Identifying and Managing Toxic Employees for Sustainable Development of Polytechnics in Nigeria

Leson James Foster, Esq
Department of General Studies
School of Foundation Studies
Kenule Beeson Saro-wiwa Polytechnic
P. M. B. 20, Bori, Rivers State
Email: fosterleson@ yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This work attempts to draw up noticeable standards for identifying and managing toxic employees in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. It describes toxic employees as workers who contribute to decay in the school system by engaging in unethical activities which could endanger sustainability of the tertiary education system. The work identifies characteristics and mode of operation of toxic employees as sabotage of work processes, insensitivity to co-workers, negativity and being judgmental; engaging in activities such as blackmailing co-workers, opposition to authority, rudeness to parents, bullying and gate-taking such as hiding or withholding vital information. Toxic workers adopt character assassination, stealth, workplace politicking as their mode of operation. Within the education sector, they can be identified and managed through use of prevention at three levels: primary prevention at the point of job interview to possibly prevent entry; secondary prevention in the early period of employment in event of applicant breaching the first stage, and tertiary prevention: of outright termination of appointment if it is proven that an employee is toxic. Toxic employees are seen in the study to be capable of causing employers financial loses, embarrassments, withdrawals of good workers from the system, and lawsuits for abuses. For posterity sake, and the fact that prevention, they say, is better than cure, it is strongly recommended that proper assessment be conducted to fish out toxic workers from the school system for appropriate action, and furthermore, that government (through the respective Governing Councils and Management of these institutions) puts an end to employing unqualified personnel as a way of solving unemployment problems.

KEYWORDS: *Toxic employees, Sustainable development, Polytechnics.*

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary educational institutions are important learning terminals and a crucial aspect in the Nigerian educational system. Students of tertiary institutions constitute the critical mass needed to populate low and high level skills. Polytechnics in particular offer post-secondary education intervention to individuals, prepare and equip them to live effectively in this age of technology and scientific innovations. The Federal Government of Nigeria in its National Policy on Education (2013) proffers that Nigerian government through this level of education aims at, among other things, inspiring students with the desire for self-improvement, fostering of patriotism and raising morally sound and well-adjusted citizens. The task of

ensuring that our children who pass through the polytechnic school system receive quality education to merit a place in the industries or even for higher studies in the University or go on to acquire other useful skills is a task as daunting as ensuring that the system will be kept intact for posterity. Issues like examination malpractices and cultism which have sneaked into the Polytechnic and University systems threaten their very existence and question the Federal Government's will-power in fostering patriotism and raising morally sound and well-adjusted citizens through those systems.

Ensuring sustainability of the Polytechnic system demands actions to forestall compromising its economic, social environment wellbeing and integrity. It means relevant authorities must act before it is too late to preserve the system so that children in the future can benefit from it. it would seem a particular set of people employed into the system to assist in making it function properly could be a factor in its seeming retrogression and movement towards decay. These people, labeled toxic employees, actually engaged to work in the system are said to be poisonous to the system because of their activities. This work, apart from search lighting the concepts of toxic employees and sustainable development will provide standards on how to identify and manage toxic workers, particularly the polytechnic sector of our education system in Nigeria, to some recommendations on the way forward.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development, according to Mckeown (2002) is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development according to the source above, is generally thought to have three components: environment, society, and economy. The well-being of these three areas are aid to be crucial to the sustainability of the human society. Sustainable development of the polytechnics in Nigeria therefore has to do with balancing of decision making processes about activities in the system in such a way that it does not have negative consequences for either current or future generation of Nigerians. It implies both the preservation of resources and a commitment to human and societal wellbeing through balanced management.

