

Kerry Howard

how
to **heal** a
workplace

Tackle Trauma,
Foster Psychological
Safety and Boost
Happiness at Work



WILEY

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Introduction

As human beings, we spend the majority of our waking adult life at work. Depending on the country that you reside in, your working hours may vary, but even in the most balanced societies, we spend more than one-third of our life at work.

Given that we spend so much time in this environment and our occupation is often a key component to our sense of identity and self-worth, it is essential to our overall functioning in life to be able to operate in a supportive environment. This means a workplace that provides psychological safety and security and affords us a positive sense of our value and contribution. It means a workplace that gives us an opportunity to meet our greatest emotional need: the need for connection.

The global way of working is rapidly changing, and workplaces have devolved and decentralised, fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic we were seeing this trend in decentralisation, particularly in knowledge industries where a computer and internet access were all employees needed to deliver outcomes. For multinational corporations with employees located in different countries around the world, it posed unique challenges that often required dedicated human resources (HR) teams to ensure worker safety and protect employers from potential legal claims spanning multiple cultures and jurisdictions.

It is rare to find a true multinational corporation that has been able to navigate the competing nuances of culture and expectations to create a truly satisfied, efficient and effective workforce.

There are exceptions, most of them in the technology space (LinkedIn, Google, SpaceX). Reports of high levels of staff satisfaction imply the workplace is a happy and productive one. This may be a reflection on the types of people who are drawn to work in these environments. In the technology field we see high levels of neurodiversity, which brings with it a greater cognitive flexibility and potentially higher tolerance of difference. In the HR field, we see more people who have high levels of emotional intelligence and are, therefore, also more likely to have a higher tolerance for diversity. So, what does that say about other workplaces and occupations?

Embracing difference in the work environment is something that is written into many workplace codes of conduct, but is rarely truly embraced in application. Group dynamics come into play, and many conservative workplaces appreciate diversity, as long as it's packaged in a dark suit and white shirt. Yet every workplace requires a variety of personality types to ensure its people can innovate and find creative solutions to complex challenges.

Difference can be expressed through personality, but it can also be created by action. When a member of the team acts in a way that seems to expose the team to scrutiny, it is not uncommon for the renegade member of the team to be excluded while the rest of the team band together to protect themselves from further ridicule. Psychological constructs around group membership often facilitate this type of behaviour in workplaces, but it can have a significant negative impact on the person who raised the alarm.

How we manage and treat our people at work can be directly linked to managing psychological safety at work. Another example is the type of work that our occupation exposes us to. We know that public safety workers (defence, emergency services, hospital staff) are routinely exposed to traumatic incidents as a direct result of the type of work that

they do. In our society we recognise that the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be disproportionately higher in these sectors than in other industries.

Then there are the sectors exposed to occupational violence, and, surprisingly, these are often the ‘helping’ professions: ambulance officers, nurses and, perhaps unexpectedly, teachers. Ambulance officers and nurses are often on the front line when people are in trouble, potentially under the influence of illicit substances or alcohol, which can expose them to negative behaviours. As occupational groups, the ‘helping’ professions can be significantly impacted by these types of incidents, because the nature of the work tends to attract quite empathic people. It can be hard to fathom why you would be hurt while trying to help someone — quite a different psychological position than those in the armed services, for example.

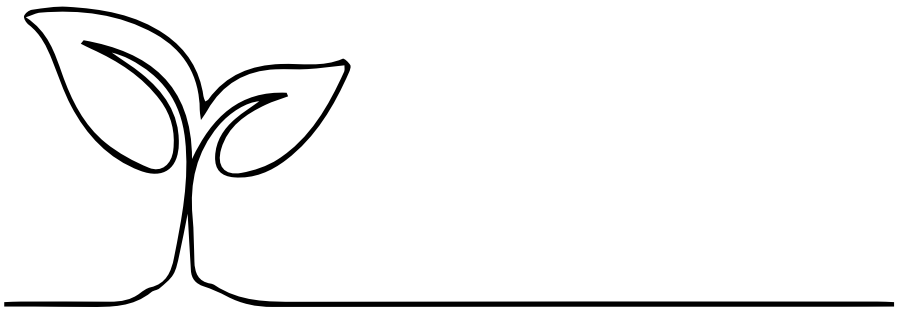
To most people’s surprise, we see that teachers are significantly impacted by violence in schools. The rates of workers compensation claims by teachers for occupational violence is almost as high as emergency services workers.¹ For similar reasons to our medical personnel, teaching generally attracts a more empathic and caring personality, and like anyone who is exposed to violence they also struggle with these incidents.

