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John, a 26-year-old educator with a well-known enrichment centre here, works for a boss who is highly educated and well regarded by his peers and clients alike for his expertise.

But within the company, the boss - a high achiever by any standards with a glittering resume most can only dream of - is one who believes in rule by terror.

Before anyone could get a grip of what is going on, the boss would from time to time bombard staff with up to over a hundred text messages at one go in the company's WhatsApp chat group, usually targeted at one employee.

Derogatory, expletive-laden messages, typed entirely in caps - which John showed to us - are often sent late into the night or during meal times, in rants that would, at times, exceed an hour. They included phrases such as "human trash", "your mother should have had an abortion" and "you deserve to die".

Although John (not his real name) has so far not been the target of the boss' rage, he said witnessing these frequent and intense tirades are enough to fill him with dread whenever the notification chime of new messages go off on his mobile phone.

"My work day could be going well, but all it takes is one message to evoke fear and cause a total mood swing, and many of my colleagues feel this way too," he said.

In response, employees at the receiving end can only apologise and promise that a task being requested will be done immediately. John had not seen anyone challenge the boss over the months that he had been included in the chat group.

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The company's culture is also such that people are constantly asked to work after office hours or respond to messages late at night. If they do not do so, they will be termed as disrespectful and threatened with termination letters, even legal action.

While the job pays well, John said the harsh working environment has seen at least 25 full-time employees, interns or temporary staff leave the small firm over his period of employment. He is already planning an exit strategy for himself.

While toxic workplaces - which encompass a whole range of harmful behaviours displayed by bosses and managers - have existed all over the world for time immemorial, the issue is in the spotlight after several well-known companies in Singapore were in recent years accused of having such a work environment.

In 2019, Mr Tan Min-Liang, the co-founder and CEO of gaming hardware maker Razer, was accused of, among other things, being verbally abusive and sacking workers for minor transgressions. In response, he said he was a "very intense" person when it came to his staff's quality of work, and certain statements were made "in jest".

In July, current and former employees of video game developer Ubisoft Singapore alleged that sexual harassment and racial discrimination had occurred in the company, which is headquartered in Paris. Singapore employment watchdog Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) is investigating the allegations.

In late September, the co-founder of independent bookstore BooksActually, Kenny Leck, 43, was alleged to have not paid salaries and made inappropriate romantic advances to his younger female employees at the bookstore. Mr Leck later said he would relinquish ownership of the store and also apologised to all those he had caused pain.

In the latest case, production firm Night Owl Cinematics (NOC) saw a spate of anonymous and unverified allegations posted on social media, purportedly showing its co-founder and chief executive officer (CEO) Sylvia Chan being verbally abusive towards one of the firm's on-screen talents.

While NOC on Oct 10 issued a statement calling the online allegations a "massive crusade against the public image and reputation" of the company, Ms Chan followed up with a statement on Wednesday, apologising and admitting to have used strong language towards the employee, Ms Samantha Tan, 27.

Ms Chan, 33, said: "I always thought that a leader should be tough and I now realise that I may have come on too strong, and people have now perceived me to be unkind and rude."

THE WILD, WILD WEST

In recent years, accounts of toxic offices are coming to the fore amid the proliferation of social media as well as online platforms - such as Glassdoor and Tellonym - which allow unhappy employees to air their grievances anonymously.

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In interviews conducted this week, more than 10 individuals spoke about how their mental health suffered due to highly toxic work environments, and also their disappointing experiences in seeking redress and accountability from people at the top.

They included employees of public sector organisations, start-ups and multinational corporations (MNCs). Some of these workplaces have highly developed human resource (HR) structures to handle such complaints, yet the rank-and-file do not have enough trust in these as the best avenues to seek help.

In the minds of some disheartened employees, their workplaces have become something of a “Wild Wild West”, where bullies and harassers roam freely and their victims are unable to tear down the power structures that foster a toxic working environment in the first place.

Contributing to their sense of helplessness is the fear of reprisal against victims who speak up, or even whistleblowers who are not the victims.

