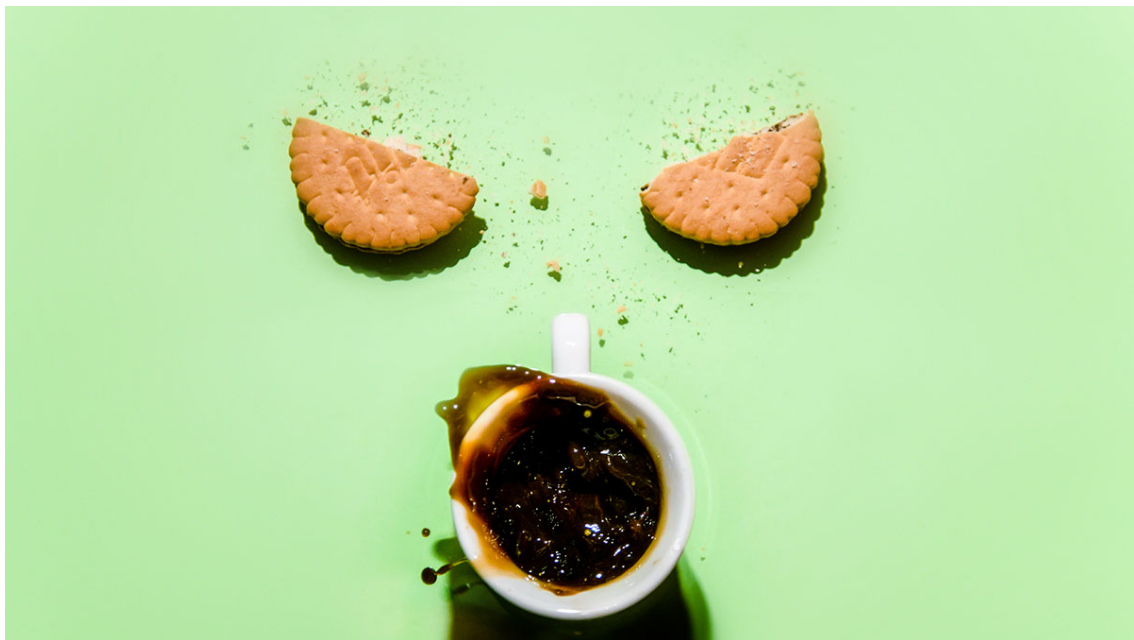


Managing People

How to Avoid Hiring a Toxic Employee

by Christine Porath

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Nothing is more costly to an organization's culture than a toxic employee. Research shows that rudeness is like the common cold — it's contagious, spreads quickly, and anyone can be a carrier.

Dylan Minor, a visiting assistant professor at Harvard Business School, and Michael Housman, chief analytics officer at Cornerstone OnDemand, studied just how costly toxic employees are using a large

dataset of nearly 60,000 workers across 11 firms in various industries, including communications, consumer services, financial services, health care, insurance, and retail.

How does hiring a toxic employee compare to hiring a superstar? Minor and Housman found that one toxic employee wipes out the gains for more than two superstars. In fact, a superstar, defined as the top 1% of workers in terms of productivity, adds about \$5,000 per year to the company's profit, while a toxic worker costs about \$12,000 per year. The real difference could even be greater if you factor in other potential costs, such as the spread of the toxicity, litigation fees, lower employee morale, and upset customers.

YOU AND YOUR TEAM

Hiring and Firing

How to build a strong team.

I've shown something similar in my research on civility at work: rude workers have a stronger effect on the organization than civil workers. That's why it's especially important to weed out toxic people before they join your organization. Here's how:

Interview for civility

Throughout the interview process, be on the lookout for signs of civility. Asking the candidate how she managed a particular situation in the past provides more valuable insight than hypothetical questions such as "How would you handle..." or "What would you do if..." Request examples of how their past behavior matches the values you're looking for (which you also need to make explicit during the interview). Don't just accept the first answer — ask for 2–3 examples.

It's best to use structured interviewing, where you ask each candidate applying for the job the same questions in the same order.

Research shows that these interviews are more predictive of candidate performance, even for jobs that are unstructured.

