

HR GLOSSARY

Gaslighting: Definition and Examples in the Workplace



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In a workplace setting, gaslighting can erode trust, reduce productivity, and negatively impact employee mental health. Read our blog to discover why spotting and acting against gaslighting in the workplace is essential for creating an environment where employees feel supported and validated.



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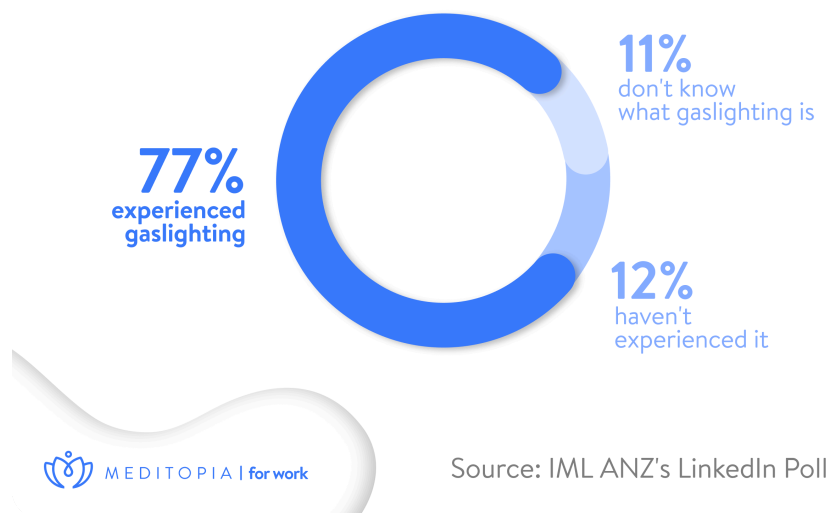
What is the Definition of Gaslighting?

Gaslighting is a form of manipulation in which one person makes another doubt their own perceptions, memories, or beliefs. The term originated from the 1944 film *Gaslight*, where a husband manipulated his wife into thinking she was losing her mind.

In a workplace context, gaslighting can involve:

- Undermining someone's confidence
- Denying past interactions
- Subtly discrediting their work to make them question their own abilities

This concept is particularly important when managing employees with mental health conditions, including [autism](#), [paranoia in the workplace](#), and [BPD](#). Gaslighting an employee with a condition that already affects their understanding of the world around us can increase the challenges of the condition itself.



Why is Understanding Gaslighting Important for HR, Business Owners, and Team Leaders?

Gaslighting can create a [hostile work environment](#), affecting productivity, [employee morale](#), and overall well-being. For HR professionals, business owners, and team leaders, recognizing and addressing gaslighting in the workplace is critical. Here's why:

- **Promotes Psychological Safety:** Recognizing gaslighting helps HR and leaders protect employees from manipulative behaviors, creating a safe environment where individuals feel respected and validated.
- **Improves Employee Engagement:** When employees feel that their perceptions are valued, engagement and productivity increase. By addressing gaslighting, leaders can help boost morale and commitment.
- **Ensures Fair Treatment:** Awareness of gaslighting encourages fair treatment and accountability, ensuring that no one is subjected to manipulative behaviors.

- **Enhances Team Dynamics:** Gaslighting can damage team cohesion and trust. By understanding and addressing it, leaders can improve team relationships and foster a collaborative and [inclusive workplace culture](#).
- **Supports Conflict Resolution:** Recognizing gaslighting at work also allows HR and team leaders to resolve conflicts with a fair, open-minded approach, ensuring that everyone's perspective is heard.

Types of Gaslighting

There are different types of gaslighting that can occur in the workplace, each with specific characteristics and implications. Here are some common types:

1. **Denial of Events or Conversations:** This occurs when someone outright denies conversations or agreements, causing the other person to question their memory and perception.
2. **Withholding Information:** Gaslighters may intentionally withhold information or act as though they "forgot" to share critical details. This manipulation leaves employees confused and undermines their ability to perform effectively, it also affects the performance of employees with paranoia.
3. **Undermining Work and Abilities:** This type involves subtle or overt comments that discredit someone's work, causing them to doubt their competence. For example, feedback like, *"Are you sure you're up to this task?"* can be used to erode confidence.
4. **Blaming and Projecting:** Gaslighters may shift blame onto others, avoiding accountability and making the targeted person feel at fault. This manipulative tactic can lead to guilt and self-doubt.
5. **Invalidation of Emotions:** When someone's feelings are dismissed or minimized—"You're overreacting" or *"You're being too sensitive"*—it can create emotional confusion, making the person question their responses.