As a result, most cases go unreported as victims simply resign quietly from their jobs.

Ms Joanna Ong-Ash, 52, a former head of marketing and brand management at a local bank, is one of those who decided to do just that.

She had a boss who made her life “living hell” with incessant bullying and verbal abuse. He once even insulted her publicly using a Hokkien sexual slur.

When she finally plucked up the courage to report her problem to the bank’s HR department, she got brushed off with the remark: “He is just like that la, Jo, what can we do?”

Shocked, Ms Ong-Ash escalated the matter to her boss’ boss, only to hear the latter counter-propose for her to stay on to help him “find a silver bullet to get rid of” the man who had been terrorising her.

Initially pleased with the response, Ms Ong-Ash recalled her husband warning her later that she was venturing into a “danger zone” and would be made use of as a scapegoat.

Feeling utterly hopeless, she found herself contemplating taking her own life before she managed to snap out of it when she thought about her family.

Her experience with office toxicity happened several years ago, but when Ms Ong-Ash — who is now the director of her own firm Bravery Communications — shared her struggles on LinkedIn earlier this week, she received a number of direct messages from current employees of the same bank who said nothing much had changed.

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For a 30-year-old HR manager, who wanted to be known only as Sarah, her former boss at a public sector organisation constantly undermined her abilities, once openly criticising her as an “incompetent” worker before other directors at a meeting.

When the then-communications executive tried to find out how she could lodge a formal complaint against the superior, a HR manager told her over the phone that “employee grievance” could only be made out if there was physical violence involved.

“(The HR manager’s) attitude towards this is like, ‘Don’t make HR life difficult. If you can, just try to tolerate it’. It is like telling you ...if you are not happy, find another job,” Sarah said.

When she left the organisation, her exit interview took just five minutes as she sensed that the HR manager was not truly interested in acting upon what she would have to say.

Over at an international public relations firm, where Anna (not her real name), 31, used to work at, the office was so small that everyone would know if anyone yelled or cried. Yet, such scenes occurred almost daily.

According to Anna, the toxic culture there started from the top – the country head in the parent agency tolerated the antics of a managing director who was known for her F-bombs as much as her charisma, as she had brought in a lot of business for the firm.

Reporting to the managing director was a senior manager who also made life difficult for juniors. The senior manager would, for example, call out Anna’s mistakes in front of everybody and invite everyone else but her out for team lunch.

As the bullying became obvious, the managing director even asked Anna how she was dealing with the senior manager. But the director clearly indicated that she did not plan to take any action even though she was aware of the issue, said Anna.

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To top it all, employees were expected to tolerate abnormal work hours – usually from 8am to 2am – and showing up for meetings even when sick.

Anna, who said she lost a lot of weight and hair while working there, added: “As an underling, you just suffer because you have no value to them.”

Then, there is Ms Chua, 28, an assistant manager in the community services sector. Starting out by working for a non-profit organisation run by a tight-knitted group of family and friends, the then fresh graduate felt that she was often bullied by her bosses.

She would be blamed for being late or taking instructions poorly, even when she was not present at lunches or gatherings where the senior management would spontaneously alter plans without informing her.

The last straw for Ms Chua came when one of the bosses remarked, within earshot of several colleagues: “You are so dumb, don’t screw it up this time.” Yet, none of those present spoke up for her. She walked back to her table and immediately drafted a resignation letter.

SIGNS OF A TOXIC WORKPLACE

How can an employee tell whether a toxic work culture indeed exists in his or her organisation, as opposed to acts of a few rogue colleagues?

Professor Mak Yuen Teen, who teaches corporate governance at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School, said a toxic work culture exists in an organisation when any of these indicators is present:

Favouritism: Certain employees receive special treatment and are not held to rules that apply to everyone else, and given opportunities not because of their abilities.

Fear and harassment: Bullying behaviour and harassment in various forms are tolerated. Employees constantly fear being rebuked or fired. Communication is one-way and top down and there is no healthy debate.

