our aim in this paper is not to saddle you with mindless, formulaic steps to follow, but to help you think about your course of action in more detail, to make sure that your interventions target the real toxicity, not just the presenting symptoms. If you follow these steps you will find that the energy you put into fully understanding the underpinnings of your team’s toxicity will greatly increase your chances of turning things around.

Step 1: Find the toxic behaviors and their impact

Make a list of behaviors.

Start by listing the behaviors you consider most troubling. Don’t try to analyze them out yet. Just make a list. It doesn’t need to be exhaustive. In our experience, the things that are top of mind are there for a reason. The stuff that keeps people up at night tends to be the things that are most important. To generate a good list, ask yourself or others involved with the team these questions:

- What bothers you most?
- What do people complain about the most?
- What are the excuses people use most?

We recommend that you spend approximately thirty minutes brainstorming a list.

Make sure your interventions target the real toxicity, not just the presenting symptoms.
Capture these behaviors in a chart, because later you will be analyzing and prioritizing them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Operational impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project manager doesn’t share schedule</td>
<td>The test team can’t prepare for testing and will either do a poor job or be late.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The deployment team can’t plan staffing for the rollout so won’t be able to deploy the system on schedule.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The help desk doesn’t know when to expect a flurry of calls about the new system and will deliver poor service during rollout.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior engineer explodes during meetings</td>
<td>Senior engineer explodes during meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stakeholders avoid interacting with the engineer, they make less-informed decisions which leads to poor product design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meetings are a waste of time because no one says what they really mean to avoid setting her off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior engineers never offer opinions</td>
<td>Valuable knowledge and insight from people with a newer technology perspective doesn’t get incorporated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We waste time coding things in unproductive ways because they don’t explore shortcuts or efficiencies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Emotional Impact**: But there are also emotional impacts that are not quite as apparent, and it’s important to try to understand how this behavior might make people on the team feel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Emotional impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project manager doesn’t share schedule</td>
<td>Team is angry that secrecy is tolerated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team doesn’t trust project manager and thinks that he is trying to hide something or game the system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team is de-motivated because they feel unable to control their own success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior engineer explodes during meetings</td>
<td>Team is “on edge”, anxious and defensive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team resents her as self-centered and self-indulgent and resist following her lead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior engineers never offer opinions</td>
<td>Team is demoralized and feels disrespected and unimportant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assumptions**: Once you have described the impacts of the behavior, you’re ready to consider the negative assumptions that it creates and reinforces.

For this one, you’ll have to use your imagination and sense of empathy. You are trying to imagine what people conclude about the meaning of the behavior. People rarely articulate these assumptions even to themselves. You might find this uncomfortable at first. Projecting what other people really think may feel presumptuous, but once you get the hang of it, this will become completely natural. You are not deciding that this is actually what someone thinks or feels. You are hypothesizing based on the evidence available. It might help to view it as an exercise in logical inference. But there’s no proof here, just informed conjecture.

Here’s how it might look on your chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project manager doesn’t share schedule</td>
<td>At this company, you can avoid responsibility for deadlines by refusing to discuss them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management doesn’t respect us enough to share their plans with us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management is too incompetent to even have a plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior engineer explodes during meetings</td>
<td>Basic civility is not respected here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You have to be mean to get ahead here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decisions here are made based on conflict avoidance more than logic and analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior engineers never offer opinions</td>
<td>Our ideas aren’t important. We should just do what we are told.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We don’t matter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When you look back at your chart you’ll probably start to get a sense of which assumptions are the most toxic. You’ll start to see how patterns of negative behavior result from negative assumptions generated by other behaviors. That’s how the cycle works.

Priority: Next you will consider which behaviors, impacts and assumptions are the most important for you to address. Then think carefully about all that you have uncovered and decide which are the most destructive to the project team and the organization as a whole. You’ll discover that some behaviors and assumptions are merely annoying, while others are cancers.

Now your chart might looks like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Operational Impact</th>
<th>Emotional Impact</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
<th>Priority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project manager doesn’t share schedule</td>
<td>xxxxxxxx</td>
<td>xxxxxx</td>
<td>xxxxxxx</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior engineer explodes during meetings</td>
<td>xxxxxx</td>
<td>xxxxxx</td>
<td>xxxxxxx</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior engineers never offer opinions</td>
<td>xxxxxx</td>
<td>xxxxxx</td>
<td>xxxxxxx</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once you have gathered all this information and have considered its importance, you’re ready to think about who is responsible for the toxicity of the team.

