

20 Signs of a Toxic Church Culture

The following 20 signs are based on my observations regarding organizational dysfunction associated with a toxic (poisonous) culture in any organization.

In this article, the word “culture” refers to the prevailing attitude, behavior, and unspoken feeling and or rules that motivate and determine how people respond, react and act in the context of their work.

The following toxic traits fit either a “for profit” or “nonprofit” organization (including nonprofits like a hospital, school or church).

1. The leader is a demanding micromanager.

When the leader of an organization is constantly hovering over staff and other team leaders—not only telling them what to do but exactly how to do it (although this is necessary temporarily when a new person is learning a new job until they prove their competency), it discourages the work environment because the leader’s leadership style demonstrates a lack of trust towards those under him or her.

2. The leader is emotionally abusive and demeaning.

A work environment is absolutely horrible when the boss is constantly putting the staff and other leaders down—never praising them and only speaking to them when he wants to correct them.

3. The leader doesn’t understand or desire to delegate tasks to others.

Often, micromanagers have a hard time delegating work to others because they have a “perfectionist” spirit and think

they are the only ones who can get a job done the correct way. Even when they delegate, they don't trust those they delegate to and are constantly on top of them, thus not giving them room to breathe or grow.

4. The leader and the governing board are always arguing.

I have spoken to numerous pastors or CEOs who say they dread board meetings because of philosophical differences. The result is, there is constant bickering and or resistance which then hurts the execution of the vision, which spills over to the rest of the organization—creating a toxic environment.

5. There is low morale among the staff, employees and participants.

When the staff and team leaders of an organization have low morale, it negatively affects the rest of the participants since it is like a virus that spreads to all.

6. The vision and mission are always changing based on the mood of the leader.

Any church or organization that has a new vision and mission every year has a confused leadership team. Since vision determines the organization's responsibility and mission determines its authority, when these two are constantly changing, nobody understands what is expected; thus, creating confusion, lack of trust towards the leader and resulting in a toxic culture.

7. A culture of rampant gossip is tolerated.

When an organization cannot keep confidentiality among the leaders and staff, and when backstabbing and gossip is tolerated, the organization is poisonous and unfit to work in until there is a drastic shift away from this behavior.

8. There is a lack of transparency regarding financial decisions.

When any organization—including a church—doesn't at least annually divulge financial expenditures, values and priorities, it shows a lack of accountability and possible mismanagement. When only the lead pastor and or CEO of an organization (not talking about a "for profit" mom and pop restaurant or small business) know the true financial state and or has access to the monies, it can be an ethical disaster waiting to happen. I've known of some cases where not even the trustees of the organization knew what was going on financially.

9. There is an ambiguous accountability structure.

When nobody on staff or in a ministry or job position understands who to report to, it creates a toxic, confusing environment without true accountability.

10. There is a lot of transition in the staff and middle management.

When a "season" of transition becomes years of staff transition, it becomes part of the culture and demonstrates some level of toxicity that chases people away from the work environment. People in healthy work environments usually enjoy going to work (unless they are lazy and unmotivated) and make a long-term commitment to serve.

11. There is no "buy in."

The key to the success of all organizations is when the staff and participants go from being "employees" to "proprietors;" hence, only when the key players in an organization take ownership and have the attitude of a shareholder does the organization gain momentum.

An organization populated only with mere "employees" is a toxic organization that marginalizes its ability to execute its vision and mission.

12. There is an entitlement mentality among the leaders and staff.

When the leadership and staff of an organization have a “what’s in it for me” mentality—the organization is in big trouble.

This entitlement mentality spreads, then instead of a culture of servant leadership you have a culture of obtaining a title in the organization primarily, so you can enjoy the fringe benefits.

13. There is much activity without measurable goals and profitability.

When an organization has much activity without measurable goals, then it’s difficult to define success and failure. In a church like this, nobody has to exercise their faith in God to accomplish their mission and assignment. Consequently, it is an organization that is on autopilot or like an aimless ship at sea in the night. This causes much frustration and lethargy among the staff, and eventually creates a toxic environment.

14. There is blame-shifting and a lack of taking responsibility.

In any organization that doesn’t have clear lines of communication, leadership structure and accountability, it is easy to have a culture of blame-shifting. Since blame-shifting generates animosity among the staff (and irresponsibility from the ones blaming others) you have a toxic culture that needs to be cleaned up systemically.

15. The participants do the minimum amount of work required.

I have observed in many organizations leaders and staff who just do the minimum work required to keep their position. They clock in and clock out and don’t care to do above and beyond the general job description. This generates a very bad

environment if it is not dealt with and results in resentment from other staff members carrying most of the weight.

16. There is a dearth of volunteers.

When it is hard for a nonprofit to garner volunteers, it may demonstrate that there is a disconnect with the vision, the morale is low or the people are not committed to the mission. This lack of motivation creates an apathy, that is toxic for the culture of the entity.

17. The boss regularly ignores the protocols.

Every efficient organization needs to have protocols in place related to communication, accountability, layers of leadership and responsibility so that participants know the when, where and who to report to. When the top leader continually violates these processes put in place he or she acts like they are above the law and become bad role models for other leaders who will also replicate their disregard for protocols and order.

18. The boss regularly bypasses the leadership structure set up.

When the top leader allows people to report directly to him or her—(thus bypassing the delegated leadership structure) it creates confusion, favoritism and disrespect towards those bypassed.

The result is resentment among those bypassed, a sense of entitlement and favoritism among those with direct access to the boss, resulting in a toxic environment that can only be fixed if the senior leader leads the way by ceasing to violate the hierarchical leadership structure.

19. Creativity and innovation are discouraged.

Healthy organizations encourage creative thinking, innovation, a certain level of risk-taking and cutting-edge methodologies to support and advance the mission.

When an organization is more concerned with protecting the status quo, the result is groupthink—a lack of creativity and a uniformity lacking a healthy dose of critical thinking, which eventually leads to the dulling and ineffectiveness of the organization.

20. There is no long-term planning.

The old popular adage “when you fail to plan, you plan to fail” is a proven truism. An organization constantly given to last-minute events (barring an unexpected crisis or emergency) or a lack of long-term planning (every organization should at least execute an annual planning meeting for future events directed towards advancing the assignment) is an organization without a spirit of excellence or proper focus.

The result will be many opportunities to maximize the gifts, talents and resources of the organization will be missed, which will frustrate many and hurt the morale of many.