

Board Volunteers

10 Signs

You Might be Leading a Toxic Organization

As a Board Volunteer, you have many responsibilities to the agency you are leading.

One factor frequently overlooked is your role in culture and organizational effectiveness. This is often left to the Executive or CEO. When the leader creates a positive, functional environment, there usually isn't a need for the Board to give it any attention.

Problems arise when the Exec or CEO has not created a positive culture and dysfunction begins to take over.





“Corporate culture matters.

*How management chooses to
treat it’s people impacts everything
for better or for worse.”*

~ Simon Sinek

As a volunteer, it can be difficult to know when things are "off."

The Executive Director or CEO may be unaware of the toxic environment they have created. Or, if they are aware, they certainly are not going to tell the Board of Directors about it.

That's why it's important to understand what to look for. As you read this list, note which indicators sound familiar.



10 Signs You are Leading a Toxic Organization

#1) Poor Staff Retention

Staff are leaving. A lot. They may say it's for one reason or another, but we all know that staff do not leave jobs, they leave managers.

It's also a bad sign if there are constant layoffs or firings. This indicates the lack of a strategic plan or vision.

#2) Morale is Low

There is a lack of motivation. Staff are "punching the clock".

This is especially disappointing in the nonprofit sector. Staff are usually drawn to an organization's mission or cause. When there is poor leadership or a toxic environment, even the most passionate employee becomes dispirited.

Additionally, while not the cause, low morale is often exasperated by years with no staff raises.

#3) Poor Communication

There are constant changes in communication, or it's unnecessarily vague. Staff are confused.

Often leaders will "talk out of both sides of their mouths". For example, in one breath they tell you how great everything is, and in the next one they tell you how they need you to raise more money because of the desperate state of the agency.

#4) Cliques, Exclusions, and Gossipy Behavior

Does it seem like there's an "in" group and an "out" group?

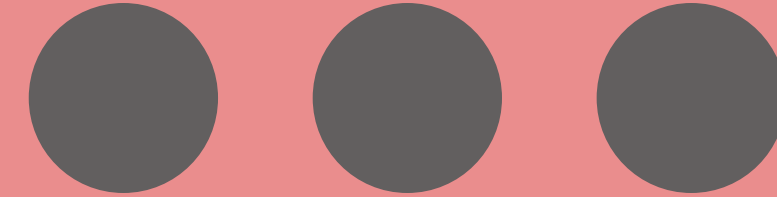
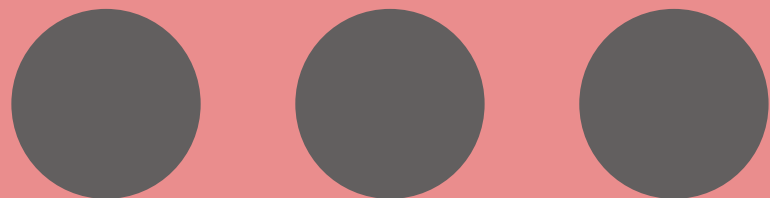
Is there emphasis on who is considered important in the organization vs. who is not?

Are staff - any staff - talked about in a negative and unprofessional way?

Do private conversations become known by everyone?

#5) Supervisors are Ill Prepared to Do Their Job

Any boss who uses tactics such as intimidation, humiliation, playing favorites, false promises, micromanaging, not communicating, unsupportive, or any of the many other outdated and authoritarian methods, should not be allowed to lead people.



#6) There is No Work-Life Balance

Sometimes staff have to put in long hours, including evenings and weekends. This is common in the nonprofit sector. Especially when delivering programs or events.

When this is the constant, normal expectation, it's unhealthy for the employees and for the organization.

#9) Staff are "Kept In Their Place"

As a volunteer you may have limited contact with anyone other than the leader(s)

Interactions between Volunteers and Staff are controlled or non-existent.

Staff have very little authority.

#10) The Organization Lacks Mission, Vision, and Values

This is not to say that these statements aren't written down somewhere. This means that they are absent from decision making, strategic discussions, and staffing practices.

These three elements should drive the work of the organization and should be present at every meeting and in every key discussion. They need to be more than words on a wall. They need to carry the organization forward and serve as the compass for the work you do.

If any of this resonates with you, I suggest you share these "10 Signs" with your fellow Board Members. Ask if anyone else sees reason to be concerned.

If so, it is your duty to take action. You owe it to the organization you are serving.

The community and your constituents deserve the best possible version of your agency. Help make sure they are getting it.

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