There are multiple ways that people may feel unsafe or disempowered in the workplace. My aim in this book is to help you understand why these situations occur, and provide clear guidance as to what you can do to support your people to tackle trauma and foster psychological safety. By taking a proactive approach to the challenges that can arise in the workplace, you will improve the culture of your workplace, be it large or small. Ensuring your people feel valued and supported by their employer will lead to increased satisfaction and boost the general feeling of happiness at work.

Part I

Workplace Culture





CHAPTER 1

What is workplace culture?

Why it's the key to profitability

I am often asked why I focus on trying to help organisations change their culture, and I point out that we spend the majority of our waking adult life at work. If we are constantly exposed to a toxic workplace culture, the chances of us being able to operate at our best and live our lives ‘full of awesome’ is pretty slim.

Conversely, if employees are experiencing mental health issues, for example, then their behaviour in the workplace is not going to be balanced or reasonable at all times. When employees feel safe enough to share their mental health issues, we can provide support for that team member. However we all experience difficulties in life, and we often don't recognise that they impact our mental health, and we don't label them as such.

I am sure that, like me, you have grown up in a world that told you that you needed to maintain a separation between work and life — don't let your personal problems cross over into your working life, and vice versa — but it's not only unreasonable to expect this type of compartmentalisation, it's damn near impossible to achieve!

As human beings we have many complex feelings and emotional experiences that impact our mood; we are not robots. We cannot merely switch ourselves into ‘work mode’ and switch off the fact that we are having relationship problems, or our parents or child are sick. There are many occupations where it can feel like we readily switch into ‘work mode’. We see this in occupations that require uniforms; we put on the uniform and our behaviour changes, but it doesn’t mean that the stress of our home life stops affecting us.

The same is true in reverse: our experiences at work can spill over into our mood and behaviour at home. When we are unhappy at work, it places pressure on our home life. Whether it’s financial pressure, time pressure or other excessive work expectations, it is impossible to separate the impact of our working and home lives — and unreasonable of us to expect that they can be separated!

The one constant reflection that I hear from staff who have had a difficult time, but managed to work through it, is that they had a supportive supervisor. The perception of ‘support’ changes depending on the workplace, but it is essentially where the staff member felt that their challenges in life were seen by their supervisor to be a temporary glitch in their work performance, and they were provided the space to get through the challenge and get on with life, without it affecting their working life.

In essence, their situation was appropriately viewed as ‘temporary’ and they were trusted to get back to full capacity as soon as practicable. The important element here is ‘trust’.

What is workplace culture?

Many people believe that they know what the term ‘workplace culture’ means, but for clarity, I am going to define it here and explain what it looks like in practicality. Workplace culture is the environment that you create for your employees. It plays a powerful role in determining their satisfaction with their career, their interpersonal relationships and

their career progression. The culture of your workplace is determined by a combination of the company's leadership and the employees' values, beliefs and attitudes, which translate into behaviours and interactions that contribute to the relational environment of your workplace. In general, these are the intrinsic rules that govern interpersonal connections in the workplace between peers.

Workplace culture should align with the company's mission and vision statements, and be supported by policies and procedures that are designed to ensure the workplace functions effectively and achieves its overall goals. However, when I am called into an organisation to support cultural change, the number one problem is that the workplace culture has veered off track and is no longer aligned with the mission or vision.

Workplace culture can be strongly impacted by the leadership, and we often see issues develop in the culture when there is a misalignment between the leader, the company's mission and vision, and the staff. There can be several reasons for this misalignment, but not addressing the misalignment is a sure-fire way to create a toxic workplace culture.

Workplace culture is the environment that you create for your employees

Toxic workplace culture

We have all heard the term 'toxic culture' thrown around, but I will outline what I mean by this term. Toxicity in the workplace develops from a pattern of combined behaviours that are counterproductive. When promoted by toxic leadership, a toxic culture incorporates six specific behaviours:

- passive hostility
- shaming

- indifference
- team sabotage
- negativity
- exploitation.²

Toxic cultures are known to promote attitudes that adversely impact employee psychological wellbeing (see figure 1.1). Psychological wellbeing is also defined by six attributes:

- autonomy
- environment management
- personal growth
- positive relationships
- having life goals
- self-acceptance.³

