

STUCK? ADVICE FOR COPING WITH UNTOUCHABLE JERKS

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Team members often ask what they can do if they are experiencing toxic behavior from an individual in their practice who they have very little formal power against, such as the practice owner, manager, or favorite client.

Unfortunately, the prognosis for improvement in an organization where leadership is actively engaging in, failing to respond to, or willfully neglectful of workplace abuse is poor. Incivility is contagious and tends to spread downward in an organization.¹

It's important to know that people's fear that there will be serious consequences for holding toxic individuals in power accountable isn't irrational. In at least one study of individuals who reported workplace bullying, almost as many of those reporting bullying were fired (20%) as the number of bullies who were reprimanded (27%).¹ Even the Workplace Bullying Institute warns that court cases often have a low success rate despite a high risk of re-traumatization.² So, what can individuals do if they feel trapped in a toxic workplace?

First – Reassess Your Reasons for Feeling Trapped

When possible, leaving is almost always the best option. Uncontrollable, ongoing stressors may induce feelings of learned helplessness and depression and result in distorted thinking, making individuals feel trapped.³ Reconsider these assumptions:

1. "The next place will be the same or even worse."

While workplace abuse is higher than desirable in veterinary medicine, it is not ubiquitous. A survey of occupational health factors in Minnesota veterinary practices found that while an unfortunate 32% of veterinary team members surveyed experienced or witnessed some level of workplace abuse in the past 12 months, that also means the majority (68%) had not.⁴

Some levels of toxicity can be subjective and a practice one person considers toxic might be the perfect fit for someone else. A practice where one team member feels their colleagues are "slacking off" might feel more comfortable on a team where someone else feels they are being "micromanaged."

Why might it feel like all practices are toxic? In part, because of availability bias. This bias describes individuals' tendency to believe something is more likely the more easily it can be brought to mind. When team members are treated poorly, 80% of them are likely to tell others about their experiences.⁵ This is natural, and yet can leave veterinary team members with a distorted beliefs about the frequency of toxic workplace behaviors.

It might also be harder to find those good practices when job hunting. There are some objectively toxic practices and they are likely to have higher turnover than healthier organizations.⁶ As a result, they show up more often in job listings. That doesn't mean good opportunities aren't out there, just that they take more time to find.

2. "I can't make this much somewhere else"

Experiencing or even witnessing workplace incivility has significant negative impacts on workplace productivity and (by extension) revenue.⁶ There is strong reason to believe individuals would be more productive and able to demand higher salaries in healthier work environments.

It's also important to consider the costs that come with revenue earned. Workplace relationships are correlated with workers physical health, length of life, quality of life, and quality of personal relationships. Is the money you earn worth the potential impact on your wellbeing?^{5,6,7}

3. "If I leave no one will be left to protect my coworkers."

According to Dr. Robert I. Sutton of Stanford, those who often see themselves as protectors in these workplaces may in fact be "toxic enablers."¹ While providing some short-term relief, you may make things worse in the long term by keeping toxic leaders from facing the consequences of their behavior.¹ While it's no guarantee, one person leaving can start a cascade of quitting that can force leaders to rethink their approach.

It can be helpful to double-check assumptions about why one cannot leave with trusted individuals outside of the practice.

Second – Set Boundaries

Unfortunately, there can be compelling reasons to staying in difficult work situations. For instance, if finding a new job would also require relocating, an individual may decide to prioritize their family's wellbeing and convenience over their own workplace wellbeing.

Owning and explaining the reasons for that choice is key to evaluating the situation going forward, especially due to the high likelihood that they get worse over time.

For instance, if the individual who was reluctant to change jobs for their family's sake becomes frequently ill and short-tempered with their kids because of a worsening work climate, the very family-focus that led them to stay might now encourage them to change jobs.

Understanding one's values and boundaries is important to help set limits on what one will and will not tolerate and why. Consider answering the following:

"If _____ opportunity became available, I would leave." OR
"If _____ ever occurred, I would leave."

