

What's worse than a 'toxic' workplace? One that gaslights employees

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When it comes to relationships between co-workers, organizations' stated priorities must match what's happening under the hood.

These days, we hear a lot about "toxic bosses," "toxic companies," and the like. It's easy to forget that non-toxicity is not all we want from an employer. If we're really honest, most of us want to be part of an organization where working relationships are consistently healthy and supportive. Our dream company would also be a place where advancement opportunities were available to all, not only those who regularly have lunch or go golfing with the right people.

It might not shock you to learn that few companies have fully achieved this sort of actively anti-toxic as opposed to superficially non-toxic–working culture. Those that have, though, tend to be more resilient when crisis hits, according to Kevin Rockmann, professor of management at George Mason University School of Business.

"If even one person is an isolate, that's a problem," Rockmann says. "That's information you're not benefiting from...It's not about everybody being best friends, it's just about having productive working relationships that are characterized by respect, so that when the [expletive] hits the fan, people are going to step up."

In a paper published in *Strategic Organization*, Rockmann and co-author Caroline A. Bartel (of University of Texas–Austin) theorize that such working cultures require concerted and sustained attention at all organizational levels—especially the top. Unstinting focus from above spurs the creation of structures and practices for supporting positive interpersonal relationships, which the paper terms "systems for relational advocacy."

Rockmann's theory adopts the attention-based view of the firm as an interpretive framework for organizational activity, as opposed to its chief competitor, the resource-based view. While the latter, according to Rockmann, centers on "the resources that an organization has or can access," the former recognizes that "resources are important, but it's

really about how we leverage those resources. What are organizational leaders paying attention to?" His paper forms part of a special issue of *Strategic Organization* devoted to the attention-based view.

Outside of relational advocacy—which relatively few firms actually practice—the paper identifies two main types of relational systems, reflecting different ways senior leaders can manage their attention.

Relational antipathy describes organizations that have made a strategic decision to deprioritize [relationship](#)-building among employees. This may be because senior leaders believe that a culture of competition rather than cooperation would be better for their firm, or because the business model is thought to lend itself to more transactional relationships (e.g. gig economy start-ups). In any case, Rockmann emphasizes that relational antipathy can be a workable system, especially when characterized by fairness as opposed to exploitation.

Rockmann reserves his strongest criticism for systems of relational indifference, where lip service may be paid to the importance of positive relationships ("we care about everyone!"), but senior leaders do not allocate the attention needed to create and maintain those relationships long-term.

"I was talking to an HR person at this company, who said, 'We started this awards program to recognize employees who helped each other out.' I asked them, 'That's great, so how many people are getting awards?' They said 'Well, no one's been getting the awards recently. We keep forgetting to send the announcement out and the rewards behind it are pretty minimal.'"

To Rockmann, this is a quintessential example of the dangers of relational indifference because it shows how espoused [good intentions](#) become mere gaslighting without organizational follow-through.

"Nobody was told that part of their job evaluation that year was to make sure they do that awards program," he explains. "What could have been a way to bring people closer together and incentivize stronger relational connections falls by the wayside. And that weakens the organization, because relationships are how we're going to solve crises."

Instead of a tightly woven, resilient network of relationships, relationally indifferent organizations are susceptible to cliquishness and a social order split into in-groups and out-groups. As with any laissez-faire system, the concentration of capital—in this case, social capital—is much less democratic. This can torpedo morale throughout the organization, as mutual resentment and incomprehension sets in among outsiders and insiders.

Due to these dynamics, leaders of relationally indifferent organizations cannot necessarily trust what their own employees are telling them. "Typically, what happens is you do a survey and the people that feel like they aren't going to be listened to don't fill it out. And so you get results that are positive or very positive, and you think, well, our workplace is great."

Rockmann therefore advises that leaders should "realize that they are products of the clique-ish system, so they need objective data. Be willing to listen to ombuds or consulting companies who come in to assess your workforce."

If they find there's a need to move from relational indifference to relational advocacy, what should leaders pay attention to first? "To me, the lowest-hanging fruit are the job descriptions. Put in the manager's job description that part of their incentive is how well-connected their people are. Put in the employee's job description that 'part of your job is helping other people do theirs.'"

"A lot of people are not intrinsically motivated to form supportive working relationships," Rockmann summarizes. "So if they're not relationally motivated, you have to be explicit."

More information: Caroline Anne Bartel et al, EXPRESS: The Disease of Indifference: How Relational Systems Provide the Attentional Infrastructure for Organizational Resilience, *Strategic Organization* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/14761270231183441](https://doi.org/10.1177/14761270231183441)

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