Bad behaviour: Employees compete rather than collaborate and engage in cutthroat behaviour to get ahead. There is no courtesy and respect but malice and negativity.

Lack of development: Management does not see the value of training and developing employees.

Working in silos: There is no information sharing to help employees do their jobs. The organisation is very compartmentalised and one department does not know what the others are doing.

Lack of accountability: When there are transgressions, they are ignored. There are no consequences for rule-breaking and in fact, rule breakers may be rewarded.

Mr Alvin Goh, an executive director at the Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI), noted that a toxic work environment is one “where employees dread going to work as the work-day is plagued by in-fighting among different groups of employees due to poor communication and indecision by their leaders”.

Toxic behaviours include taking part in “gossipy” engagements with different groups and undermining work, as well as micromanaging and fault finding in employees’ work, he added.

In some extreme cases, there would be shouting, using vulgar language or signs, and getting physical, including the throwing of items.

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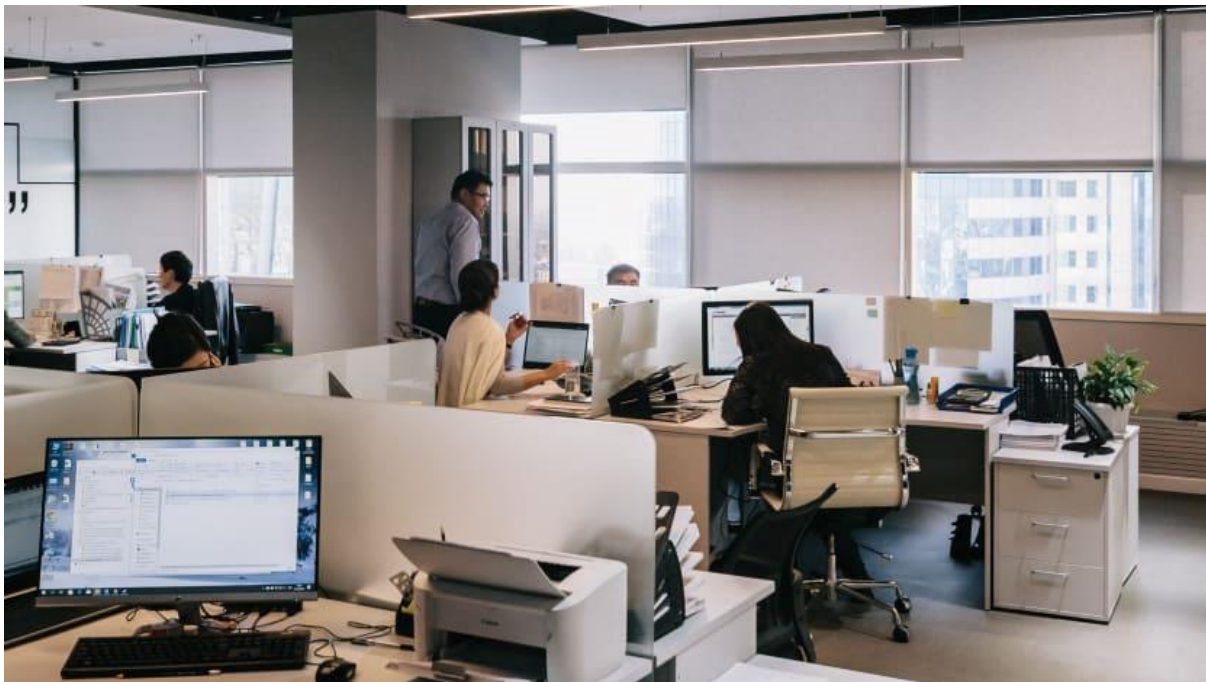
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In contrast, Dr Donald Ferrin, professor of organisational behaviour and human resources at Singapore Management University (SMU), said healthy, non-toxic organisations emphasise kindness, respect, due process, fairness, trust, compassion and psychological safety.

That said, the point at which an organisation “crosses the line” to be considered toxic is “really in the eyes of the employees themselves”, he said.