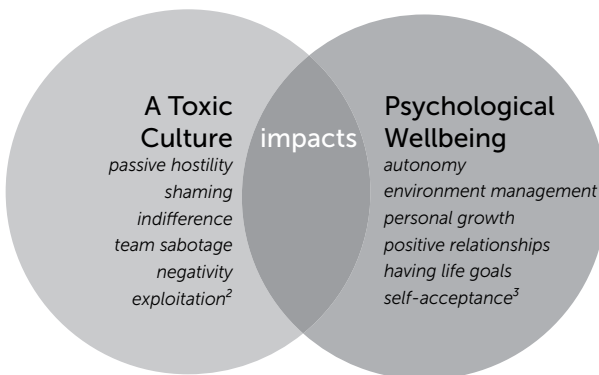


Figure 1.1: The impact of toxic cultures on employee psychological wellbeing

In one particular study that considered the impact of a toxic workplace culture on psychological wellbeing, it determined, not surprisingly, that wellbeing is lower in employees who are exposed to toxic workplace cultures. What might be surprising is that almost 80 per cent of workplaces met the criteria for toxicity!³

The researchers identified that there are three main strategies adopted by employees who are confronted with these toxic work environments:

- **Active rejection:** These employees are the whistle-blowers, the fighters against injustice, who take action against the toxicity of the workplace and see quitting as the last resort. These employees represent over one-third of the workforce, and you will read some of their stories in this book.
- **Passive rejection:** These employees are those who tend to hide their dissatisfaction from the perpetrators (usually the leadership) while sharing their dissatisfaction with their peers. These employees represent a staggering 40 per cent of the workforce and perceive that *all* workplaces are toxic, so they remain passively disengaged because they are pessimistic. They believe that it is better the devil you know, than the devil you don't!
- **Escapees:** These are the ones who decide that it is easier to get out as quickly as possible, in some cases leaving the professional field. These employees represent the remaining 27 per cent of the workforce and often react swiftly to toxic experiences of blatant harassment, threats and intimidation.

Employees with higher levels of psychological wellbeing are more likely to escape when the organisation toxicity worsens, whereas employees with the lowest psychological wellbeing are the most likely to become passive rejectors.⁴

It isn't that difficult to see why these numbers need our attention. If 80 per cent of workplaces have a moderate to high toxicity, and

40 per cent of those employees are passively disengaged, 33 per cent are actively disrupting the workplace and 27 per cent are actively looking for work elsewhere, then it really isn't hard to understand why actively leading to reduce toxicity in the workplace should be the major goal of all compassionate leaders. The disenfranchisement of our human resources is leading to significantly reduced productivity, and this is silently eroding the profitability of businesses globally.

The Great Resignation

The Great Resignation: The mass exodus from the work environment observed post-pandemic. The term was coined by Anthony Klotz, a professor of management at University College London's School of Management, in May 2021.

The phenomena of the Great Resignation was first observed in 2021 following the disruption to the way that we work thanks to the pandemic. In July 2021, a Gallup Poll revealed that almost half the American working population was actively looking for new roles. Business is facing a staggeringly high resignation rate and record numbers of unfilled positions.⁵ The United States quit rate is at its highest in over 20 years, hovering at almost 3 per cent since early 2021.⁶

Quit rate: The number of employees who voluntarily resign, as opposed to as the result of redundancy or being fired.

There are several reasons for this phenomenon, but the primary reason is that the impact of the pandemic on people's freedom meant that their discontent with life was linked with the employer that they were connected with at the time of the strongest lockdowns and control over their movements in society.

In Australia, we saw less of this movement until 2022, primarily due to the prolonged lockdowns, which affected our general sense of security and limited the number of people changing roles due to the need for stable employment. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' annual job mobility survey shows that Australians are on the move at their highest rate in over a decade: 9.5 per cent in 2022, up 2 per cent from 2021. Not surprisingly, the highest change was seen in Victoria, usually a reasonably stable state in terms of job mobility. As the state that experienced the most prolonged lockdowns around the pandemic, it went from 7.2 per cent in 2021 to a whopping 10.1 per cent in 2022.⁷

In other countries like the United Kingdom, the statistics around economic inactivity give a clearer picture about the impact of the pandemic on the labour market. Since the start of 2021, there have been some alarming changes around economic inactivity (people who are not actively engaged in the workforce due to ill health, retirement, study, etc), despite an overall decline in the total number from 411 863 to 378 073, which on the surface would appear to be good news, certainly that is how the UK Government is espousing these numbers. However, when we dig into the data, we see some significant and alarming trends.⁸

What the data is telling us and how it affects your business

From the beginning of 2021 until May 2022 in the UK, we see sickness rates are out of control: temporary sick rates showed a 740 per cent increase from 3648 to 30 640, and long-term sick rates more than tripled from 67 487 to 208 655. At the same time, fewer people are studying, with student numbers declining by two-thirds — from 339 380 down to 139 690 — and more people are retiring, with rates skyrocketing from 6851 to 63 174 — a 1022 per cent increase! Although the overall trend now looks like it's improving, there are much higher numbers of people who are unable to participate in the workforce due to health concerns, and many who are opting out of the labour market and retiring early.