**Step 2: Claim and assign responsibility**

Earlier in this paper we talked about rethinking blame and adopting a more future-oriented approach to claiming and assigning responsibility. Yes, you will need to claim responsibility for much of this behavior. As a leader of the group you’ve had a role in creating the problem or allowing it to fester. Your ability to accurately see your part will help you to choose the right interventions and serve as an example to the rest of the team for what taking responsibility looks like.

As we stated earlier, toxic teams are like a broken system. One person cannot be responsible for the team’s descent into toxicity. In a healthy team, if one person behaves in ways inconsistent with expectations, that person is either corrected or ejected. Healthy teams have social norms that act like an immune system rejecting inappropriate behavior rather than allowing it to multiply. Unhealthy teams tend to protect the negative status quo.

So when considering who is responsible for better behavior in the future, consider both direct and indirect responsibility.
**Direct responsibility** is exactly what it sounds like. People who are directly responsible often include:

- The initiator of the negative behavior
- Other team members who respond in kind, or escalate with new negativities
- Leaders who reward it

**Indirect responsibility** goes to others on the team. While they are not performing the toxic behaviors and directly driving the cycle, they bear a measure of the responsibility. Usually that will include:

- Leaders who tolerate the behavior or fail to put a stop to it
- Team members who imitate the toxic behaviors
- People who encourage it
- People who passively avoid the problem rather than confront it

Here’s how it looks on the chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Direct responsibility</th>
<th>Indirect responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Project manager doesn’t share schedule | Sanjit – he’s not sharing the information.  
Me – I let his bonus go through even though I’m frustrated with his secrecy. | Me – I asked him to share the information twice but let it slide when he made excuses. |
| Senior engineer explodes during meetings | Sue – it’s her temper.  
Me – I put her in the lead engineer spot even though I knew she had anger management issues. | Me – I just sat there and didn’t say anything last time she blew up in a meeting at which I was present.  
Bob – He is avoiding Sue and hasn’t responded to her request to collaborate on test case development. |
| Junior engineers never offer opinions | Junior engineers - They see looming problems that they don’t point out until they become crises. | Sue – She scares them with her temper and doesn’t ask for their input.  
Me – I haven’t coached Sue on how to handle junior people, or set the expectation that she needs to grow the talent on her team. |

Did you notice how every line item has a “Me” in it? It is important that you as leader consider your role in perpetuating the toxicity of the team. It is essential for you to identify what you might have done to encourage it, or how you might have put a stop to it. This will lead you to what you might do differently so that your better behavior will have cascading benefits throughout the team.
Step 3: Choose your interventions

Now you’re finally ready to think about what to do, the interventions you want to use to bring the team back from the brink.

What’s an intervention?

If you’ve heard the term intervention before, it was probably in the context of helping a drug addict or alcoholic. So you’re probably imagining that we are going to recommend that you hold some sort of meeting to confront the people responsible. Don’t worry. In this context, the phrase has a much broader meaning. For us, an intervention is simply anything you do to try to improve the situation. It can be as small as setting ground rules for your weekly meeting or as complex as reorganizing the whole organization with multiple layoffs. As long as you are doing something specific to improve the team’s function, then it’s an intervention.

Principles for choosing an intervention

There are three principles to keep in mind for intervening in toxic teams.

1. Your intervention should address behavior, not emotions or assumptions.

This may seem counter to what we have been suggesting. We just asked you to do a lot of work to understand how emotions and assumptions fuel the toxic behavior on your team. So it would seem logical that you would try to change the team’s emotions or assumptions, right? No. Unless you have been explicitly trained to help people process emotions or change deeply held assumptions, this would be very difficult to do. Perhaps a therapist could affect these changes, but therapists usually have the benefit of working with patients who have volunteered to be helped. Toxic teams rarely ask for help.

Chances are that you would end up doing more harm than good by trying to directly target emotions and assumptions. You’ve probably witnessed failed efforts to transform teams through mission statements, vision statements, or the worst of all, motivational posters. People just roll their eyes. There is a sense that talk is cheap. If you say, “We value people who are stable team players here,” but you just promoted someone with an uncontrollable temper, the team isn’t going to believe you. People will only change their assumptions when they see better behavior sustained over time.

And targeting behavior has some inherent advantages. Behavior is objectively observable. Everyone can see it. And everyone expects leaders to set and enforce standards of appropriate behavior.

So your task will be to find ways to modify behaviors that will ultimately transform the team’s feelings and their assumptions about the nature and culture of the team itself. By making concrete behavioral changes and replacing dysfunctional behaviors, you will be able to redirect how they think and feel in a more productive direction.
2. Your intervention must make a forceful, visible, symbolic break from the past.

When a team is suffering in a cycle of toxicity, they need to be jolted out of it. The intervention you choose has to signify for the team a clear break with the past. Subtle, private gestures are not likely to have that effect. There needs to be no doubt in anyone’s mind that the future is going to be different from the past. If there’s any room for the team to doubt a better future, they will.

