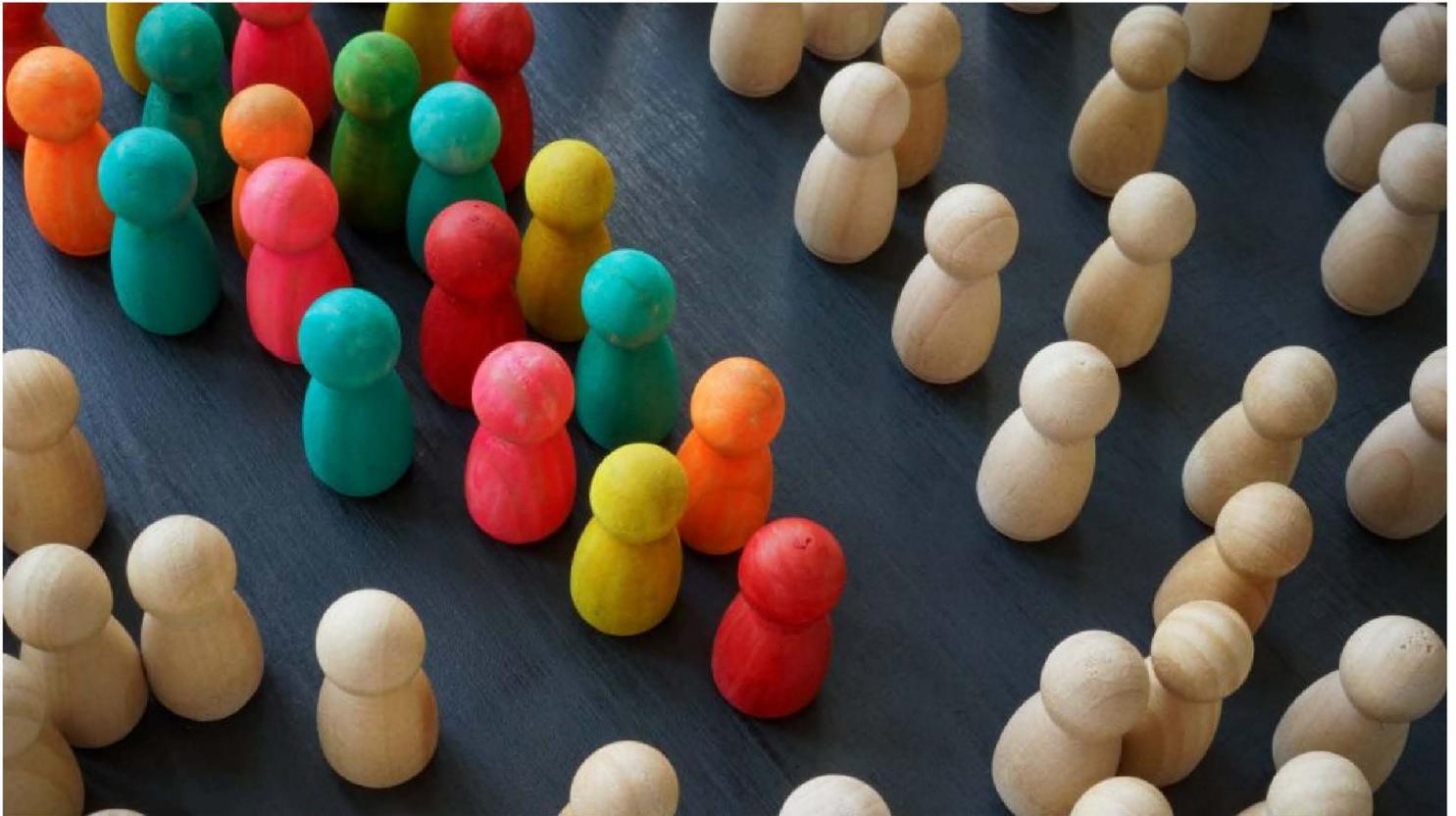


Inoculating Yourself against Toxicity in the Workplace

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Most situations are fixable. But if you must leave the firm for your mental health, make sure it's on your terms.

