

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT

THE MAGAZINE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF LEGAL ADMINISTRATORS

## HR Feature

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

# Taking Out the Toxic

Bad employee behavior can quickly bring morale down. Here's how to spot it & get it under control.

Toxic employees can have a devastating effect on your law firm and department. They take up crucial company time with their drama, making it harder for important tasks to be completed. All it takes is one person with a bad attitude to bring down the whole team.



**KYLIE ORA LOBELL**  
Freelance Writer

"Toxic employees are like a virus. The negativity and [unproductivity] literally spread," says Kristina Moris, President of *The Washington Firm, Ltd.*, a team of HR consultants. "Not acting allows the negativity to take hold, and it's much harder to deal with after it spreads."

By being able to recognize toxic behavior and deal with it immediately, law firms and departments can avoid catastrophic consequences within their offices.

### SPOT THE TOXIC WARNING SIGNS

If you're uncertain whether employees are just having a rough time or they're actively trying to be destructive, here are some clues.

**They have a negative attitude.** Are some employees always seeing the glass as half-empty? Do they say they are having bad days every day? Is this attitude catching on with other employees? Mauricio Velasquez, President and Founder of the *Diversity Training Group*, says that this is classic toxic behavior.

## QUICK HIT 1

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Toxic employees love to say, "Not my job!" If some employees aren't contributing to the success of your firm or department, then they are exhibiting toxicity.

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**They are always at the center of drama.** Does it seem like some employees are always the focus of conflict? Are some people consistently stirring the pot? Moris says that employees who are there

*“Toxic behavior could come in the form of bullying that may be directed toward one particular target.”*

**CHRISTINE WALTERS**

Independent Consultant  
the FiveL Company



when drama strikes are typically toxic.

**They put other employees down.** “Toxic behavior could come in the form of bullying that may be directed toward one particular target,” says Christine Walters, Independent Consultant with the FiveL Company, an HR and employment law consulting company. Watch out for employees who boss their colleagues around, use insulting language, make offensive jokes and are generally abusive to others.

**They don’t do their part.** According to Velasquez, toxic employees love to say, “Not my job!” If some employees aren’t contributing to the success of your firm or department, then they are exhibiting toxicity.

**Others are complaining about them.** Are employees always coming to you with specific complaints about certain people? Peter Economy, the management expert behind Inc., says this is a telling sign of who your toxic employees are.

You now know what a toxic employee looks like. Here’s how to stop this behavior and prevent it from affecting your firm.

**QUICK HIT 2**



Taking action and stopping toxic employees from infecting the workplace is not so simple. Instead, it’s all about behavior modification.

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**KRISTINA MORIS**

The Washington Firm, Ltd.

**PUTTING AN END TO TOXICITY**

Taking action and stopping toxic employees from infecting the workplace is not so simple. Instead, it’s all about behavior modification, says Walters.

“Tell the person what needs to change from a behavioral standpoint, why it needs to change, and help [him or her] recognize [his or her] own triggers to acting toxic — what alternate response [he or she] can begin using and, importantly, what the options will be if the behavior does not change,” Walter says.

Marsha Petrie Sue, author of *Toxic People: Decontaminate Difficult People at Work Without Using Weapons or Duct Tape*, says that toxic employees may alter their behavior if they understand the consequences of not changing, i.e. possible termination.



Aside from bringing up the possible termination, you can implement changes in your office that will prevent the situation from becoming dire. Walters recommends starting an Employee Assistant Program (EAP) that will help employees function better in the workplace.

## QUICK HIT 3

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Toxicity can be prevented from the get-go. Aside from dealing with issues right away by hiring an EAP counselor, encourage open dialogue at your office so that people don't hold in their frustrations.

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"We are amazed what we don't know about what employees are dealing with in their personal lives," Walters says. "I find it not at all uncommon for the toxic employee — especially when the toxicity is a change in behavior — to be dealing with overwhelming personal issues that an EAP counselor may be well-equipped to handle or can refer the employee to another resource for support and assistance."

Though it may be awkward or difficult to interact with toxic employees and then sort out their issues, it is crucial if you want your law firm to survive.

"If we don't correct the behavior, then the environment may become contaminated or toxic," says Walters. "We may lose some great employees as a result. Who wants to work in that environment? Calculate your cost per hire, and you can assess what that will cost you."

Taking the time to get to know your employees, communicating openly with them, and stopping problems as soon as they start is going to greatly benefit your firm or department in the long run.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:


**Kylie Ora Lobell** is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles. She covers legal issues, blogs about content marketing, and reports on Jewish topics. She's been published in *Tablet Magazine*, *NewsCred*, *The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles* and *CMO.com*.

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## QUICK HIT 4

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By being able to recognize toxic behavior and deal with it immediately, law firms and departments can avoid catastrophic consequences within their offices.

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### MAURICIO VELASQUEZ

President and Founder,  
Diversity Training Group



### REGISTER FOR TOXIC EMPLOYEES, TOXIC WORKPLACES

What is a toxic employee, and what is a toxic work environment? How does this toxicity affect employee or attorney engagement and productivity? Join Mauricio Velasquez, President and Founder of the Diversity Training Group, in Los Angeles at the ALA's 2016 Annual Conference & Expo. This interactive session will address the toxicity in your workplace, and you'll learn the skills and tools needed to remove it. Practice a new set of skills and tools, build a toolkit and learn how to rid the firm of this employee-engagement hindering dynamic.

***Register today!***