Consider using these interview questions:

- What would your former employer say about you — positive and negative?
- What would your former subordinates say about you — positive and negative?
- What about yourself would you like to improve most? How about a second thing? A third?
- Tell me about a time when you've had to deal with stress or conflict at work. What did you do?
- What are some signals that you're under too much stress?
- When have you failed? Describe the circumstances and how you dealt with and learned from the experience.
- What are some examples of your ability to manage and supervise others? When have you done this well?
- What kind of people do you find it most difficult to work with? Tell me about a time when you've found it difficult to work with someone. How did you handle it?

Also, observe these behaviors:

- Did the candidate arrive promptly for the interview?
- Does the candidate speak negatively of former employers or others?
- Does the candidate take responsibility for behaviors, results, and outcomes, or do they blame others?

Follow up with every employee who encounters the candidate, not just those on her interview schedule. How did she treat your parking lot attendant? Your receptionist? Your administrative assistant? Is the candidate kind, gracious, and respectful? Or rude and condescending? Many HR professionals have told me that some of the best feedback they receive is from the person who drove the candidate from the airport or the receptionist who greeted the candidate at the front desk.

Get your team involved

Have your team go out to lunch or dinner with the candidate or take her out to a ball game. You want to give the candidate a first-

hand opportunity to observe your team's and organization's values. Doing so will help her consider whether she's willing to sign up to live those values. If she isn't, you can both save yourself a world of time, frustration, and heartache — not to mention your organization's money.

Ask their references about civility

Understanding how the candidate behaved in the past will help you assess whether they'll be civil when they come work for you. Ask their references for specific behavioral examples of the candidates' characteristics. Ask questions that get at the heart of civility: "What's it like working with him?" or "What could he improve on?"

Share the company's core values with the reference and ask them to give examples of the candidate demonstrating those values. Did the candidate's behavior ever reflect negatively on the organization?

You might also ask:

- How did subordinates feel about working for him?
- How emotionally intelligent does she seem? Is she able to read people and adjust accordingly?
- Is he comfortable in various situations and working with different types of people?
- How well does she seem to collaborate? Is she a team player?
- How did he react to authority?
- Would you rehire the person?

A call, not a letter, is more likely to reveal any specific behavioral problems. Seasoned recruiters report that the most useful data they get from references comes from follow-up questions, and mainly from the reference's tone, demeanor, and pace — not necessarily their words. Listen very closely and follow up on hints of trouble.

Don't just stick to the reference list — talk to your own network as well. U.S. Deputy Secretary of Labor Chris Lui explained to me that any time he's looking to hire someone, he simply picks up the phone

and calls people that should know the candidate. Chris said it never fails. He gets great information on almost all candidates from his trusted network.

It's worth talking to a candidate's colleagues from lower levels to make sure the person isn't the type to "kiss up, kick down." Also, check references with other people to whom the candidate has been accountable outside of work, such as boards, community organizations, professors or coaches, boards, and community organizations.

A hospital I worked with avoided a near miss when hiring a new radiologist. It offered the job to "Dirk," a talented M.D. with many solid recommendations. Dirk aced the interviews, but an assistant in the department had a hunch that something was off. She traced Dirk's job history by calling up her contacts in the field and learned that Dirk had left many badly treated subordinates in his wake. She reported her findings to the department head. The offer had already gone out, but the department head nixed the offer by warning Dirk that if he accepted, the hospital would let him go immediately, which could raise a red flag for potential future employers.

Contrast this story with one from another hospital, where the chief administrator told me how one highly talented but uncivil doctor cost his hospital millions. Had the hiring committee done its homework, they would've learned about the offensive doctor's history of problems, including formal complaints filed against him at his previous hospital. Instead, the newly hired M.D. incited dissatisfaction among nurses and technicians that eventually led to a lawsuit, taking a financial and emotional toll on the hospital.

Check your own civility

It's hard to expect someone to be civil if you're not modeling the same behavior. No matter what the job is or how good or bad the candidate may seem to you, treat them respectfully. At Google, internal research shows that candidates regularly mention their interactions with

interviewers in feedback to the firm — and that it's more important than the type of work, the benefits, or their interactions with recruiters when evaluating the overall hiring experience. Coach anyone who interviews candidates to be civil.

Skill and talent can't make up for the costly impact that toxic employees have on your organization; it's better to catch that behavior before the person joins your team. Do your homework. Rely on structured, behavioral interviews. Conduct thorough reference checks. Investigate hunches thoroughly. And put your best foot forward. After all, it pays to be civil.

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