

# Preventing Toxic Workplaces

The role of values,  
training, and leadership  
in promoting a positive  
workplace culture



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## Executive Summary

Toxic workplaces don't just result in negative outcomes for employees - they impact organizations' bottom line. The Society for Human Resource Management recently found that nearly 1 in 5 American workers have left a job in the past five years due to bad company culture, resulting in an estimated \$223 billion lost for companies over that [time](#).<sup>1</sup>

To gain greater insight into toxic workplaces, HR.com's HR Research Institute partnered with EVERFI, a leader in digital education on critical workplace culture issues, to conduct a survey to examine toxicity in the workplace. The main objectives of the survey were to:

- identify the key factors that impact workplace toxicity,
- assess the impact of leadership practices on building healthier cultures, and
- gather insights on effective organizational practices and their impact in creating positive cultures.

### Below is a summary of the survey's key findings

**Key Finding One:** *Negative stress is common in the workplace, along with high rates of toxic and negative cultures.*

- Only about half (48%) of respondents agree that their organization is "positive and non-toxic." About 4 in 10 (39%) disagree.
- 54% of respondents agree that negative stress is prevalent in their workplaces. Additionally:
  - ▶ Just 27% agree that their organization is good at helping people cope with negative stress.
  - ▶ Only 22% agree that their organization is good at preventing negative stress.

### About this Survey

The survey was conducted online from June 11 to August 12, 2019, among professionals invited to take the survey through HR.com's opt-in contact list. Overall, 548 individuals completed the survey, comprised primarily of human resources practitioners. The survey was conducted by the HR Research Institute in collaboration with EVERFI, a leader in digital education on critical workplace culture issues.

Throughout the following report, the term "agree" is used to reflect the combined responses for "agree and strongly agree," and "disagree" is used to indicate the combined responses for "disagree" and "strongly disagree." References to "positive cultures" refer to respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Overall, my organization's culture is positive and non-toxic." "Negative cultures" refer to respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

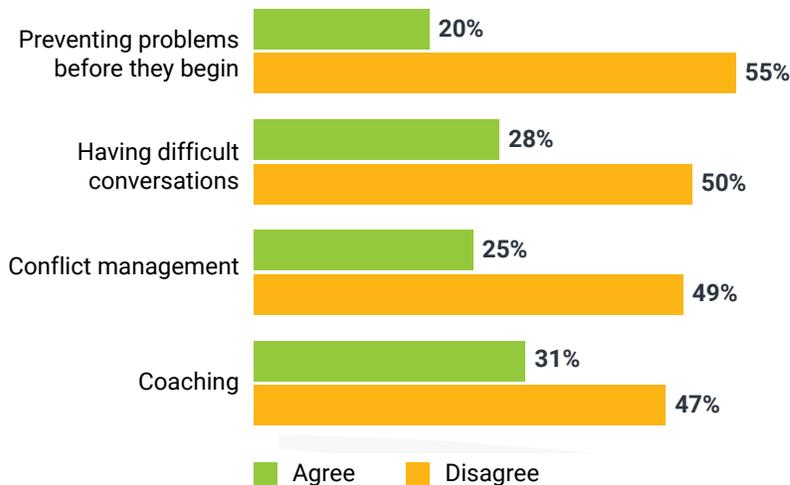
<sup>1</sup> SHRM Reports Toxic Workplace Cultures Cost Billions. (25, September 2019). Retrieved from SHRM: <https://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/press-room/press-releases/Pages/SHRM-Reports-Toxic-Workplace-Cultures-Cost-Billions.aspx>

**Key Finding Two:** *Organizational leaders are not proactive in building a positive culture. They, along with those at the management level, may lack vital skills that could help.*

- Only 38% of respondents agree that leaders in their organization take proactive steps to create a positive workplace culture.
- Two-thirds (66%) of respondents agree that managers will listen to employee concerns. However, fewer (52%) agree that managers will ask how they can help employees when they have concerns, and even fewer (43%) agree that managers take appropriate action to address employee concerns.
- More respondents disagree than agree that their leaders are good at:
  - ▶ Preventing problems before they begin (55% disagree vs. 20% agree)
  - ▶ Having difficult conversations (50% disagree vs. 28% agree)
  - ▶ Conflict management (49% disagree vs. 25% agree)
  - ▶ Coaching (47% disagree vs. 31% agree)



**More disagree than agree that their leaders tend to be good at:**



**Survey Statement:** Our leaders tend to be good at:

**Key Finding Three:** *Many organizations lack a comprehensive approach to mitigating toxicity and ensuring a positive work environment.*

- More than a quarter (28%) of respondents say their organization doesn't address workplace toxicity issues, and 23% say their organization will not increase their emphasis on addressing toxicity issues in the coming years.
- Many organizations aren't providing training on bullying (39%), discrimination (28%), or harassment issues (22%). Fully 1 in 5 (20%) do not provide training in any of these three areas.