TOXIC EMPLOYEES AND THEIR MODUS OPERANDI

Generally speaking, something is regarded as toxic if it is poisonous. At the organizational level, the term is used to describe workers whose presence negatively impact on the work environment adversely affecting commitment and performance of other staff. According to Andreoni, and Miller (2002) a toxic worker is a worker that engages in behavior that is harmful to an organization, including either its property or people. Since toxic employees operate by means of stealth, and are quite difficult to identify, the submissions of Goulston (2015), Minor (2014), Folmer and De Cremer (2012) and Andreoni, and Miller (2002) permit the profiling of behavior manifestations of toxic employees and their modus operandi by use of the following characteristics:

1. **Waste of time and engagement in negative bonding:** This type of workers prefer to discuss and dwell on unproductive topics like bickering and destructive gossips instead of working. They also draw weaker co-workers into negative bonding alliances thereby causing distraction in workplaces and creating dangerous divisive factions.

2. **Stealth in sabotaging the workplace:** They sabotage work processes by backstabbing, badmouthing, spreading negative rumors, and withholding information. They also run down the authority making it difficult for coworkers to take instructions from managers and other school leaders. They do not only engage in regular character

assassination of fellow staff and students, they may engage in blackmail too and operate by stealth: always hiding behind others and choosing instead to communicate by hearsay and innuendo. They like to stir things up behind the scenes, and will often then go to the boss with some "constructive" solution to the problem they themselves had helped to create.

3.   **Practice of "gatekeeping" and are insensitive to fellow workers:** The toxic employee is also skilled at the art of "gatekeeping" – withholding important information that others need to do their jobs effectively and giving it out in an inconsistent or unfair fashion that favours one colleague over another. This can also, for example, take the form of only allowing selected people to use certain equipment at certain times in a seemingly random, arbitrary – and completely frustrating – fashion. In addition toxic workers show insensitivity and withhold support from co-workers except gang members which is often a destructive informal grouping.

4.   **Use of informal organizational structure to entrench their power:** They champion the formation and use of unofficial and informal groupings through which they exert their authority. it is often said that people who cannot take advantage of opportunities offered in their places of work to distinguish themselves professionally, often try to take advantage of people to make themselves acceptable and relevant. They rely on informal groups among workers to advance their desires and getting close to authority for recognition.

5.   **Exploitation of the human need for love and acceptance:** Toxic employees take advantage of a near universal need humans have to be liked by others in the workplace and to belong. They use negative contracting – which is an agreement to keep secrets to perhaps do something harmful, or spread rumor about someone else – to build a core team of loyalists. They victimize those who are not loyal by blaming them and using clever manipulation to exploit and project their mistakes and attack their credibility in a manner that shifts focus away from whatever the victim was trying to raise for management's attention to the victim's misdeeds. In some workplaces employees give up trying to get management's attention because the futility has been demonstrated repeatedly.

6.   **Strategic in use of bullying tactics:** The toxic employee is not just out to intimidate people by bullying them, they are more deliberate and strategic and more difficult to stop than a straight forward bully. This is because of their clever means of discrediting those who may speak up against the machinations of the toxic worker, and disempowering supervisors and others who possess the power on paper, to make changes in the workplace. When bullies repeatedly target a particular employee, the effects can be devastating. It can lead to low self-esteem and a negative effect on performance.

Goulston (2015) sums up the identifying characteristics and operational mode of toxic employees by holding that they always try to become friendly with the boss by providing information on the other staff, court the favor of the boss by performing personal favors that are often more in the boss's personal interest that the organisation's best interest. They try to discredit highly competent colleagues (who might threaten their position) by bad-mouthing them; manipulate bosses who have little skill in reading other people by running errands and providing incrimination information on others; exhibit much more skill in playing politics than in carry out their responsibilities. Toxic employees are good at carrying workplace politics to the next destructive level.

7. **Procrastination:** Toxic workers are known to be in the habit of postponing what could have been done now to a further time: missing deadlines or submitting low-quality work, and make excuses. In the school system, such worker makes his submissions late, and will often postpone what could have been taught during normal working hours.

8. **Project themselves as being more knowledgeable than others:** These employees overestimate their abilities and often claim to know it all be it personal or professional issues. They claim to have an answer for everything, and will not accept or even listen to a different point of view. Employees who exhibit this kind of behaviour will not receive feedback and are most unlikely to incorporate constructive criticism into their work for improvement.