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You passed the bar. You are a big-shot lawyer, and now your firm reveres you for generating billable hours and producing high-quality legal work! After all, that is what they teach you in law school, right? Put in the effort, and you will be rewarded.

Certainly, hard work is important. But advancing your career once you begin practicing requires more than diligence. The skills you developed studying law may be essential, but simply doing

great work is only half the battle. Learning how to navigate personalities in and out of your firm will also play a critical role in your success.

So, what do you do when you encounter a partner who is highly critical of your work? How do you react when the person who controls your destiny is making unreasonable demands on your time, blaming you in front of others for things that are not your fault, or failing to provide you with the resources you need to be successful?

Law is a stressful business. Clients want results, and deadlines can come fast and furious. At the same time, partners who are good at their craft do not necessarily have great interpersonal skills. The following tips will help you survive these situations.

Understand Why the Partner Communicates This Way

What about their belief system tells them this is the way to get things done? Do they need to be the smartest person in the room? Are they under a lot of pressure because the clients are paying high fees, or is there a looming deadline? Are the stakes high? Is their personal life going sideways? Did they learn bad habits to get what they wanted? Maybe another associate is out sick, and they do not want to be seen as a failure.

Recognize that smart and analytical lawyers may not communicate relationally. They may be accustomed to focusing on objective facts and impersonal analysis. They want the job done, and you are the associate they think can help. Maybe they are not jerks. They have just learned to act like this to survive.

Pause; Breathe; Say Thank You for the Feedback

Resist defending yourself or arguing. Try to find constructive feedback amidst the destructive delivery. When you are under stress, blood goes to your large muscles and leaves the more

rational part of your brain. So, get your emotional brain under control before you react. Pausing and breathing can give a chance for that to reverse.

After You Pause, Ask Clarifying Questions

You may be tempted to get defensive. Instead, here are some things you can say. Your tone must be one of curiosity, not defensiveness.

- Tell me more about what you mean when you say X.
- I would love to hear some examples.
- How would you like me to handle that?
- Your priorities are my priorities. Here is what I have on my desk right now. What top three things need to be done today?
- What would you suggest?
- Are there any documents from prior deals/matters that you think I should look at as models?
- Are there any other associates I should talk to?

Find out what the partner wants and tell them you will get back to them when you find the answer. Ask for a deadline that is feasible based on *their* priorities.

If it is hard in the moment for you to receive the feedback, find a way to pause the conversation until you are thinking clearly again. You can always say, *Thank you for the feedback. You've given me a lot to think about. How about we speak some more tomorrow?*

Later, Rehearse How You Might React Next Time

Videotape yourself to observe your potential blind spots. You cannot stop your emotions, but you can control your behavior.

Learn and Adapt to Their Communication Styles

Some partners will want a lot of detail. Some just want the big picture. Some prefer email with just the bottom line. Some like to have a conversation.

Speak to What Is Important to *Them*

They may not care that you have another engagement, like a book club meeting. You want to get *their* work done professionally and need more information or time.

Know Your Boundaries and Ask Yourself How You Are an Enabler

If someone is being inappropriate or verbally abusive, it is okay to let them know. “I am happy to redo the memo, but please speak to me with the same respect I give you.” If you do not raise the issue, you are tacitly accepting that the behavior is OK and enabling them to do more of the same later.

Do Not Be a Gossip Spreader

When someone mistreats you, it is natural to want to talk about it with someone. While it is fine to vent with your friends and family (healthy even), talking about partners behind their backs to other colleagues will always get back to them and will prevent you from advancing.

Most situations are fixable. But if you must leave the firm for your mental health, make sure it's on your terms.

In the meantime, you might as well find ways to cope while you are there and learn what you can. If worst comes to worst, you will still benefit by becoming more effective in handling these personalities when you encounter them in the future in another workplace. And maybe you *can* alter the relationship for the better and become a partner without having to leave.

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