**Key Finding Four:** *Respondents from organizations that include culture-building topics in their trainings are more likely to say that their workplace is positive and non-toxic. Trainings that include culture building are also viewed as more effective than compliance-only trainings.*

- Organizations with positive workplaces utilize culture-building trainings more than organizations with negative workplaces, and these trainings are viewed as more effective than ones solely focused on compliance, regardless of training topic (e.g., harassment, bullying, or discrimination).

**Only about half or fewer agree that they deliver effective training in:**

Training Type	Workplace viewed as positive		Training viewed as effective	
	Culture-building	Compliance only	Culture-building	Compliance only
Harassment	58%	45%	67%	29%
Bullying	61%	49%	57%	27%
Discrimination	60%	43%	65%	29%

- There is a significant difference in the perceived effectiveness of trainings that include culture-building components (such as civility, respect, and bystander intervention) and those that only focus on compliance topics (such as what behavior is prohibited under law and the process for reporting inappropriate behavior). For example, among organizations that use culture-building components in their harassment training, 67% view that training as effective. In contrast, among organizations that take a compliance-only approach to harassment training, only 29% believe that training is effective.
- Despite this, among organizations that provide training, the most common areas covered today are compliance-focused.
- There is a lot of room to improve the effectiveness of training overall. Only about half or fewer respondents from organizations who offer training agree that their programs are effective in preparing employees to prevent and react to:
  - ▶ Harassing behaviors: 53%
  - ▶ Discriminatory behaviors: 53%
  - ▶ Bullying behaviors: 47%



- Furthermore, only 37% of all respondents say their organization plans to offer more training on creating a positive corporate culture in the coming years, including just 28% of those from organizations with negative cultures.

**Key Finding Five:** *Organizational values are vital to building positive workplaces.*

- Among factors related to all employees in an organization, the strongest correlations to a positive workplace culture are perceiving colleagues as *living* core organization values and *supporting* core organizational values.
- Among factors related to leaders, the factor most correlated to a positive workplace is perceiving that leaders uphold the stated values of the organization.
- The vast majority (84%) of respondents who report a positive workplace culture agree that behaviors and procedures of their organizations tend to be aligned with core values, while just 5% disagree.
- For respondents who report a negative culture, perceptions of alignment with core values are nearly the reverse of those who report a positive culture. Three-quarters (75%) disagree that behaviors and procedures of their organization tend to be aligned with core values, while only 10% agree.



## Detailed Analysis of Key Findings

### Key Finding One: Negative stress is common in the workplace, along with high rates of toxic and negative cultures.

More than half of respondents (54%) agree that negative stress is prevalent in their workplaces. Furthermore, only 27% agree that their organization is good at helping people cope with negative stress, and even fewer (22%) agree that their organization is good at preventing negative stress.

**Stress:** In the survey, respondents were given the following definition of “stress”: “For the purposes of this survey, the word “stress” refers to negative emotional stress. Emotional stress can be positive or negative. Positive stress tends to be short-term and is perceived as being within our coping abilities. Negative stress, however, tends to cause anxiety and is perceived to be outside of our coping abilities. Negative stress is often longer term in nature.”

**Toxic workplace:** In the survey, respondents were given the following definition of “toxic workplace”: “For the purpose of this survey, we define a toxic workplace as one characterized by productivity-hindering interpersonal conflicts that tend to be characterized by distrust, bullying, resentment, unethical behaviors, manipulation, mean-spiritedness, or even harassment or discrimination.”

Responses to other questions also show evidence of high rates of toxicity. Many respondents agree that there is a sense of distrust between leadership and employees at their organization (52%), a lot of toxic behavior (46%), a pervasive air of resentment (42%), and a sense of distrust between coworkers (42%). Many also agree that people are often bullied (29%), discriminated against (20%), or harassed (19%).