9. **Manipulation of Information to discredit other staff:** Toxic employees are manipulators who collect information about other staff and processes in the workplace to either withhold or use against targets for maximum advantage. In addition, they use strategies to prevent complaints about them from getting traction and to weaken the power of others.

A toxic employee in the workplace has been compared to a low grade infection which one can live with for a while but, if not properly treated, can develop into a full-blown infection – making you, and your business not only suffer, but risk extinction in the long run. The presence of toxic employees in our polytechnics specifically threatens the sustainability ofo the entity in the following ways:

1. **Toxic employees' behavioiur are contagious and can affect healthy workers negatively:** When an employee is working alongside a high density of toxic workers, there is a big chance they too will become toxic as held by Housman, & Minor (2015). This atmosphere can contaminate work places and retard healthy working conditions. In the school system, it is possible that lecturers who are frugal in instructional delivery will go toxic if continually exposed to the company of a lecturer who dos not turn in his semester results and is not indicated for doing so and yet is receiving salary.

2. **Dent School image and diminish customer satisfaction:** Minor (2014) holds that toxic employees produce lower-quality work and diminish customer satisfaction which may be damaging to school reputation. Parents who are dissatisfied with school output may become vocal and complain, while students produced by toxic lecturers are most likely to be of low quality as it may be difficult for them to rise above the quality of teachers who teach them. Such students may be unable to undertake serious studies in a university which is a major goal of secondary education.

3. **Toxic employees' conduct may lead to negative modeling:** Israel (2017) opines that students model what they see and hear, and in many cases, what they see and hear on daily basis could be toxic employees. This behavior if allowed to go unchecked eventually leads to negative modeling since good lecturers and instructors will gradually leave or adapt to the modalities and standards of the toxic employee, and students – the most vulnerable – now have these toxic lecturers/instructors as their models: they simply copy what they see and hear. There is every likelihood that the prevalence of cultism in our schools today are the handiwork of toxic instructors who have become cult heroes and models for the youths to emulate.

4. **Unethical Practice can lead to decay in the system and destruction of learning culture:** Toxic employees are unethical in their work activities, do not adhere to principles of correct work behaviour (Nezieh, 2017). They are negative, abusive, mistreat fellow workers and are motivated not by corporate goal, but by getting and

protecting personal gains (power, money, or special status). Their presence therefore in school system is not to fulfill what the school system wants of them, but on an agenda which is individually defined. In this case, ethical issues are of less interest to them: being in the school system is not for the toxic lecturer to teach children to pass examinations, but there to receive salaries without working: carry out examination malpractices to make money or sexually abuse students with compunction since he or she does not feel bound by the ethics of teaching and learning.

5. **Toxic work environment lowers productivity, increases attrition of non toxic employees:** Since toxic workers sow seed of discord, distrust and disaffection in the workplace, the general opinion is that productivity will dwindle and highly motivated and positive employees who had tried and failed to improve things will move on to other outfits and those more comfortable in a negative environment will stay. This can cause a major organizational disorientation heightening customer loss, loss of employee morale, increased turnover, and loss of legitimacy among important external stakeholders (Litzky, Eddleston & Kidder 2006; Ermongkonchai 2010 and MacLean, Eddleston & Kidder 2010).

6. **Toxic employees can constitute security risks to past and current employees:** At an extreme toxic employees who happen to be fired or administratively put under pressure can constitute security risk to past and current employees as evidenced in the report by Housman and Minor (2015) on the case of the tragic and fatal shooting of Virginia WDBJ-TV reporters by their former colleague.

7. **Toxic employees can lead to pressing of lawsuits and other charges:** The conduct of toxic employees toward their co-workers can result in lawsuits for harassment and sex offenses. Benoit (2014) in supporting above position holds that employers who ignore bullies and toxic employees are much more likely to be sued by emotionally injured and disgruntled employees.

