

The Economist

Bartleby

Charity begins at work

Toxic workplaces can be found in every sector

Business and finance

Jun 2nd 2019

THE REPORT was devastating. The working environment at the organisation was described as “toxic”, there was widespread bullying of staff, a bunker mentality among senior management and 39% of employees developed mental or physical health issues as a result of their work. An investment bank or a technology firm in Silicon Valley? No. This was Amnesty International, a human-rights charity. Five managers have just left the organisation following the report’s findings.

Workplaces create their own hierarchies regardless of whether the aim of the operation is to help people or make money. Two female partners at KPMG, an accountancy group, recently left out of concern at the behaviour of a male colleague. Coming from a family of teachers, Bartleby can attest that school staff rooms are beset by bitter rivalries. Universities are famous for their internecine disputes, as captured in the adage that “academic politics are so vicious precisely because the stakes are so small.”

At Amnesty, the problem was not with staff motivation. The report, by the KonTerra group, a consultancy, makes clear that many employees regarded their job as a “vocation or life cause” that provided them with “a compelling sense of purpose and meaning”. But that commitment proved to be a double-edged sword.

First, in the eyes of workers, managers believed the importance of the NGO’s work was so great that they did not need to listen to staff concerns. Employees, the higher-ups seemed to conclude, “should be grateful for being able to work at Amnesty”. Second, workers found it difficult to set healthy boundaries on their hours (or their tolerance of a toxic climate) owing to a deeply held belief in their mission.

One cause of stress was a process called the Global Transition Programme (GTP) which moved the staff away from headquarters and closer to the abuses they covered. Workers felt that their views about these transfers were not seriously considered and that the implementation of the programme was rushed. As a result, employees found their work patterns disrupted, even as some moved to high-risk locations. Concerns came to a head when Gaëtan Mootoo, a long-term employee, committed suicide, leaving a note blaming work pressures. Another staff member committed suicide shortly afterwards, although inquiries found no evidence that the death was work-related. The tragic incidents led to the commissioning of the report.

So what went wrong? On the surface, Amnesty seemed to offer services to help employees cope with stress. Staff were eligible for five counselling sessions, and an external reporting service for whistle-blowing had been created. Programmes were developed to train leaders and to help staff support their colleagues. But these efforts were described as “ad hoc, reactive and piecemeal”. In a survey 85% of employees said they had not been given enough guidance to support the well-being of their colleagues.

The problem clearly came from the top. If senior management is not committed to a caring atmosphere, no amount of discussion groups or special programmes will make things better. A certain amount of stress at work is inevitable. Most organisations are hierarchical. Deadlines are a part of life, as is uncertainty over whether individual projects are going to succeed. But workers who are stressed and fearful are unlikely to stay in their jobs or be productive in the long run.

Many managers derive a lot of their status from their oversight role. That is, in part, why organisations create such roles: they can reward high-achieving employees with a title, as well as with extra money. But power is seductive. Peter Cappelli, a scholar of human resources at the Wharton School in Philadelphia, says that toxicity arises when “the boss acts like a dictator and actively punishes people who articulate different views or express disagreement.”

As Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School explained in her book, “The Fearless Organisation”, the ideal is to create an atmosphere of “psychological safety” where workers can speak their minds. Managers need to learn the art of “respectful inquiry”, where they ask employees questions and listen intently to the answers. The bosses at Amnesty may have listened to the political dissidents whose causes they were championing. But they clearly weren’t listening to their staff.