Respondents also paint a picture of organizations in which many do not feel safe reporting incidents — another indication of toxic workplaces. For example, many respondents disagree that employees feel safe reporting incidents when they have been bullied (32%); witnessed bullying (30%); witnessed harassment (29%); witnessed discrimination (29%); been discriminated against (28%); and been harassed (27%).

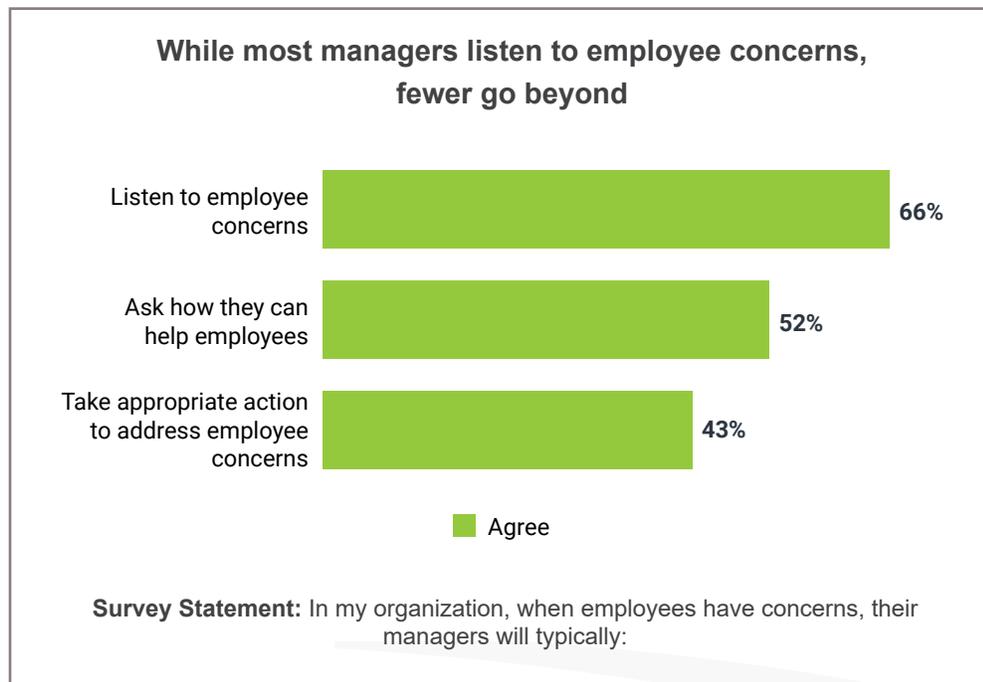
Considering that organizations struggle with all of the above behaviors in the workplace, it is perhaps unsurprising that many respondents also say that their organization struggles with toxicity. Overall, about 4 in 10 (39%) respondents disagree that their organization is “positive and non-toxic,” while only about half (48%) agree (the remaining 13% of respondents were neutral on the question). In other words, the majority of respondents say their organizations are toxic, or at best, neutral.