8. **They can bring about financial loses:** Toxic worker engages in behavior that is harmful to an organization and such worker's misconduct can cost billions of naira as evidenced by JP Morgan's "London Whale" incident involving one Bruno Iksil whose unethical business behavior cost his company huge financial loses. In the education system, a toxic employee can lead to parents withdrawing their children from the school which may precipitate depreciation in the financial fortunes of the system.

9. **Toxic workplaces exacerbate workers' stress/health problems:** Working with a toxic co-worker can be bad for both one's physical and mental health. In a study at the Harvard Business School and Stanford University and reported by Housman (2015) such workplace stress is as bad for one's health as passive smoking had increased the chance of heart attack by 23%.

10. **Toxic employees lead to erosion of respect for management by good employees:** Having a toxic employee in the workplace can also result in employees generally losing their respect for management for hiring the toxic employee or for failing to squarely address the toxic behavior. A survey reported by Kohler (2014) showed that four out of five employees believe management does not do enough to combat toxic employees, and are somewhat or extremely tolerant of such individuals. This eventually leads to good employees and sometime the general public losing respect for management in organizations.

11. **Destroys healthy workplace values and erode confidence among stakeholders:** Toxic employees' tactics of consolidating and maintaining informal power in the workplace, and controlling co-workers for personal gain is an infraction of healthy workplace values and may conflict with education goals of Nigeria. Thus, critical

values like focusing on details, delivering quality, honesty/integrity, being reliable and positive may be sacrificed and completely compromised. When in the school system the core values mentioned above are not present, they are more likely to be replaced by values crafted by toxic employees which means that the cases of violent cultism and antisocial behavior will continue to be generated in our education system due to continuous presence of toxic employees

MANAGING TOXIC WORKERS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Identifying and managing toxic employees in the education system can be tasking and challenging on the competence and intelligence of managers. School management must demonstrate control and leadership by laying down framework for handling toxic individuals to avoid such persons expanding their boundaries, ego and spheres of influence beyond what is safe for the system. Prompt action sends a signal of zero tolerance of toxicity among workers by management in the school system. In confronting workplace toxicity, Brightman (2013) suggests a three pronged plan of action hinged on one word: Prevention. This is elaborated as: Primary prevention, secondary prevention and tertiary prevention. They are explained as follows:

Primary Prevention

This focuses on stopping toxic employees from entering the education system at the point of employment. Brightman (2013) recommends the use of self-assessment instruments, and "360 degree" observer ratings interviewing processes be avoided in which the discussion usually focuses on job skills alone and experience. Here the discussion focuses on the applicant's civility in a workplace environment: looking for specific examples of how applicant's past behavior matches the values sought for in an employee; such questions might include applicant's opion of what former employer would say about him or her – positive and negative; the same from opinion of former subordinates – positive and negative? What are the areas that one thinks he needs improvement most? The general target here in primary prevention therefore is job interview and selection of personnel.

Secondary Prevention: Administrative Intervention to Re-oriented Toxic Employee

If toxic persons breach the primary level of prevention and are employed into the system, they need to be identified and handled in the early stage of entry into the system before they gain root. Suggestions here may include the following:

Fostering Communication: Managers are to maintain an open-door policy that fosters communication and feedback and allows employees to report toxic behavior by co-workers so that the problem is identified. If people know managers are interested in listening to their complaints or worries and using their perspective to guide change, they will be more willing to share. A suggestion box should be conspicuously displayed for opinions and information (Eller & Eller, 2013) and the issues contained therein must be investigated and addressed as appropriate.

Confront the problem promptly, listen, and create a plan: If a worker is undermining you, and the problem is noticed, it is critical to swiftly confront it. Meet privately with the person and discuss this behavior and find out what the worker's issues are. To keep you on track, develop a script for what you will say in the meeting, and try to keep emotion out. If it is a toxic group, you will need to decide whether to meet with just the "leader" or with all the members. If the group seems to gain power in numbers, divide and conquer. It is advised that during this time, discussions should focus on the behavior not the personality. The aim here is to improve work climate and correct the behavior, and not to change the personality or general attitude of the employee. Document the proceedings of the meeting and possibly get a witness.