“Some may be very sensitive whereas others may be less so. And it could be a single employee who concludes the organisation is toxic, or a group of employees deciding together,” he added.



OVERNIGHT SUCCESS, START-UP MODEL MAY BREED TOXIC BEHAVIOUR

Prof Mak pointed out that such toxic culture is allowed to fester more than ever today due to the maddening pace at which the start-up model is being used to conduct business.

It used to be the case that companies sought to cultivate and retain good and loyal employees over time, as businesses were predominantly “built over a long time and entrepreneurs rarely got rich overnight”, he noted.

But the runway between starting a business and monetising it through someone buying the business or proceeding to the initial public offering stage is much shorter these days.

“Unfortunately, those who invest in start-ups at early stages often don’t take a long-term view. Private equity and venture capital investors are just looking at maximising valuations in preparation for their exit. So they may not be concerned about how employees are treated,” he said.

Prof Mak added that these entrepreneur types tend to be “more narcissistic personalities who may be clever or creative but lack EQ (emotional quotient) and people skills”.

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He pointed out that founding teams are usually compensated through options or stock, which can only become valuable if the company is successfully listed or bought out at a good price. Hence, employees may tolerate unacceptable behaviours longer than they normally would.

For 29-year-old Olivia (not her real name), who joined a retail start-up in her early 20s, she had to grapple with quirks such as a requirement for all newcomers to work for free for the first month and being paid through an ambiguous “profit-sharing model” in subsequent months.

She was eventually paid only S\$800 to S\$1,300 a month, a far cry from what she had expected for a full-time position.

The fine print was that company profits would be shared based on each person’s perceived “performance” on a month-to-month basis, and it was not transparent how workers could get more.

It did not help that the company’s leadership was extremely “cliquish”, she said, noting the presence of a private Telegram chat group where only favoured employees would be added.

Olivia was left to wonder what sort of values the leadership was trying to promote. But everyone would just go along with the flow, conscious about the need to avoid becoming a target, she said.

Prof Mak stressed that toxic work cultures always start from the top – often because of someone who has power but little accountability, such as the founder in a start-up, and is seen as an “untouchable” figure.

Board members and senior management must also play their part to call out bullying behaviours, so that such conduct doesn’t cascade down the organisation. “If it is okay for the chairman to bully the CEO, then it is okay for the CEO to bully others,” he said.

Professor Lawrence Loh, who is the director of the Centre for Governance and Sustainability at the NUS Business School, said toxicity occurs in every social group, but it is extremely sensitive in the workplace due to an asymmetry of power.

“One person has the power to hire and fire ... This is where we have to take the problem by the horns and try to address it,” he said.

WHAT FIRMS NEED TO DO

But this power balance in the workplace is also shifting, with a growing number of employees seeking redress by going straight to social media.

Prof Loh also pointed to a new trend of firms going beyond financial reporting to cover “culture reporting”.

He said: “Companies had been managing external stakeholders. Now it is time to ‘come back home’ and examine what is on the inside.”

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Agreeing, Prof Mak said that it is time to put more emphasis on HR functions in all organisations, not just in start-ups. “Sadly, many organisations, including public companies don’t pay enough attention to their human capital or people,” he said.

The lack of attention can be seen from the fact that the HR profession in Singapore is not as developed as it is in more advanced economies, said Prof Mak.

Boards also rarely appoint directors with human capital experience, he noted. “They think someone who has been a CEO would know HR and this is often not the case,” he added.

Dr Michael Ramsay Bashshur, an associate professor of organisational behaviour and human resources at SMU, said people management is the hard part as it is never “plug and play”, or as simple as talking about “transparency” and “openness”.

He said: “It’s very easy to scare people into doing something, or pay them a ton of money ... But (such workers) don’t really care about what they’re doing ... The minute you turn your back, the minute they stop working and doing what you want.”

He pointed out that on the other hand, workers would be self-driven and require a lot less supervision to perform well if leaders make the effort to inspire and motivate them through shared beliefs and goals and shared commitment to the values.

