



How to Avoid a “Toxic” Company

Every now and then I hear from a client who jumped from the proverbial frying pan into a fire. And sometimes it's even a senior level client – a Director of H.R. comes to mind. Promised executive-level strategic planning the new hire found herself handling recruiting day in and day out.

Is there any way to avoid this scenario?

Let's step back to the hiring process. You sit in waiting room, knowing that at each step you are evaluated – by the receptionist, the interview team member who comes out to fetch you, each person in the team – everyone is observing your every move and communication! And so you are on best behaviour.

The company's representatives realize that you are also evaluating them – their culture and the solidity of the business – and so everyone who represents the company is also on best behaviour. They entice you with benefits, hope to inspire you with examples of flexible work arrangements, and reel you in with three weeks of vacation to start!

Conduct Due Diligence

It is up to you to conduct due diligence, and here are a few ideas for how to do so.

- “Discretely” solicit opinions from former employees or competitors through social networks or even by contacting existing employees. I once called an existing employee who warned me that the job to which I'd applied required two people but the budget allowed for only one.
- If appropriate, review annual reports and financial info to measure the company's business health. I've also had clients who joined companies only to learn that a merger was almost complete, after which a good chunk of the most recent hires was let go.
- Request details of benefits and make sure the company offers what you need – EAP, annual physics, the right to choose holistic approaches over traditional?
- Ask questions such as “how is the turnover in the company?” or “what do you enjoy about working here?” Or ask whether their sick leave statistics are equal to or better (or worse) than industry averages. If they are worse, it's not a good sign! Brave questions that not everyone would ask, but framed politely they are acceptable.

These are but a beginning and truly hardly scratch the surface of potential pitfalls. Determining a company's health – as in whether or not it is toxic – is more likely if one learns to read between the lines or trust a gut-reaction. Let me share an example.

Gut Reactions

I recall an interview that I attended at a leading “think-tank” institution. The two interviewers gave me enough signals that I knew something was “hinky.” The two did not break a smile, rarely made eye



contact with one-another, did not speak to one another ... I knew I didn't want to get into that hornet's nest!

Learn to pay attention to body language. Not always overt as in rolling eyes and finger twirling a "crazy in the head" message, even fairly subtle signs as in my interview signal trouble. For example, as you wait for your interview pay attention to staff. Hunched shoulders, deep worry lines, and scowls on people racing to and fro are not great signs!

Another form of red-flag signs is verbal. Listen to the team's use of language. If they refer to your potential boss as "hard-hitting, unrelenting, goal-smashing, task-master" or other language that has your inner toxic-radar quivering, either ask for clarification or stay on heightened alert for more such signs.

Although good manners are useful for getting along, an overly polite environment may indicate a forced culture – forced and enforced! To determine whether the politeness is genuine, strike up conversations with the receptionist or in the interview. You should feel a level of human connection – a chuckle, a laugh, or a shared opinion – and not a stilted and insincere politeness.

As you walk through the workplace, peek into cubicles or offices – is a measure of individuality allowed? If not, this could indicate a strictly imposed "appearance" that you may not buy into.

I recall another job I had – I lasted three days! My first clue was the first day. Quitting time came and went and no one, not one person, was making any move to pack up and go. I wandered out of my office and asked whether my clock was incorrect. No, smiled the woman I'd asked, it's just that the boss has a tendency to call at five minutes after five, and ask whoever answers who else is still working. Actually my first clue was in the interview. The owner made a comment that triggered my "oh-oh" radar.

Those gut-reactions are critical and worth paying attention to. If triggered, make it a point to ask questions related to your concerns BEFORE you accept an offer. But if you do accept an offer and then regret it, bail quickly. Don't get stuck in the job where a year later you are still recruiting rather than planning strategy as did my HR Director.

Toxic workplaces take a heavy toll on your emotional health, which research shows can lead to a toll on your physical health with a lowered immune system and possibly serious disease. Aside from that (as if that's not reason enough!), working in a toxic environment reduces your ability to produce, which then negatively affects your resume's content.

Do yourself and your career a favour: learn to read the signs and stay clear of toxic workplaces.

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