Assess your leadership style and job description activities: Ensure that you are providing positive and proactive leadership as the leader's toxicity may develop due to unnecessary controls, and autocracy which could antagonize employees. This calls for collaborative leadership style which sees the leaders as partners rather than subordinates. Also, keeping records of employee activities and setting of clear job descriptions could help in detoxifying workplaces.

Tertiary Prevention

Here you decide to retain or fire as suggested by Brightman, B. (2013) thus:

Form a termination policy: Have a policy usually contained in the service manual in place for terminations, including cancelling access facilities of the organization and arranging for the employee to be escorted off the premises.

Communicate with other employees: Without going into specifics, inform co-workers about the decision to terminate the employee rather than keep them guessing and creating rumors.

In the case of employees exhibiting risk factors for workplace violence: A zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence is a necessity. This policy should cover all workers, clients, visitors, contractors, and anyone else who may come in contact with school personnel. It is critical to ensure that all workers know the policy and understand that all claims of workplace violence or threats of violence will be investigated and remedied promptly. Depending on the circumstances, the employer should at the earliest opportunity involve company or school security personnel, and if necessary, local law enforcement agencies (Brightman, cited in Vamos 2014).

CONCLUSION

Toxicity in the school system is an aberration to teaching and learning which is the major goal of education. Toxic employees negatively affect co-workers and provide negative modeling to students. They poison the education system as their presence bring tension, bad blood, insubordination, abuses, violence etcetera. Toxic employees can only produce substandard students, and if they are not sorted out and expelled from the system, there is no need to talk about the future of our children, because the future is being compromised by toxic teachers. It is observed that: many students currently leave the polytechnic school system with high grades but cannot defend their certificates; no thanks to toxic teachers and managers who engineer examination malpractices or sorting to ease the process; many students can shoot guns and have blood on their young hands because of initiation into violent cultism, but cannot solve a simple mathematical problem. If we do not make goats to watch over our yams because they will eat the yams, why then do we condemn our polytechnic school system to an educational toxic waste by employing some managers and teachers who can only antagonize their fellow workers and corrupt our children: sexually abusing some and initiating others into violent and antisocial fraternities. The implications of these for the wellbeing of our children, the sustainability of the secondary system and the future of the larger society leaves much to be desired.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Induction of new employees should include providing some education and coaching abut toxic behaviors during the first weeks of employment. A period of probation should be observed for the new employees for examples two years before the confirmation of appointment to access and audit employees for traces of toxic behavior.

2.   Federal and State governments should make laws to stop the practice of employing unwilling undergraduates to teach in secondary schools as solution to unemployment as this hurts the system by glutting in with inefficient, unwilling and uncommitted staff who often fall prey to toxicity.

3.   Confidential database on school employees should be created enabling authorities to have access to background information on them. This should include their past records in the primary, secondary, allied institutions and previous work places for traces of criminality to enable ongoing personnel assessment s and where necessary termination of appointment or worker who are toxic.

4.   Government should evolve security apparatus for protection of managers against retaliation by toxic workers who by their recommendation may have to be laid off.

REFERENCES

Agarwal, R. (2017)BenchMarking: Definition, Types and Its Succesful Performance Retrieved June 20th 2017 from http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/accounting/benchmarking-defintion-types-and-its-successful-performance/53108/

Andreoni, J. amd Miller, J (2002) Giving According to GARP: An Experimental Test of the Consistency of Preferences for Altruism. *Econometrica*, 70 (2), 737 – 753

Bohlander, G. & Snell S. (2004) *Managing Human Resources*. Ohio: Thompson Corperation

Benoit, S. (2014) What are Toxic Employees and Workplace Bullies Costing You? Retrieved June 20th from http:j//www.benoitcentral.com/2014/05/18/whats-the-cost-of-retaining-toxic-employees-and-workplace=bullies/

Brightman, B. (2013) How Overcome the 6 Most Toxic Employee Behaviors. Retrieved June 20th, 2017 from https://www.fastcompany.com