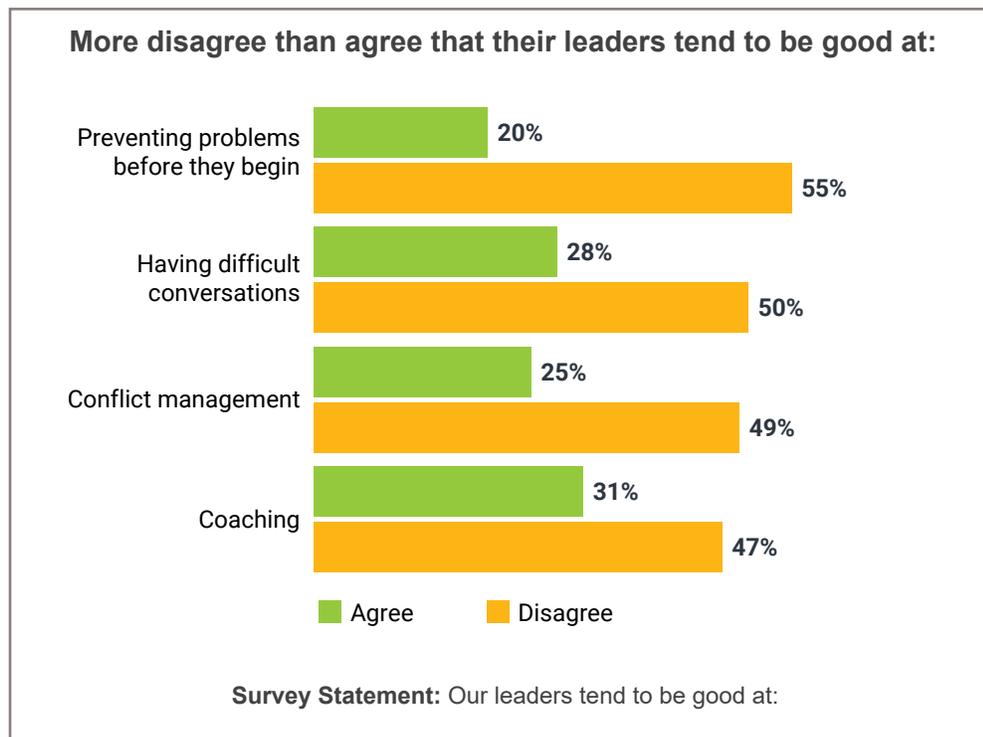
**Key Finding Two: Organizational leaders are not proactive in building a positive culture. They, along with those at the management level, may lack vital skills that could help.**

The survey also asks a series of questions about organizational leadership, and responses indicate that leadership has a long way to go to help facilitate positive workplace cultures. Only 50% of respondents agree that leaders in their organization tend to uphold the stated values of their organization, and many (44%) also agree that their leaders become resentful when others disagree with them. Furthermore, only 38% agree that leadership takes proactive steps to create a healthy workplace.

Additionally, management is reported to lack other qualities necessary to build or maintain a positive culture in the workplace. Whereas two-thirds (66%) of respondents agree that managers will listen to employee concerns, fewer (52%) agree that managers will ask how they can help employees when they have concerns, and even fewer (43%) agree that managers take appropriate action to address employee concerns.



Respondents also paint a picture of organizational leadership that includes critical skill gaps in areas that, if improved, could contribute to more positive cultures at work. More respondents disagree than agree that their leaders are good at: preventing problems before they begin (55% disagree vs. 20% agree), having difficult conversations (50% disagree vs. 28% agree), conflict management (49% disagree vs. 25% agree), and coaching (47% disagree vs. 31% agree).



In summary, although most managers do listen to the concerns of their employees, many do not seem equipped to go beyond listening to take actions that can create a more positive impact on their employees. Furthermore, leaders' current behavior—from failing to uphold organizational values to becoming resentful when others disagree with them—may be actively undermining workplace culture.



**Key Finding Three: Many organizations lack a comprehensive approach to mitigating toxicity and ensuring a positive work environment.**

Despite the prevalence of toxic workplaces, large shares of respondents indicate that their organization is not taking steps to make changes. When asked what their organization is doing to address workplace toxicity issues, more than 1 in 4 (28%) say their organization doesn't address workplace toxicity issues. And, when asked what they will do in the coming years to address workplace toxicity, 23% of respondents say they will not increase their emphasis on it. Furthermore, 32% say they do not allocate funding to promote a healthy workplace.

Lack of action is especially pronounced among organizations with negative cultures. More than half of respondents from these organizations (53%) say they do not address toxicity issues, 40% say they will not increase their emphasis on addressing toxicity in the coming years, and 48% say they do not allocate funding to promote a healthy workplace. Among organizations with positive cultures, 8% of respondents say they do not address toxicity issues, 11% say they will not increase their emphasis on addressing toxicity in the coming years, and 19% say they do not allocate funding to promote a healthy workplace.

