

Toxic Workplace Culture

Towards the end of the year is often when people start thinking about making a move to a new company. With historically low unemployment, there are lots of options out there for job seekers, it is a buyer's market for sure. In addition to looking for more compensation, advancement opportunities or a change of place, job seekers these days are paying close attention to company culture - for good reason.

Cultures are all different, but in almost all cases a great culture is one where the company's mission and values are reflected in the behaviours exhibited by employees day-to-day. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to work with hundreds of businesses, and I have seen that too often reality falls very short of public image. I even know of several examples where expectations set during the interview process were shattered almost the minute the employee started work. No matter how great the title, pay or the role, if a company's culture is toxic, you will regret taking that new job almost instantly. The problem is that by the time you find out, it's often too late.

Fortunately, it is possible to spot a toxic culture in advance and save yourself from a bad career move. Here are five signs that a prospective workplace might be problematic.

1. Reviews are poor and/or suspiciously inconsistent.

Job sites like Glassdoor and Indeed collect and publish company reviews and rank companies by culture -- but look for more than just high marks. Check for consistency in the pros and cons listed to get a feel for the culture. When you look at the cons, look for patterns -- especially related to the behaviour of the CEO and upper management. Gloss over personal complaints and watch for posts such as "*The CEO doesn't trust anyone*", "*management doesn't listen to employee feedback*", or "*anyone here that speaks up is walked to the door*." If you see those themes or comments over and over, run.

You might also see a string of consistently bad, very detailed reviews followed by several glowing shallow reviews by people who can't seem to come up with a negative and it doesn't feel like the same company. This is a sign upper management has been posting comments to try to clean things up and is a major red flag. It's one thing to have a bad culture and be oblivious to it, it's another to know it and try to paint a false picture.

2. Vision and core values are 'wall art'.

You want to work for a company with a clear mission and real values. If the company doesn't have any statement of this kind, that can be a concern. But it's a bigger concern when a company's values are nothing but wall art and sound like they are from Dilbert or Office Space. Real core values express a differentiated point of view. To test this, ask questions in your interview about values and mission.

Do people know what they are without looking them up? Does anyone mention the subject to you? Ask if any of the company's awards and recognition are based on values. Such questions can help you discover if you're dealing with a company that says one thing and does another.

3. Feedback is not encouraged or even discouraged.

Great companies regularly ask their employees for feedback - *and act on it* to make the company better. Look for how feedback is discussed and explicitly ask about it in your interviews. What are some examples of things

the company has changed based on feedback? What do you think would happen if you e-mailed the CEO with a suggestion?

Watching how interviewers respond to these questions in the first few seconds will give you the answer you need and maybe more important than what they actually say. If they struggle to reply, beware.

4. Transparency and trust are lacking.

More and more information is public these days, and companies that share their ups and downs transparently are valued for getting their employees involved in understanding the goals and the mechanics of the business. Today, there is a notable shift to open-book management among companies with great cultures. Conversely, companies that keep everything under wraps are typically the ones where unpleasant surprises eventually emerge.

A few years back, a company in our industry had several press releases about all its hiring plans and spinning a very positive story to the community and employees about growth; at the same time, it was conducting two rounds of layoffs. Employees quickly lost trust and defected.

Companies and managers that are tight-lipped about metrics and financials also tend to have the mentality that "*it's our money, not yours.*" Wouldn't you rather work at a company designed to benefit everyone?

5. Family has a heavy hand in business.

Ideally, there should be checks and balances in any business, and family enterprises can lack these. So, be careful. When a husband/wife team are at the top or an extended family is forming the leadership team, it can be hard for employees to debate or challenge decisions. Imagine trying to take a complaint about your boss to his wife, the CEO.

In many cases, if you are not part of the family, opportunities for advancement are limited. Since it's possible to go to work for a family business unknowingly, do your research before you join and ask questions about this dynamic from people outside the inner circle.

Working at a company with a toxic culture can make it miserable to get out of bed every day and go to work -- and life is far too short for that. So, take some time to do your homework on company culture *before accepting that offer.*