Brooks, C. (2015) 4 Ways to Spot a Toxic Employee. Retrieved June 20th, 2017 from http://www.buisinessnewsdaily.com/88388- spot-toxic-employees.html

Chandola, T. (2008) Work Stress and Coronary Disease: What are the Mechanisms? *The European Heart Journal.* http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/eurheart/ehm641

Eller, J. F. and Eller, S. A. (2013) The Principalship: Working with Difficult Staff, Retrieved June 20th 2017 from http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr13/vol 70/num07/Working-with-Difficult-Staff.aspx

Ermongkonchai, P. (2010). Understanding Reasons for Employee Unethical Conduct in Thai Organizations: *A Qualitative Inquiry, Contemporary Management Research*, 6(2), 125-140

Folmer, C. P. and De Cremer, D. (2012). Bad for Me or Bad for Us? Interpersonal Orientations and the Impact of Losses on Unethical Behaviour. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 38(6), 760-771

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC Press

Gallo, A. (2016) How To Manage a Toxic Employee. Retrieved June 20th, 2017 from https://hbr.org/2016/10/how-to-manage-a-toxic-employee

Geigle Safety Group Inc (2016) Types of Benchmarking: Retrieved June 20th, 2017 from https://www.oshatrain.org/notes/2fnotes04.html

Goulston, M (2015) Toxic Deflectors at Work: How to Go From Enemy to Frenemy. Retrieved June 20th, 2017 from https://hiring.monster.com/hr/hr-best-practices/workforce-management/improving-employee-eletions/toxic-deflectors-at-work.aspx

Hawthorne, W. (2017) What is Benchmarking? – Definition, Types, Process & Examples. http://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-benchmarking-definition-types-process-examples.ht

Housman, M. (2015) Cornerstone Report Details Effects of Toxic Employees in the Workplace: Retrieved June 20th, 2017 from https://www.cornerstoneondemand.com/rework/cornerstone-report-details-effects-toxic-employees-workplace

Israel, M (2017) Managing Difficult People: Turning 'Negatives' into 'Positives'. Retrieved May 8th, 2017 from http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin313.shtml

Kohler R. (2014) How Removing Toxic Employees Will Improve Team Morale. Retrieved May 8th, 2017 from http://www.applicantpro.com/articles/how-removing-toxic-employees-wiil-improve-team-morale/>.

Lear, K (2009) *Personnel Organisation and Supervison*. South Carolina: Mcgraw-Hill

Litzky, B. E., Eddleston, K. A., & Kidder, D. L. (2006). The good, the bad, and the misguided: How managers inadvertently encourage deviant behaviors. The *Academy of Management Perspectives,* 20(1), 91-103.

MacLean, T. L., & Behnam, M. (2010). The dangers of decoupling: The relationship between compliance programs, legitimacy perceptions, and institutionalized misconduct. *Academy of Management Journal,* 53(6), 1499 – 1520

Mckeown, R. (2002) The Education for Sustainable Development Toolkit: Retrieved December 10th, 2016 from http://www.esdtoolkit.org/about.htm

Minor, D (2014) Hire a Superstar or Dump a Toxic Worker? Retrieved May 9th, 2017 from https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/ article/hire-a-superstar-or-dump-a-toxic worker

Nezich, H (2017) The Effects of Toxic Employeee … and Bosses. Retrieved June 20th, 2017 from https://www.sbam.org/Resources/ tabid/97/ArtMID/2980/ArticleID/2694/The-effects-of-toxic-employees-and-bosses.aspx

Pavlou, C. (2017) How to identify and Address Toxic Employees. Retrieved May 8th, 2017 from https://resources.workable.com/ tutorial/toxic-employees

Rouse, M. (2017) Benchmark. http://www.searchcio.techtarget.com/ definition/benchmark

Vamos, V (2014) How to Cleanse a Toxic Workplace. Retrieved May 8th, 2017 from http://execdev.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/blog/effective-leadership-can-prevent-toxic-culture