3. People need to see the better future, not the bad past.

Your team is profoundly aware of the past. Disappointments, insults, and other offenses haunt their thoughts. They are, in their own way, meting out justice for past wrongs done to them. They feel justified and self-righteous about redressing past abuses, and that feels good to them. They will cling to this unless you show them a plausible, nobler future. If they anticipate feeling good about their work and their ability to work with others on the team, they will more easily let go of grievance and retribution.

What are some options for interventions?

So now that you know the underlying principles, what are some actual things you can do? We’ve organized possible interventions into three categories.

**Individual**

The least intrusive interventions affect only one individual. They may or may not be visible to the whole team. Individual interventions are nearly always part of the solution, since responsible parties need to understand how their behavior is expected to change. But rarely are they ever the entire solution for a truly toxic team.

Individual interventions might include:

- Private conversations with responsible people about their behavior and your expectations for their future behavior
- Hiring a coach to work with an individual on their behavioral issues
- Hiring a coach to work with you to help you mentor people with these types of issues
- Threats issued to only one person such as HR write-ups, private warnings, etc.

If there’s any room for the team to doubt a better future, they will.
Collective interventions affect the entire group at once rather than one person at a time. Because they are collectively visible, they help establish a shared sense of what behavior is expected. They might include:

- Sending everyone an email about acceptable behavior
- Holding an offsite meeting with the whole team to address team values
- Sending everyone to a training session
- Holding out-of-cycle personnel reviews for everyone
- Establishing formal, written ground rules for acceptable behavior
- Revamping seating arrangements

Structural

The most dramatic and visible of the interventions are structural. Changes are made that affect the structure and working relationships of everyone on the team. While these are the most visible, they are also the most risky. They are costly and you must pay close attention to the meaning you assign to them. They might include:

- Restructuring team roles and reassigning the people who fill those roles
- Firing vendors
- Firing employees
- Cancelling the project entirely

What to do with the bad apples?

This is one of the toughest questions in dealing with a toxic team. There are bad apples. People may be individually productive but they make everyone around them so miserable that the entire team becomes less productive. In thinking about what to do with these individuals, assess whether their
negativity is situational or the result of something more intrinsic to their nature.

If you think that it’s situational, consider:

- Placing them in a role that better fits their temperament and talents
- Removing them from the project and assigning them elsewhere
- Keeping them on the project but isolating their work from that of others on the team to reduce their influence
- Physically isolating them so that they are in less regular contact with everyone else

But there are a few reasons that it may be necessary to just fire them, such as:

- Incompetence – Let’s face it, some people get put in positions for which they are ill-equipped to hold.
- Character flaw – Sometimes people are just too damaged to work with. They may have problems that you can’t fix like pathological lying, excessive stubbornness, intolerable arrogance, or uncompromising selfishness.
- Inability to change – Sometimes people have significant flaws that might be fixable but not in a timeframe consistent with being part of your organization.

How you deal with this individual will send a message to the rest of the team. If you deal with them leniently the team may learn that the organization is benevolent and gives employees the benefit of the doubt. Or they might conclude that no one is willing to make tough decisions to protect them. You’ll need to frame things carefully no matter what you decide.

**Step 4: Implement and monitor**

The success of your team will depend on how well you implement the interventions you choose. We offer the following advice to increase your chances of success.

**Enlist support of key players in advance.** Make sure to talk to the influencers within the group about your planned course of action. You need their support to make the intervention work, and you’ll want to gauge their response. They might see something that you missed in your analysis, or detect something off-putting in your approach. Where human resource policy allows, give them a chance to help.
improve the intervention.

**Take appropriate responsibility.**

Taking responsibility may be the single most important thing that you can do to prevent the intervention from turning into a finger pointing match. In doing so, you are setting an example, and making it safe for people to admit they have made mistakes. By publicly acknowledging your part, you demonstrate your recognition that team situations are complicated, that people make mistakes, and that mistakes are forgivable when new behaviors are adopted consistently.

**Focus on the future.** Everyone knows that things have gone off the rails. Focus on what you want to happen in the future rather than what you don’t want. Your discussion should not be a long list of what people won’t do anymore. It should focus on what they will do.

**Acknowledge emotions to diffuse them.** Emotions do not respond to mechanistic fixes. You can’t just tell someone to feel differently than they do. But, happily, emotions behave in fairly predictable ways, and the easiest, most sure-fire way to soothe hurt feelings is to simply acknowledge them with a bit of empathy. Here’s an example:

> I know that a lot of you have felt frustrated and insulted by our team’s habit of not sharing information. I know exactly what that’s like. I’ve experienced that in other situations. I’m really sorry that this has been so painful and unnecessary.

