

How to Deal with Toxic People

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Leadership would be so much easier, the saying goes, if it wasn't for people. And topping off the list of difficult people to work with or lead is *toxic* people. The hard part is, as much as we might wish it was otherwise, toxic people are everywhere.

Two questions spring up almost immediately when the subject of toxic people arises.

1. How do you spot them?
2. How do you deal with them?

It's critical in leadership to think through the people aspect of what you do. I know it's easy for visionaries to think success lies in ideas, or operations people to believe that progress lies in execution, but the key to getting anything done is always people. What you accomplish in leadership is often most powerfully shaped by you allow into leadership. If you let toxic people in, you pay a staggering price.

My guess is not everyone will like the direction or language in this post. I get that. However, every day gifted leaders quit toxic cultures, toxic bosses and leave toxic workplaces. Every single day, amazing businesses, churches, causes, and not-for-profits miss their mission because someone allowed toxic leaders to sabotage the work.

And every day, good people go home discouraged and defeated because nobody had the guts to deal with the toxic people at work. If you don't think our culture suffers from toxicity (and even evil), just read the headlines or scroll your feeds for a few minutes. Yep. We do.

So, with all that in mind, here are 7 insights that have helped me immensely in figuring out how to spot and then how to deal with toxic people.

1. UNDERSTAND THAT BASICALLY THERE ARE THREE KINDS OF PEOPLE

It probably seems too simple to divide the world into three kinds of people, but try as he might to avoid it, clinical psychologist and best-selling author Henry Cloud helpfully points out in his book, [Necessary Endings](#) that there are essentially three kinds of people in life and leadership.

1. Wise People
2. Foolish People
3. Evil People

Essentially the difference between wise people and foolish people comes down to how they deal with truth.

Wise people encounter truth and *change* as a result. For example, after getting a speeding ticket, wise people learn and slow down. After being told their words hurt someone, a wise person will try

to understand why, apologize and work hard not to do it again. They're open, not defensive, they learn and grow and tend not to make the mistakes over and over again.

Foolish people encounter truth and don't change. Instead, they try to adjust the truth so they don't have to adjust to it. Confronted with a problem, a foolish person will deny, blame, minimize, generate excuses and do anything in his or her power to avoid having to deal with reality.

They don't learn and rarely grow. As Cloud's frequent collaborator [John Townsend](#) puts it, foolish people have a flat learning curve. As a result, they tend to wreak a lot of havoc and cause damage in their own lives and the lives of others.

Foolish behaviour means some broke people will always be broke, some chronic procrastinators will always be late and some people keep running into the same problems again and again. They may mean well, but they're lack of learning means they keep making things hard for themselves and others.

Finally, as hard as it is to admit, some people really are **evil**. They intend to harm you. They want to take you down. And as hard as it is to believe, they don't have your best interests at heart and want to see you fail. I found it hard to accept this early on in leadership, but I've seen it often enough times to no longer dismiss it.

There are basically three kinds of people in the world: wise people, foolish people and evil people. The sooner you accept that, the easier it becomes to make progress. So what do you do with this stark (and unpleasant) truth?

2. REALIZE THAT SOME PEOPLE WON'T CHANGE

At some point in our lives, all of us behave wisely, foolishly and with evil intent. I know I've spoken words that I intended to hurt, and when I do that, I'm acting in an evil or toxic way. And sometimes I make the same mistake over and over again, and when I do, that's foolish.

People who are generally wise sometimes do foolish things and mean things. The good news with Cloud's categories is that people do change with time and grow. Evil people may have a change of heart and start helping not hurting, and when they do that, they can even become wise. Foolish people sometimes realize how much damage they do and decide to learn and grow.

But overall, most of us would have to admit that human beings fall into one of those three categories at any moment in life: you're either generally wise, foolish or evil in your approach to life.

And that means, as much as you want to believe otherwise, and despite your coaching and encouragement, fools often remain fools and evil people remain committed to harming others. Yep. I know. It sounds so judgmental and terrible and I resisted it for a long time too— resisted it to my peril and to the peril of the people I lead, may I add.

Henry Cloud admits it's a tough pill to swallow:

“If you are a responsible and loving person, then you might assume that other people are like you—responsible and loving. They do the right thing, taking responsibility for themselves, for their mistakes, for their work. And they care about other people and how their actions affect those people...So doesn't it make sense that everyone else would be like you and really care?

Sure, if you lived on Mars. But this is planet Earth. And if you are going to succeed in life and business, you need to succeed on this planet, not Mars.” (Henry Cloud, Necessary Endings)

Just because someone *can* change doesn't mean someone *will* change. That's where your leadership and discernment come in. So what's next? You learn how to spot toxic people.

3. LEARN HOW TO SPOT TOXIC PEOPLE

I'm increasingly convinced one of a leader's key tasks is to learn how to spot toxic people and take appropriate action. In my view, both foolish people and evil people are toxic to your culture and mission. Fools pollute things not because they're trying to ruin things, but because they (for whatever reason) do tend to do it again and again.

