

Fixing Toxic Work Culture at Schools

By: Francisco L

Staff will always be the backbone of the school system. Without quality teachers, education quality is not realistic. It is painful to see complaints about toxic environments are more and more common. Why is the backbone of our education system feeling they are in pain and a hostile situation?

Toxicity at work are represented differently because there are different causes, but they all have the same consequences:

- Lost of Staff motivation
- Low performance
- Increased turn over rates
- High burnout levels
- Increase in risk behaviors
- And more

“I love my students but I don’t feel comfortable with the school environment, and that affects my motivation and mental health”

That is a typical case of a teacher who enjoys teaching. However, because of the culture, there is a lack of motivation that can result in the teacher leaving. As leaders, you need to provide safe environments for staff and students. You need to make sure that your teachers feel comfortable, that they are being heard, and taken seriously when comments or complaints arise.

There are a variety of causes for toxic culture, some of them come from the top and others from the very bottom. What we know is that the consequences listed above, are caused by all of them. Here is a list of reasons:

- Wrong leadership (A lot of micromanagement issues, nepotism, favoritism, etc...)
- Communication issues: They occur when there is not a correct communication strategy in place.
- Ineffective recruitment processes (Lack of diversity, background checks, wrong job descriptions)
- Lack of clear policies and rules

- Lack of professional training (Harassment prevention, DEI training)

As we can see, most of the causes can come directly from bad management or leadership experience. At the same time, it means you can start fixing culture from within. By having prepared and empathetic leaders, you ensure there will be a good process full of equity and justice for all.

Following, we want to share a list of activities your school can do to improve the culture and improve the staff experience at the workplace.

- Implement professional training on workplace etiquette
- Build recurrent activities where staff can socialize and know more about each other
- Execute clear policies against unacceptable behaviors at work, and correct the infractors
- Develop a communication strategy that empowers, and give a voice to staff to express
- Recognize diversity and celebrate differences between staff
- Share recurrent surveys on how the staff is feeling and asking for feedback if any. The act on the feedback.
- Apply a “recognition” system. One where staff can compliment each other, and celebrate each other’s wins.