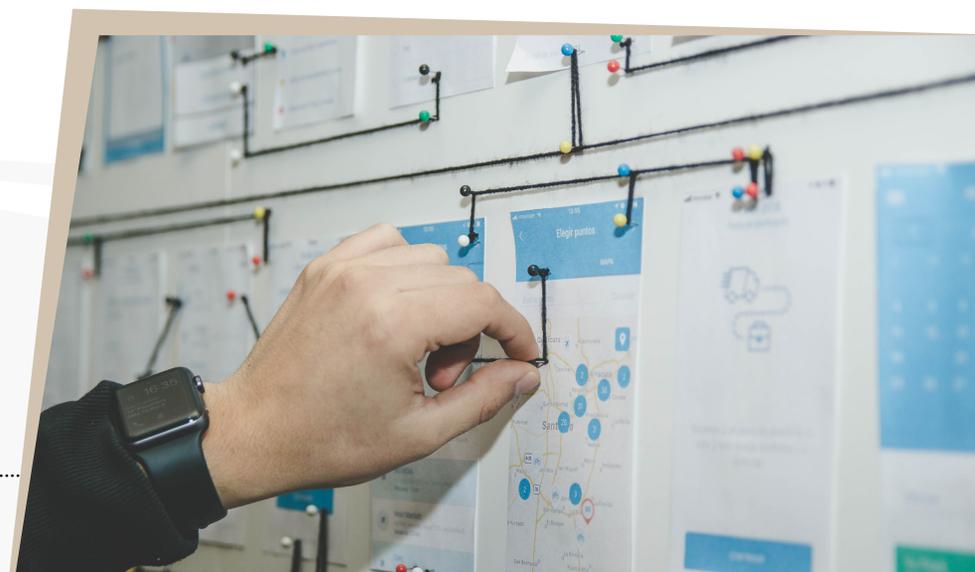


*\*Note: The graph above refers to responses from three survey questions: "How does your organization address workplace toxicity issues?"; "How will your organization address workplace toxicity issues in the coming years?"; and "How does your organization allocate funds to promote a healthy workplace culture?"*

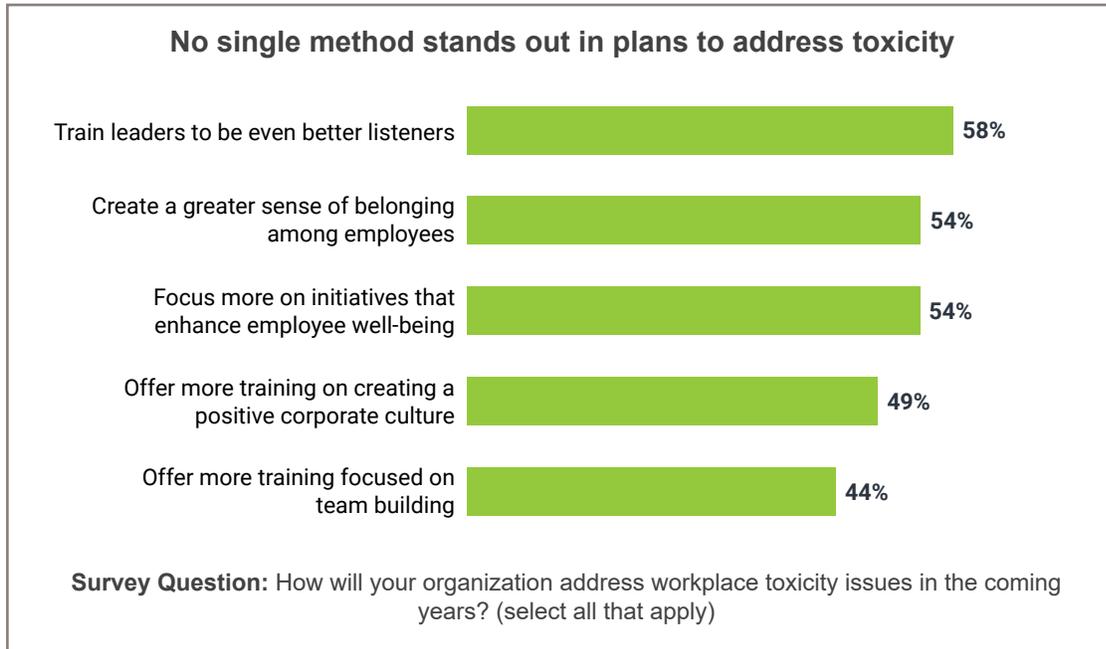
Among organizations that are addressing workplace toxicity issues, the most common method is to define and communicate corporate culture and values, which is done by 60% of these organizations. Respondents from organizations that use this method also indicate that their workplace cultures are more positive than those who do not. About 7 in 10 (69%) respondents who say their organization uses this method also agree that their organization’s culture is positive, compared to just 51% of respondents who say their organization does not use this method.