A simple statement like this can go a long way toward diffusing negative emotions. This process may seem almost like magic because so little is actually “done.” But it adheres to a tried and true principle of trust and belonging, which states:

> If you feel on the inside the way that I feel on the inside, then I can trust you to understand me and treat me with care and respect. I can trust that we really are on the same team.

If you invest even a small amount of your attention during the intervention to diffusing negative emotions and bolstering belonging in this way, you increase your chances of a successful intervention.

**Clarify what’s acceptable and what’s not.** As the leader of the team, you are expected to establish norms and correct behavior. Otherwise, the bullies win. Just as a parent would remind her child not to chew with his mouth open at the dinner table, the group leader sets the boundaries of good behavior with both praise and correction. She uses statements like:

> “We don’t yell at each other on our team. That is not acceptable.”

> “It’s not okay to sit on information that other people need and not share it.”

> “Thank you for letting us know in advance that you would be late. That shows the kind of respect we all need to show for each other’s time.”
These statements are the very stuff of what it means to lead people out of toxicity. Framing them in simplistic terms is exactly right. It may seem that you are treating people like juveniles, and you are. Until the rules of acceptable behavior are internalized by individuals on the team, you need to speak them out loud, in no uncertain terms, whenever they are transgressed.

You might consider publishing a set of ground rules. If you can do this credibly, and back it up consistently, and hold yourself accountable to them, then ground rules can be an excellent tool.

Focus on principles. When you state what is acceptable and what is not, you can accelerate the adoption of new assumptions about the team by emphasizing the principle that you are committed to. For example:

“We don’t raise our voices to each other, because on this team we owe each other basic professional respect.”

“It’s not okay to hoard information; because on this team we help each other do our best work.”

Follow up relentlessly. Consistency is key. It will take quite a while for people to believe that things will really change for the better. Do not make exceptions and do not allow your attention to be diverted from the details of this behavior change. It took a while for things to get bad, and people will need to see more than a few days of correction from you. If your determination to enforce the new standards ebbs in any way, people will be quick to label the whole effort as an exercise in hypocrisy and futility, and all of your work will be for nothing.

How will you know if it’s working?

How recovery happens

Not surprisingly, recovery is the reverse of the toxic cycle. If you’ve chosen your interventions well and delivered them with sufficient force, the result will be an immediate shift in behavior. Over time, as the cycle repeats, the old, dysfunctional assumptions will be replaced by better ones, leading to better behavior and better assumptions still.
As you continue to enforce the new standards, you also need to monitor the team for signs of progress or backsliding. If you see progress, make sure to recognize and reinforce it. If you see stagnation or further descent into toxicity, you’ll need to act quickly to implement more significant interventions.

**Early Signs of Trouble**

Here are some common signs that your interventions are not having the desired effect:

- Nothing changes
- Turnover accelerates
- Bad behavior escalates
- People complain that intervention is insufficient
- People complain that the responsible people haven’t changed their ways

If any of these come up, you’ll need to consider your next move quickly. And you should seriously consider getting outside help. These problems are hard for anyone to solve which is why there are battalions of consultants devoted to helping people in exactly your situation.

**Early Signs of Success**

Hopefully, you’ll start to notice signs of progress, signs that the group is moving in the right direction. Look for things like:

- People thank you for intervening
- People show a visible sense of relief
- Creative energy gets focused on the project rather than the problems
- Disagreements are about the substance of work rather than personal hostility
- Turnover stops or slows
- Less time gets devoted to private, whispered conversations

If you see these things begin to occur as a result of your efforts, go ahead, and feel good about it. Your good feeling will be infectious, and will serve to accelerate the team’s transformation.

**8 signs of a healthy team**

You’ll know your intervention has really worked when:

1. Responsibility is accepted, apologies happen, and mistakes are forgiven
2. Ideas, insights and suggestions flow freely and are respected
3. Information is shared and advice is sought
4. Credit is shared, people thank each other and successes are celebrated together
5. Feedback is constructive, naturally occurring, and assumes good intent on all sides
6. Help is asked for, offered, welcomed and reciprocated
7. Lively disagreements lead to better solutions
8. People smile, laugh and get excited about work
Conclusion

When you started reading this paper, you probably had a dark cloud of dread and confusion hanging over you. There are few things in life more damaging to one’s confidence and sense of self-worth than being on a toxic team. And there are few things more daunting than trying to turn one around. The steps outlined in this paper will take a significant amount of focused attention, imagination, creative problem solving, and courage. But we believe that these steps are your best hope for transforming your team. If you’re committed enough to seek out and read this paper, you are exactly the person your team needs.

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