Third – Workflow Tricks for Minimizing Harm

Please note, I do not think team members should have to resort to these measures. However, it is important to recognize the struggles of and provide help to individuals who cannot easily remove themselves from these situations.

Distance - Short of leaving the practice, it is advisable to create physical distance from toxic individuals and set limits on the type and amount of contact. The amount coworkers talk to one another, both in person and through other means of communication, is correlated with how closely they work to one another. Also, the more closely you work to a toxic team member, the more likely you are to become toxic yourself or even get fired for toxic behavior.¹ It might be

time to type up medical notes at another workstation. Finding retreats like the breakroom to spend some additional time can also be therapeutic.¹

Length and Frequency - When speaking with difficult individuals Dr. Christine Porath of Georgetown recommends being “Brief, Informative, Friendly, and Firm”.⁶ This might look like maintaining a positive affect during short interactions, firmly focused on the objective details of work-related topics. Also consider intentionally taking a little longer to respond to slow the pace and intensity of interactions with these individuals.¹

Collaboration – Depending on the severity of the behavior, there may be a teammate who truly doesn’t find this individuals behavior as problematic and who is willing to act as a buffer for the rest of the team. Ideally these individuals would be recognized for and compensated for performing this additional emotional labor. Note, this is not a suitable long-term replacement for leaders being held accountable for their actions. For leaders with unpredictable behavior, team members can warn one another if there are signs of a “bad day” on the horizon.¹ Positive connections with mentors and other team members can also contribute to a sense of thriving that can buffer against the impact of workplace rudeness.⁶

Fourth – Improve Your Power

Team members often assume that their leaders have more power than they actually do. Everyone, even bosses, are still accountable to others. If choosing to hold leaders accountable for their behavior, I recommend speaking with someone specializing in employment law. This leader already has a track record of bad behavior, and what kind of retaliation are legal can vary greatly. Consider these approaches for addressing behavior directly:

Become indispensable – Power is the ability to influence others. Unique skills, knowledge, or connections can increase influence and the likelihood that concerns are heard.

Information is power – Document what’s happening as objectively as possible without treading into obsession. While possible, it is harder for leaders to deny what’s happening with a list of what happened, when, and the consequences. Keep personal copies. Where advisable or required, report incidents of harassment, bullying, and violence to the appropriate individuals.

Increase your people power – While still not a guarantee against retaliation, team members are less likely to be individually fired if they report bad behavior as a group.¹ You are often not the only individual who has been experiencing abuse. Check in with other current or past employees.

Pursue legal venues - Where behaviors violate the *Veterinarians Act*, provincial board bylaws or professional practice standards, some behaviors may also be submitted as complaints to the veterinary board. All Canadian employers have a general duty to employees to protect them from workplace risks. According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, this extends to both employees physical and psychological health.⁸ Some federally regulated workplaces and some local regulations may provide additional protections. Litigation may be most likely to be successful if harassment is also discriminatory in nature, but can still be expensive and emotionally difficult.²

References

¹ Sutton, Robert I. (2017) *The Asshole Survival Guide: How To Deal with People Who Treat You Like Dirt*. Portfolio Penguin.

² Namie, Gary. (n.d.) "Checking Legal Options". Workplace Bullying Institute. Accessed 23 March 2023 <https://workplacebullying.org/legal-options/>

³ Seligman, Martin E. P. (2006) *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind And Your Life*. Vintage.

⁴ Fowler et al. (15 Jan 2016) Survey of Occupational Hazards in Minnesota Veterinary Practices. JAVMA.

⁵ Pearson, Christine and Christine Porath. (2009) *The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility Is Damaging Your Business and What To Do About It*. Portfolio.

⁶ Porath, Christine. (2016) *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace*. Grand Central Publishing.

⁷ Pfeffer, Jeffery (2018) *Dying for a Paycheck: How Modern Management Harms Employee Health and Company Performance-and What We Can Do About It.* Harper Business.

⁸ Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (2 March 2023) CCOHS: Bullying in the Workplace. Accessed 23 March 2023.

<https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/bullying.html>