*\*Note:* Data excludes respondents who selected: “None of these; my organization does not address workplace toxicity.” There were other answer options included in the question that are not shown here.



Among respondents from organizations that plan to address workplace toxicity issues in the coming years, more than half say they will train leaders to be better listeners (58%), focus more on initiatives that can enhance employee well-being (54%), or create a greater sense of belonging among employees (54%). About half (49%) say they will offer more training on creating a positive corporate culture.



\*Note: Data excludes respondents who selected: “We will not increase our emphasis on addressing workplace toxicity.”

Many respondents also say their organizations do not provide training related to harassment, bullying, and discrimination issues. About 4 in 10 (39%) say their organization does not provide training in regard to bullying issues, 28% say their organization does not provide training in regard to discrimination issues, and 22% say their organization does not provide training in regard to harassment issues. Overall, there is a lot of overlap in the organizations that do not provide training, as fully 1 in 5 (20%) do not provide training in any of the three areas.

**Key Finding Four: Respondents from organizations that include culture-building topics in their trainings are more likely to say that their workplace is positive and non-toxic. Trainings that include culture building are also viewed as more effective than compliance-only trainings.**

Among those organizations that provide training, their training content is more focused on compliance (such as behavior prohibited under law) than on building an overall positive culture (such as demonstrating respect and civility or using bystander intervention techniques). Among organizations that provide training in harassment, bullying, or discrimination, the most common topics covered are about specific behavior prohibited under law and the process for reporting each behavior.

Which of the following areas are included in your organization’s training about...			
	...harassment issues (n=430)	...discrimination issues (n=397)	...bullying issues (n=336)
What behavior is prohibited under laws	75%	78%	72%
The process for reporting behavior	74%	72%	69%
Specific behaviors constituting...	67%	71%	58%
Issues such as civility and respect	56%	61%	63%
The steps that will be taken against those who engage in behaviors	58%	51%	54%
Bystander intervention techniques	37%	39%	40%
Other	5%	3%	5%



Compliance



Culture-Building

*\*Note: Data excludes respondents who said they do not provide training in each issue*

The data show that there is a lot of room to improve the effectiveness of training, which is important considering the frequency of harassment, bullying, and discrimination reported by respondents. Among respondents who say their organization provides training, only about half agree that the training is effective in preparing employees to prevent and react to harassing behaviors (53%), discriminatory behaviors (53%), and bullying behaviors (47%).

*Culture-Building and Effective Training*

However, respondents from organizations that include culture-building topics in their trainings are much more likely than those that only include compliance to say that their trainings are effective. For training related to harassment issues, 67% of respondents from organizations that also include culture-building agree that their training is effective, compared to just 29% that only cover compliance. For training about bullying issues, 57% of respondents from organizations that include culture-building agree that their training is effective, compared to just 27% that only cover compliance. And, for training about discrimination issues, 65% of respondents from organizations that include culture-building agree that their training is effective, compared to just 29% that only cover compliance.



*Culture-Building and Positive Workplaces*

Furthermore, respondents from these culture-building organizations are also more likely to say that their workplace is positive and non-toxic. For training about harassment issues, 58% of respondents whose training includes culture-building agree that their workplace is positive, compared to 45% of those whose training only covers compliance. For training about bullying issues, 61% of respondents from organizations that include culture-building agree that their workplace is positive, compared to 49% that only cover compliance. And, for training about discrimination issues, 60% of those that include culture-building agree that their workplace is positive, compared to 43% that only cover compliance.

Despite this relationship between including culture-building topics in trainings with more effective trainings and positive workplaces, only 37% of all respondents say their organization plans to offer more training on creating a positive corporate culture in the coming years. Those from organizations with negative cultures (28%) are especially unlikely to say their organization plans to offer this training.



**Key Finding Five: Organizational values are vital to building positive workplaces.**

When looking at the factors that have the strongest connection with a positive workplace environment, it is clear that organizational values are vital. Among all employees in an organization, the strongest correlations<sup>2</sup> to a positive workplace are “lives core organizational values” and “supports core organizational values.” That is, workplaces where respondents report that employees “live core organizational values” and “support core organizational values” also tend to be described as having a positive workplace environment.