Dr Tan Hwee Hoon, also an associate professor in the same field at SMU, noted that in the area of fairness, firms often emphasise outcome fairness (pay and bonuses) but overlook procedural fairness (having avenues for redress and ensuring that the criteria for decision are made clear) and interpersonal fairness (treating folks with dignity).

Lecturer Paul Lim, also from SMU, identified insecurity to be at the root of toxicity in the workplace, drawing parallels to dominant work cultures here, such as the “Singapore FaceTime” – or the practice of not leaving before the boss does – and managers’ compulsive need to “double confirm” things.

Given the perception that HR departments are powerless to effect change, it is not surprising that social media has become the medium of choice for unhappy employees to expose their bosses from hell and unfair work practices, said the experts.

SHRI’s Mr Goh urged HR personnel to be the voice of employees and have “the moral courage to call out unfair workplace practices and abuses”.

In progressive organisations, HR should become a “strategic asset that assists business leaders to create an environment to bring the best out of its talents”, he said.

Apart from developing a whistleblowing policy, Mr Goh said companies can set up an “all ranks” committee that can independently investigate issues on workplace harassment.

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WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION LAWS A STEP FORWARD, BUT MORE CAN BE DONE

In August, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that laws will be enacted to expand the range of actions that authorities can take against companies that discriminate against employees based on nationality, age, race, gender and disability.

Experts said that this is a step forward given that Singapore is a country with some of the weakest protection for employees.

Still, a lot more can be done.

“For one thing, it’s hard for employees to seek redress for unjust dismissals,” Prof Mak said. “Even if you sue and win, the legal costs will kill you and you won’t get punitive damages. That’s generally not the case in other developed markets. We should have something similar to a small claims tribunal or other dispute resolution mechanism for employees to go to.”

Indeed, Ms Ong-Ash once had a lawyer persuade her to drop her case of unfair dismissal, with the lawyer advising her to “just take the package and be happy”.

Still, there are existing laws to protect workers who feel harassed in toxic workplaces.

The Protection from Harassment Act (POHA), for instance, prohibits intentionally causing harassment, alarm or distress through threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour or through doxxing, said SMU Assistant Professor of Law Benjamin Joshua Ong.

POHA also covers “stalking”, which takes into account a course of conduct, or a series of acts, that collectively cause harassment, alarm or distress, even if each individual act may not by itself amount to wrongdoing.

SMU law lecturer Eugene Tan said a significant barrier to any law being effective in dealing with internal company affairs is the asymmetry of power within most organisations.

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Even with POHA, it may not be “straightforward” to prove a case of harassment at work, he said.

