

CONFLICT

Signs You Might Be a Toxic Colleague

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No one likes a toxic coworker. Even the most difficult people themselves would probably be the first to agree.

Which raises a question: If you were “toxic,” would you even know it? Is it possible that *you* are the one wreaking havoc on your team, making everyone else less productive and more miserable?

Of course not, you say. Because that’s what we all say.

The research paints a very different picture, namely that most of the time there is remarkably little overlap between how other people see us and how we think we're coming across. (There are lots of good reasons for this disconnect — for the most part, it has to do with how difficult and subjective perception is.)

Assuming you would prefer not to be hated by your colleagues, here are three ways people inadvertently come across as toxic and some strategies you can use to avoid doing so yourself.

Problem: You seem cold.

Human brains are wired to try to figure out whether others pose a threat to us — to our relationships, to our careers, to our overall well-being. *Are you going to make trouble for me?* we wonder (often unconsciously). *Are you going to be competitive, or try to undermine me?*

People answer this question about you by evaluating how warm you seem. Your warmth — being friendly, attentive, empathetic — is taken as evidence that you have good intentions toward the perceiver, and it's the very first thing about you that they zero in on.

When you are warm, your tendency to tell people what to do is more likely to be seen by your colleagues as an attempt to be “helpful”: your leaving a coworker off an important email chain is “an oversight,” and your hot temper is the result of “so much stress.” In other words, when people believe you generally have their best interests at heart, you get the benefit of the doubt, and your actions are interpreted more generously. And this only happens when you are warm.

The problem is that most people, especially in work settings, see making a good impression on their colleagues as being first and foremost about competence. In their eagerness to demonstrate their skills and talents, they neglect to project warmth. (Actually, it's worse than that — some people will actively play down their warmth in an attempt to seem more competent.)

Solution: To turn up your warmth quotient, make a conscious attempt to pay attention to other people. Make eye contact and hold it, both when you are speaking and listening. Resist the urge to look at your cell phone during meetings. Seem interested. Nod from time to time to show you understand what's being said to you. Smile, especially when others do. And above all else, actually focus on what other people are saying — your colleagues have a need to feel heard, just like you do.

Remember that people don't have access to your secret thoughts and feelings — you have to make them apparent. So make that effort to *show* you are on their side.

Problem: You seem selfish.

But wait! you say. *I work my butt off for my colleagues. I do more than other people do — and do it better.*

That may be true. But how much time do you spend really thinking about your colleagues? Their perspectives? Their struggles? Do you know what their goals are?

If you don't know much about what drives your colleagues or what their hopes and fears are, you might be in trouble. Coworkers perceived as “toxic” often come across as if they think *it's my world, and you're just living in it*. It's not that you believe this is actually true — but to be “toxic,” all you need to do is be *perceived* as if you do. This can happen even if you're just really focused on the work in front of you, head down and plowing away. While it may feel to you like you're a martyr to the job, other people might see it as you hoarding work, micromanaging, or having trouble delegating or collaborating. Because such people don't spend much time thinking about others or trying to see things from perspectives other than their own, they also often inadvertently do classic “toxic” things like assigning blame to others when things go wrong, leaving key people out of the loop, or taking credit for other people's work.

Solution: Honestly, most egocentric people don't realize that they *are* egocentric, and almost all of them certainly don't want to be. (Except for narcissists. Let's assume you aren't one of those.) To be certain that you don't fall into this particular toxic category, take the time to mentally put yourself in your colleagues' shoes on a regular basis to really try to grasp their perspective. Be curious, and ask questions to learn more about the coworkers you don't know well. And most importantly, show empathy. Let them know you respect and value them enough to try to see things through their eyes. Use phrases like "I'm sorry you had to deal with..." and "I imagine you must have felt..." to convey empathy directly.

Problem: People think of you as the "Rule Nazi."

It should come as no surprise that in a recent study, toxic coworkers were found to be reliably more overconfident and self-centered than their nontoxic colleagues. What may surprise you is the third common trait they often share: believing that rules must *always* be followed.

Of course, when those rules are ethical or legal in nature, we can all agree that they shouldn't be broken. But other rules, the ones that govern how work "should" get done, sometimes can be bent (or ignored altogether) for the sake of a larger goal.

Rule Nazis don't see it that way. They cling to the rules like Leonardo DiCaprio clung to that door in *Titanic* — as if their lives depend on it. And they make sure everyone else does too, even when the rule doesn't make sense or stands in the way of productivity.

This strict adherence to the rules is born primarily out of an excessive *prevention* focus. Prevention-focused people are determined to *stay safe*. They're generally risk-averse and they worry about what might go wrong if they aren't careful enough, but their work is also more thorough, accurate, and well-planned.

Solution: Be honest — does this sound like you? Do you think you might be a bit rigid when it comes to doing things “the way they are supposed to be done”? And are you vocal about it? Despite your good intentions, what may seem perfectly sensible and responsible to you is probably undermining your entire team. Make a point of being more flexible about the rules, particularly the ones that are neither unethical nor illegal to break. And be sure to point out to your colleagues when you *are* being flexible, so that you get credit for it. Finally, when you really have to stick to the rules, don’t just assume that other people understand *why*; take a moment to explain your thinking, why it’s so important to follow the rules in this case, and how doing so is good for your team.



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