As seen in the table below, employees living core values has the strongest relationship to positive workplace culture. Employees’ ability to articulate values and being engaged in their work are less correlated, but they still have a positive relationship to workplace culture. And for leaders, the factor most correlated to a positive workplace is upholding the stated values of the organization.

How does, “Overall, my organization’s culture is positive and non-toxic,” correlate with...	
Just about everyone in my organization...	Correlation Coefficient <sup>3</sup>
Lives core organizational values	.65
Supports core organizational values	.64
Works collaboratively toward common goals	.63
Is engaged in their work	.51
Can articulate core organizational values	.50
Our leaders tend to ...	
Uphold the stated values of our organization	.63
Take proactive steps to create a healthy workplace culture	.61
Be good at coaching	.50
Listen to employee concerns	.49
Be good at having difficult conversations	.44

2 Correlations measure the degree to which two variables are associated. The presence of a relationship between variables does not necessarily mean that there is a causal relationship. In this example, “lives core organizational values” has the strongest association with whether or not an organization’s culture is positive and non-toxic, but this does not necessarily mean that a positive and non-toxic culture is the result of living core organizational values.

3 Coefficient values can range from -1 to +1. A value of 0 indicates no correlation between variables, negative values indicate a negative correlation, and positive values indicate a positive correlation. The closer the values are to +1, the stronger the positive correlation is between the two variables.

Companies with positive cultures are more likely to have behaviors and procedures aligned with company values. The vast majority (84%) of respondents who report a positive workplace culture agree that the behaviors and procedures of their organizations tend to be aligned with their core values, while just 5% disagree.

Comparatively, for respondents who report a negative workplace culture, the perception of alignment with company values is nearly the reverse of those who report a positive culture. Three-quarters (75%) of these respondents disagree that organizational behaviors and procedures are aligned with core values, while only 10% agree.





## Key Takeaways

1

**It is critically important that organizations address workplace toxicity.** Toxic workplaces not only have negative consequences for employees themselves, but also have negative consequences for organizations' bottom lines. Failing to address toxicity in the workplace leads to lost revenue.

2

**Based on this data, toxic cultures and negative stress are common in the workplace.** Organizations report high rates of toxic behavior, distrust, and resentment, as well as egregious conduct like harassment, discrimination and bullying—yet many organizations do not have plans to address them. Thus, there is a significant opportunity for organizations to be more proactive in preventing this conduct and building a positive workplace culture.

3

**Organizational leaders and managers are not taking effective, proactive steps to help promote a positive workplace environment.** Indeed, too often they engage in negative behaviors that can undermine culture. Organizations should provide additional development and support for leaders on critical culture-building skills, such as having difficult conversations, conflict management, and coaching. Furthermore, organizations must address leaders' negative behaviors that are harmful to workplace culture, such as failing to uphold organizational values and becoming resentful when others disagree with them.

4

**Training is an important tool for communicating organizational values and outlining behavior expectations.** Organizational training that conveys this information through a compliance lens, however, is viewed as less effective than training that includes culture-building subjects such as respect, civility, and bystander intervention techniques. Furthermore, those organizations that include the foregoing culture-building topics in their training are more likely to say that their workplace is positive and non-toxic. Organizations should go beyond compliance to include education and skill-building related to respect, civility, and bystander intervention to maximize the positive impact of its training on their workplace culture.

5

**Living and upholding organizational values is vital.** *Employees living core organizational values, and leaders upholding the stated values of the organization,* are more highly correlated with a positive workplace culture than even employee engagement or key leadership skills. In short, it is not enough for leaders and employees to be able to articulate their organization's values; they must live them every day, and leaders must ensure that others do as well. Bystander intervention techniques can be a powerful tool that both leaders and employees can use to address actions that are not aligned with values—and in doing so, contribute to a positive workplace culture.



### About EVERFI

EVERFI is an international technology company driving social change through education to address the most challenging issues affecting society today. EVERFI's workplace training packages cover a wide-range of issues, from harassment and discrimination prevention, diversity and inclusion, code of conduct, and data security. The courses go beyond mere compliance training to focus on prevention— creating an atmosphere of trust and respect where employees want to do better and be better for each other. To learn more about EVERFI visit <https://everfi.com/offerings/conduct-and-culture/>

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