

# How to Change a Toxic Culture



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Photo: Annie Spratt

*By Tricia Emerson*

Culture is composed of the unspoken rules that drive employee decisions. MIT Professor Edgar Schein defines it as repeated behavior. Lately, we're seeing an increased number

of companies whose unspoken rules and repeated behaviors create toxic work environments.

But how do you change a toxic company culture? Culture is deeply entrenched, and changing it is like shifting the course of a river. If we want to truly change the river of culture, we need dynamite and dams — drastic measures reserved for an organization in existential crisis.

**Dynamite.** These are strategies intended to disrupt — to so dramatically change the geography that the previous terrain is obliterated and unrecognizable.

1. **Focus attention.** Humans change only when the current system no longer works for us. We must convey that the current system is unacceptable and over, then keep this message in the spotlight. For example:

- Terminate people who embody the toxic behavior — no excuses. Even if they are top performers.
- Change symbols that represent the old culture. Examine work spaces, pay scales, meeting structures, social rituals, and brand names. Such artifacts can trigger old habits. Rid the organization of them and replace them with fresh symbols that signal a new day.

2. **Involve a critical mass of the organization.** You need enough people to create momentum. Put them in a room at the same time. You want them to hear the same message and, ideally, work together to design new ways of working. You can even do this with hundreds of people at once — it's incredibly powerful. When they leave, they will have a shared vision of what has to happen.

3. **Move swiftly.** Research shows that you must show progress within 90 days. Otherwise, people revert to their old habits. We encourage our clients to post their 90-day plan on their walls, and to update it with new information — successes and setbacks. This creates a sense of progress and unifies the organization around a shared experience.

**Dams.** These strategies ensure that the river moves exactly as intended. This is the infrastructure that embeds behavior into the normal flow of day-to-day operations.

**4. Clearly define which behaviors must change and what is expected.** Glittering generalities won't cut it. For example, healthy people usually agree that we need to "be inclusive" and "operate with integrity." The question is, what does that look like? What, specifically, do I need to do differently on Monday than I did on Friday? Simple, tactical behaviors, defined in small steps, move an organization forward.

**5. Get your execs on message.** Leaders must be able to describe what you are doing consistently and passionately, using their own stories, without relying on PowerPoint or email. When all of your execs are aligned and consistent, your employees know unequivocally that the direction is true. The easiest way to do this is to work with your executives to develop a message frame.

The message should answer four questions: What problem are you trying to solve? What is the solution to it? What approach are you using to implement that solution? And finally, what do you expect the result to be? Choose one word that represents the answer to each of the four questions. Why? Because it's easy to remember four words.

**6. Create the infrastructure to sustain the new behavior.** You need people to monitor your progress and follow up when things go off course. Build training on new behaviors for new employees. Align performance management with your new values. Infrastructure is usually the easiest part of the change; the key is to establish owners and deadlines.

It takes courage and commitment to disrupt a toxic culture. It's best done by moving swiftly with a clearly defined course and employee involvement. As employees succeed in practicing these new rules and behaviors, your culture will become a self-reinforcing system.

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