Foolish leaders keep repeating their mistakes because they're either convinced they're right or oblivious to the fact that they're wrong, regardless of the fact that others have pointed that out. And evil people, well they meant to lie, harm and malign.

So how do you recognize the signs? A few years ago, I wrote a post outlining 6 early warning signs you're dealing with a toxic person. I'm going to add a few more to the list I didn't cover in that post. See if any resonate.

Behavior that's ultimately toxic to your organization's culture and mission include:

- Making the same mistakes over and over again, despite frequent attempts to help them and ample time to correct the problem and change.
- Self-absorption.
- Lying.
- Manipulation.
- An unwillingness to listen to feedback.
- Assigning blame.
- Refusing to accept responsibility.
- They're never wrong.
- Playing the victim.
- Frequent anger.
- Hidden agendas.
- A critical spirit about anything they didn't think of.
- Gossip or malicious talk about other people.
- Ignoring boundaries, they or other people have set.
- Passive-aggressive behavior (what happens to your face and what happens behind your back are very different).
- Pursuing their own mission that's different from the organization's mission.

The list could be much longer, but this gives you a sampling of toxic behaviors that take people and missions under.

Naturally, we all exhibit some of the behavior listed above some of the time (we're all human), but the wise realize what they did, correct course, change and grow. If you allow toxic people into leadership, you can be sure a toxic culture will follow.

4. TAKE A GOOD LOOK IN THE MIRROR

The first place to look for wisdom, foolishness, and evil in leadership is the least comfortable place to look: in the mirror. I've been in senior leadership for over two decades. As much as I don't want to admit it, it's still true: my organization will only ever be as healthy as I am.

Ditto for you. Fight it all you want, but your organization will only ever be as healthy as you are as the leader. Even if you're not the senior leader, that's true of the team you lead, the department you run, or the crew you manage. The health of the leader tends to determine the health of the team.

It's hard to have a healthy organization if you don't have a healthy leader. So when you see foolish behavior or bad intentions inside you, confess them and address them. Invite other people to give you feedback. Learn and grow. Healthy leaders produce healthy teams. Unhealthy leaders don't.

5. LIMIT FOOLS

So, what do you do with foolish people? Well, here's the problem with foolish people at work: You only have so many hours in the day and so much energy. The problem with pouring your time and energy into foolish leaders is that after your coaching and help, they're no better and you're drained. What's worse, is their repeated mistakes impact everybody around them and threaten the organization.

Does that mean you'll have no fools at work? No. First, there's an abundance of foolish people and behaviors. And second, I'm not sure that completely eliminating all fools from your life is a good idea. We should all have at least a small place in our life and leadership for building into others, even if sometimes that takes a little more grace and lot more time than we'd like.

What that does mean, though, is that because your time is limited, you should *limit* your time with fools and be really careful who you hire and recruit. The key to fools is to limit the number and limit their impact. Otherwise, the cost is simply too great. Whether they mean to do damage or not, foolish people can do a lot of damage. It's hard to build the future on people who have trouble navigating the present.

6. ELIMINATE EVIL PEOPLE

When it comes to evil people...people who want to wound, maim and undo you or your organization, there's only once option: block those attempts. Get away and stay away.

Looking back on my leadership, I realize there were seasons where—for whatever reason—people wanted to take me out or take down our mission. It hasn't happened often, but it has happened. Clear boundaries, firm decisions and consistent 'no's' that block any attempts they make to undermine the mission are critical.

When it gets that serious, I always involve other leaders I trust to make sure that we really dealing with someone who intends to harm and that the boundaries we put in place make sense. On rare occasions, those boundaries have included the police.

And while my faith tells me to love my enemies, there are some instances where a person is best prayed for from a distance, not from up close. Imagine reaching 100—or 1000 or 10,000 new people—in the next year if your mission continues. That's what people who want to harm you threaten.

Taking the mission seriously means that, as a leader, you also have to take evil seriously. It's actually that important.

7. STACK THE TOP OF YOUR ORGANIZATION WITH WISE PEOPLE

You know how to get the healthiest team and how to best move the mission forward? Stack the top of your organization with as many wise people as you can find. The top is critical (by that I mean your senior leaders, board and other key players) with as many wise leaders as possible. Look for honest, humble, growing leaders who love to learn and are open for feedback.

Teachability is a much greater ingredient in wisdom than IQ is. A humble, hungry, teachable leader will beat a smart leader any day. (Surprisingly, there are a lot of intelligent fools.)

Obviously, there's a lot of work to do based on the points already covered, and a regular vigilance that you need to maintain in keeping threats at bay, but the secret is once you do that and stack the top of your organization with wise people, a natural buffer gets created. Eventually, a multiplicity of wise leaders will help you create a healthy culture.

Here's the truth about culture.

Create a deeply healthy culture and, over time, toxic people will leave.

Why? Because a healthy culture spits out toxic people. Just like healthy bodies ward off disease, healthy cultures ward off toxic people. Here's the surprise. No one gets kicked out. When your culture is ultra-healthy, toxic people leave when they can't get traction or validation. Your long term investment and vigilance finally pay off in ways you never expected.