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Since the mid-1990s, Baird has helped healthcare organizations nationwide improve the patient experience and enhance organizational culture. Baird's culture assessment and diagnosis include experience mapping, medical mystery shopping, and focus groups to reveal the real customer experiences within your organization. Using your patients' experiences, Baird and her team prescribe critical next steps for improving patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores.

5 Signs Your Culture is Toxic

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Organizational leaders these days almost universally claim their commitment to a culture that nurtures and supports talent, innovation, engagement and loyalty. Yet many of these same leaders are, in fact, operating in environments that are more toxic than supportive.

The Trouble With Toxic Environments

Amazon is one notable example. Back in 2015, the [New York Times published a scathing report](#) about the company's toxic environment based on interviews with more than 100 employees—some still working at the company, some not. It was an environment where, the Times reported: “Workers are encouraged to tear apart one another's ideas in meetings, toil long and late (emails arrive past midnight, followed by text messages asking why they were not answered), and held to standards that the company boasts are ‘unreasonably high.’”

Not the kind of environment that most of us would want to work in. And yet, some supported this climate as one that led to a high level of productivity and innovation. [Jeff Bezos himself defended the culture](#) as one that is “a gold standard culture for innovation and pioneering work.”

That kind of perspective may be exactly why even those leaders claiming to be committed to a nurturing culture often go off the rails.

Looking for “Toxicity Tells”

So how can you tell if your culture is more toxic than nurturing? There are a number of “tells”:

- When employees are walking through your hallways, are they smiling with their heads up, or frowning with their faces pointed downward?
- What kinds of interactions take place in your breakrooms? Furtively whispered conversations that stop abruptly when leaders enter the room, or animated and engaging interactions with staff (including leaders), patients, visitors, leaders and others?
- When the workday is over, are employees racing out the door, or do they stick around to chat with fellow coworkers and others before heading out?
- Do your rules and regulations support risk-taking or focus on sanctions for not following policies and procedures to the letter?
- Are employees rewarded for receiving only financial goals or also for innovation, teamwork and service to others?

In an [article for Forbes](#), consultant Liz Ryan offers her perspective on a number of other “tells” that may indicate that your culture is a toxic one.

Leaders can also turn to data for indications that their culture is far from nurturing. In an article for The Predictive Index, [Drew Fortin points to data from Glassdoor](#) indicating that the average CEO rating on the site is 69 percent,

with the average company scoring 3.4 on a five-point scale. "If your ratings fall below these benchmarks, your workplace could be toxic," he writes.

A Path Forward for Leaders

What can leaders do if they find that their culture is too toxic? There are a number of steps that we recommend as we work with organizations to help them improve their culture to positively impact retention and decrease turnover:

1. Create a clear vision for the culture of the future and share it with your team
2. Connect to the values and live them with conviction. If you do not have them, conduct a facilitated meeting to define core values.
3. Put the values into action with clear, non-negotiable standards for behavior – train and coach. Then measure performance
4. Establish two-way open communication to hear the voice of the employees and to share crucial information
5. Make coaching a core leadership competency and ensure it is happening consistently

What's the situation in your workplace? Are you cultivating a culture of toxicity or engagement? The signs listed above can give you some clues. We've also created a short toxicity assessment to help you determine how toxic your current culture is. [Take the Assessment](#) and see where your culture stands on a scale of 1-5. Better yet, ask others in your organization to take it as well and compare ratings. Leaders, as Jeff Bezos' example clearly indicates, can sometimes have a distorted perspective on what a good culture really looks like.

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Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.