The only real positive is in the number of discouraged workers, those who were not looking for work because they believed that no jobs were available — the number declined massively from 57 158 to 21 958, an incredible 138 per cent decrease!

So what does all this labour market data actually have to do with your business? Everything! Recruitment specialists are talking about the fact that it is now an employee's market, at a time when many industries are struggling with the skills gap between the available prospects and the requirements of the role. One of the biggest challenges with fewer people studying is that we already have a skills shortage. Recruitment has become much more of a 'take what's available' for the employer, leading to some significant challenges in an under-skilled labour market with unrealistic expectations of its worth.

Employees are seeking roles with employers that offer them more wellbeing support and greater flexibility than ever before. There are several reasons why we ended up in this situation, but realistically, the labour market has been decimated by the departure of the Baby Boomers, many of whom retired through the pandemic, leaving a major skills shortage in the market. Most organisations are now led by Gen X (born 1965–1980), with Gen Y/Millennials (born 1981–1996) and Gen Z/iGen/Zoomers (1997–2012) the main players in the workforce.

It's an employee market and they want greater support for mental health and real balance between home and work

What does our generation have to do with our work ethic?

In Western societies, our 'generation' defines many things about our psychological and social dimensions, and is expressed in commonly held beliefs or views of the world that are shaped by the social experiences of

each generation. There are two overlapping theories about how generations form. The ‘pulse-rate hypothesis’ gives rise to the naming conventions and timeframes that we are most familiar with, and essentially claims that each generation develops a particular ‘peer personality’ based on the time period in which each one reaches adulthood.⁹ Social scientists follow the ‘imprint hypothesis’ of generations, which indicates that the specific historical events that are experienced during our early lives shape our outlook on the world and differentiate us from our parents.¹⁰

In broad terms, our current society and, by default, our workplaces are influenced by the current ‘living’ cohorts who are still participating in the labour market: Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and Gen Z. In terms of population numbers, the Baby Boomers were the largest generational cohort until they gave birth to Gen Y. Most Baby Boomers are in or looking at retirement, so the majority of modern workplaces are filled with members of Gen X, Gen Y and Gen Z. We need to actively manage the expectations of Gen Z and prepare for the influx of Gen Alpha in the next five years.

Baby Boomers

Most Baby Boomers were raised by parents whose lives had been impacted by the Great Depression. As such, they were often raised with austerity, and subject to strict rules and social obligations until the emergence of the 1960s counterculture. These varied experiences really affected how they parented Gen Y. There was a significant increase in expectations of university education, and corresponding expectations around success in the occupational sphere.

As workers, Baby Boomer males align with a strong work ethic: diligence and dedication to an employer; most of their careers were spent with a single employer. Baby Boomer females tended to work outside the home to bring in additional income once children were at school and society allowed it. In the 1960s, many young Baby Boomer women were forced to quit their jobs once they married. As such, Gen Y was raised by a generation of mothers who stayed home until they went to school, and then engaged in the workforce, often part time, usually to be able to provide more for their children.

Generation X

Gen X is the generation that saw mothers entering the workforce in a time before the advent of formalised childcare or after-school care. Higher rates of divorce meant that this was the first generation that experienced high levels of sole parenting, and this was usually done by the mother. They learned how to fend for themselves because they had to; so they learned to solve problems. As a result, they were open to thinking outside the box.

The 80s saw the rise of music videos and subcultures develop around punk, metal and goth. They were exposed to widespread health concerns with AIDS, were the first generation to engage with technology and were more likely to get a university degree than previous generations. Gen X women believed that they could have a career and a family and sacrificed a lot to achieve both.

They embraced individualism and are known for being entrepreneurial and productive in the workplace. They are committed to their profession, not necessarily the employer, and they look to change career focus every ten years or so. They tend to get on with things because they were raised to be self-sufficient.

Generation Y

The social changes that impacted the Baby Boomers through the 1960s really shaped how they would parent their offspring. As a result, Gen Y were raised to believe that they could achieve anything they set their mind to — that success was theirs for the taking, they just had to ask for it. As their mothers self-sacrificed to give them more, Gen Y started to develop more egocentricity than earlier generations as they were given a lot of support from their parents, coupled with a lot of expectation.

This generation saw the movement from personal computing to mobile technology, and the emergence of new technologies and social media through their teen years, which further enhanced their egocentricity. They are known for being ambitious and expect to rise rapidly up the corporate