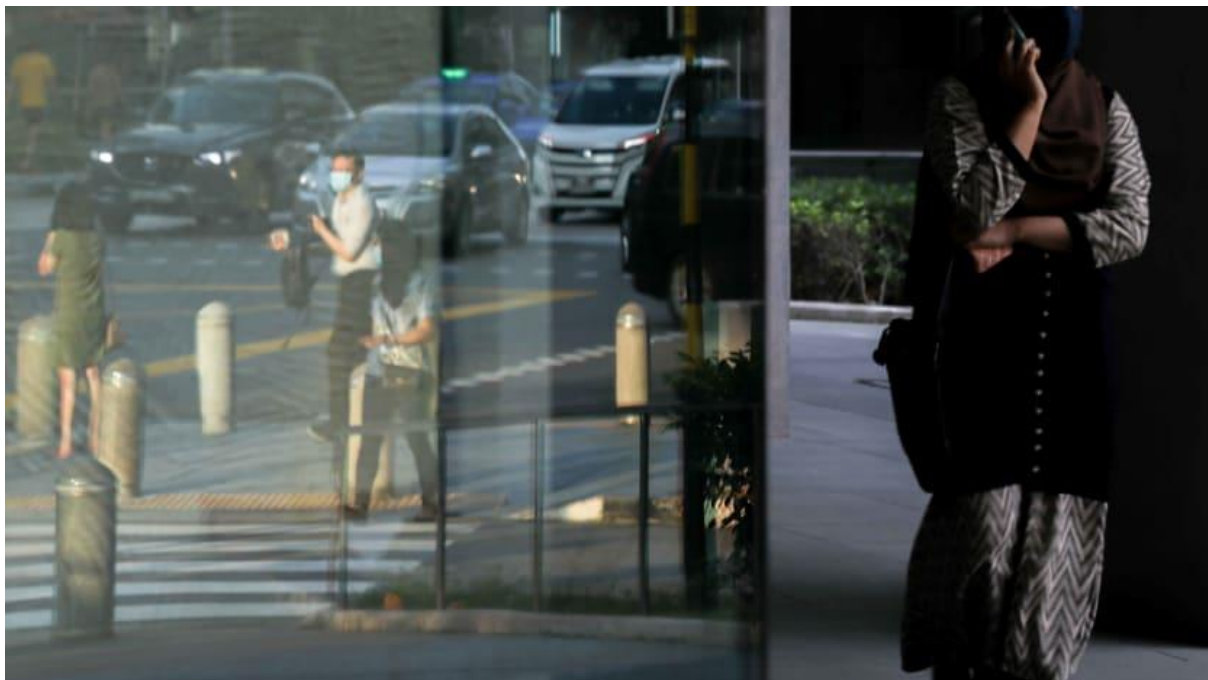
As such, TAFEP cannot remain a “paper tiger” that lacks enforcement teeth, said Assoc Prof Tan.

In response to queries, a TAFEP spokesman said it follows through a case by working with employers to provide proper closure for the affected individual, which could involve adjusting work arrangements.

Employers will also be required to follow up with implementing proper grievance handling or harassment reporting procedures to prevent future incidents.

“For employers who fail to provide a safe environment or refuse to improve their grievance handling process, TAFEP will work with the Ministry of Manpower to take enforcement action against the company, including a review of the firm’s work pass privileges,” the spokesman said.

So far, employers engaged by TAFEP have been cooperative and have heeded its advice, the spokesman said. Between 2019 and 2020, TAFEP handled around 80 cases of workplace harassment, with about four in 10 involving harassers who were the victims’ supervisors or superiors.



SELF-CONFESSED TOXIC MANAGERS WHO CHANGED THEIR WAYS

For people managers themselves, helping to create a less toxic workplace is not always straightforward, with none of the three interviewed by TODAY getting it right the first time round.

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Farah (not her real name), a 39-year-old corporate services manager, said it took some reprimanding from a HR director at her previous company three years ago to get her to reflect on her approach to people management.

This came after Farah screamed at one of her subordinates: "What the f*** have you done?"

The firm had a zero-tolerance policy on the use of vulgarities, she later learnt. "It made me realise that what I took from my previous companies (including a law firm where cursing and being heavy-handed were very much normalised) were toxic," she said. "If I weren't being called out or reprimanded for it, then I think I'd still continue, thinking it's okay to behave that way."

Mr Lim Hong Zhuang, CEO of blockchain start-up ShuttleOne, recognised that it was his fault for allowing a toxic work culture to fester at the previous company that he ran - an agricultural firm with about 200 workers - by simply accepting many demands of workers whom he deemed to be good.

He had thought he could "play favourites" with his better performing employees, and had also formed an "inner circle" with some of them. But he has since realised that it is a "terrible way" to manage people.

At his new start-up, Mr Lim encourages employees to be "brutal" with work quality but he is firm about not letting anybody engage in personal mudslinging.

He has already sacked a worker for launching a character attack on a colleague.

As for employees themselves, they must know when to walk away from toxicity, said Ms Ong-Ash.

She suggested that they ask themselves these questions: Am I empowered enough to add value to the job currently? Am I treated with decent human respect? Are the company's values authentically aligned with mine and are leaders walking the talk on these values?

If most of the answers are "no", then perhaps it may be time to seek out greener pastures, or in this case a happier environment, she said.