Recognizing these types of gaslighting at work helps employees and leaders identify toxic patterns and promote a respectful and transparent work environment.



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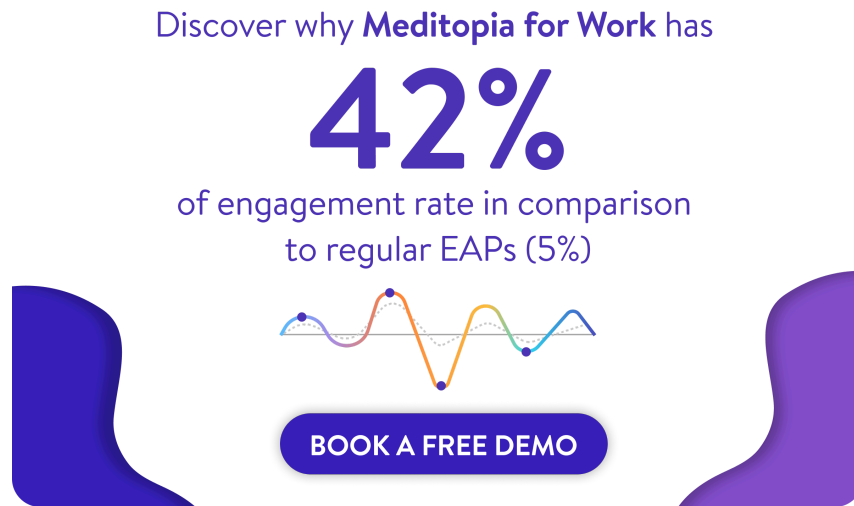
How Does Gaslighting Influence Workplace Productivity?

As you can guess, chronic exposition to gaslighting in the workplace has a detrimental impact on productivity, as it creates a culture of mistrust and fear. Here's how gaslighting can affect performance:

- **Reduces Focus and Efficiency:** Constantly questioning one's own reality takes a toll on mental focus. Employees subjected to gaslighting often feel insecure, which can distract from their tasks and reduce their efficiency.
- **Undermines Confidence:** When employees are made to doubt their abilities, they're less likely to take initiative or contribute ideas. This stifles creativity and innovation, negatively impacting the team's overall performance.

- **Increases Absenteeism and Turnover:** Gaslighting creates stress, which can lead to burnout, absenteeism, and ultimately, higher turnover rates. Employees who don't feel safe at work are more likely to leave, leading to increased hiring and training costs.

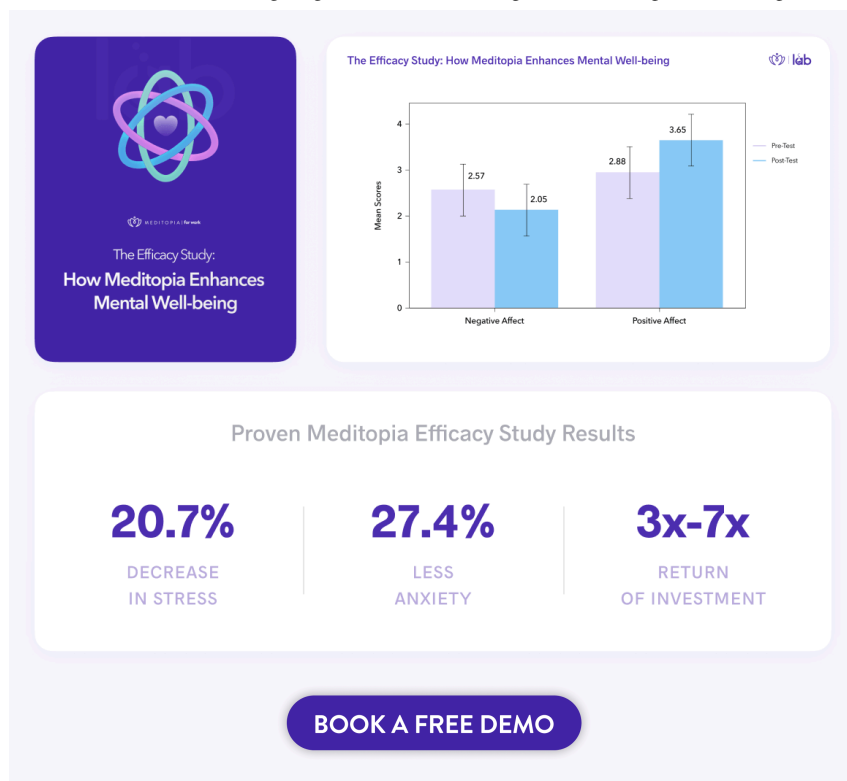
Essentially, by understanding what is gaslighting in terms of productivity, leaders can take proactive steps to foster a positive, inclusive work environment that values open communication and support.



What Are Some Real-World Examples of Gaslighting in the Workplace?

Now that you are familiar with the gaslighting definition, it's time to understand that it can appear in many forms, from subtle interactions to more overt manipulative tactics. Here are some examples of gaslighting that may occur in workplace scenarios:

1. **Overlooking or Ignoring Input:** A manager may routinely ignore an employee's ideas, later claiming they never offered suggestions. This subtle form of gaslighting undermines the employee's confidence.
2. **Misattributing Success:** A team member may claim credit for someone else's work or contributions, denying the original employee's input and making them question their worth.
3. **Downplaying Concerns:** When an employee raises an issue, a supervisor may respond with, "You're overthinking it," causing the employee to question the validity of their concerns.
4. **Rewriting Past Agreements:** A manager may agree to a course of action but later deny the agreement, implying that the employee misunderstood. This creates confusion and erodes trust in leadership.
5. **Gaslighting as "Feedback":** Phrasing criticisms in a way that implies an employee is not capable—"I'm surprised you didn't know that"—can manipulate the person into feeling inadequate.



How Can Gaslighting Impact Employee Mental Health?

The psychological effects of gaslighting are significant, often leading to anxiety, self-doubt, and reduced job satisfaction. Let's check how gaslighting impacts employee mental health, supported by psychological theories.

Constantly doubting oneself due to gaslighting can create chronic stress and [anxiety](#), impacting both mental and physical health. **Cognitive Dissonance Theory** explains this as the discomfort experienced when a person's perception is repeatedly challenged, creating mental strain.

Moreover, the **Self-Perception Theory** suggests that people form beliefs about themselves based on how others treat them. If an employee is consistently gaslit, they may internalize these doubts, which leads to low self-worth and decreased engagement.

Finally, the **Social Comparison Theory** explains how individuals compare themselves to others in their work environment. Gaslighting can create a sense of isolation and [loneliness](#), as employees feel misunderstood and may withdraw from social interactions, further affecting morale and productivity.

Key Takeaways

- Manipulating employees to question their reality damages trust, emotional security, and the overall culture—undermining a healthy, supportive work environment.
- Gaslighting leads to anxiety, self-doubt, and even burnout. Over time, it can reduce self-esteem and trigger chronic stress or depressive symptoms in employees.
- Employees who are gaslit often second-guess themselves, avoid contributing ideas, and disengage—reducing focus, creativity, and team performance.
- A culture where gaslighting is tolerated leads to high turnover, absenteeism, and fractured team dynamics as employees seek safer, more respectful environments.
- From dismissing concerns to rewriting agreements, subtle gaslighting must be addressed early through training, open communication, and clear accountability systems.

Frequently Asked Questions

How does an EAP help with gaslighting?

An **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** offers confidential counseling and support services to help employees process and recover from gaslighting. EAPs provide a safe space to discuss experiences and offer resources for building resilience, improving employee mental health and confidence.

How should gaslighting be managed at work?

How can gaslighting be prevented or addressed?

How can training address issues related to gaslighting?

How can companies create policies around gaslighting?

What role does gaslighting play in workplace morale and mental health?



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I am a Diversity & Inclusion Advocate. I hold degrees in Law and Business Administration. My passion lies in writing about Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB), and I am committed to raising awareness about the pressing issues in our rapidly changing world. I am also a certified Yoga instructor.