

# Addressing the Six Sources of Workplace Cultural Conflicts

By Claire Meyer

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**G**iven nationwide protests in the United States following George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, an increasingly polarized political divide, and rising stress and anxiety amid the coronavirus pandemic, the likelihood of workplace conflicts is high. As more offices and businesses reopen after lockdowns, however, organizations have an opportunity to renew or revise workplace cultures that have gone awry by following conflict to its origins.

According to the *2020 Workplace Culture Report* (<https://www.emtrain.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Emtrain-Culture-Report-2020-Executive-Summary.pdf>) from education and analytics company Emtrain, workplace culture is how people interact and treat each other in the work environment, and elements of those cultures will influence whether the organization is a positive or toxic workplace.

"We have seen for many years now, as company stakeholders, we have to deal with these bad outcomes that seem to catch us by surprise," says Janine Yancey, CEO of Emtrain based in San Francisco. "The idea was to take these bad outcomes—the tricky culture issues like harassment, bias, ethical mistakes, violence—and map them back to the indicators that are tied to behaviors or situations that, in heightened levels or when combined with each other, produce these bad outcomes."

The Emtrain research from a database of responses from 40,000 employees across more than 125 companies traces workplace conflict back to six key indicators: three people indicators (unconscious bias, social intelligence and preexisting mind-sets) and three organizational indicators (in-groups and out-groups, power dynamics and norms and practices).

"This is just part of being human—we carry our proclivities into the workplace," says Yancey. "It's the human condition, and when not well-understood and broken down into patterns we can all understand and process, then we're just going to be emotionally reacting off each other, and that's what breeds conflict."

That reactive stance can have serious consequences for organizational safety and security, says Steven Millwee, CPP, president and CEO for background screening and investigations firm SecurTest, Inc.

"A lot of misbehavior happens in organizations that have a toxic work environment; that's the sheer motivation for destruction of property, the theft of intellectual property, stealing or just becoming abusive," Millwee says.

"If you work in an atmosphere where your manager is extremely toxic, you feel unappreciated, you feel isolated, no one listens to you, no one cares about you, your management team is totally disengaged from you," he adds. "This oppressive type of atmosphere motivates a person to not do their job—or just do the bare minimum of the job—or it creates a catalyst for the employee to act out because they feel they need to take some action, albeit inappropriate action. This can lead to all kinds of misbehavior as punishment for the way they are being treated. It doesn't justify their behavior, but it shows you the motivation that generated it."

Feedback

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**Unconscious bias.** As employers commit to diversity goals and workforces become more multicultural and multigenerational, these unintended, learned stereotypes come to the fore.

The Emtrain study found that more than half of employees surveyed report working with five or more diverse coworkers of different races, genders or generations in their teams, although they have yet to see that much diversity among executives.

In addition, although organizations increasingly encourage workers to voice their opinions and "bring their whole selves to work," the report said, only 32 percent of respondents said they strongly agree they can be their authentic self in the workplace.

On this factor, awareness is an essential first step. But awareness alone will not decrease the effect of unconscious biases. Most employees don't see the processes that organizations can use to mitigate unconscious bias, such as role modeling, consistent employee evaluation and equal division of support tasks.

**Social intelligence.** This is the ability to recognize and negotiate the social dynamics of the workplace, and these skills vary widely across the workforce. Only 46 percent of employees surveyed by Emtrain said their coworkers understand the impact their words or behaviors have on those around them, and just 23 percent said their coworkers can accurately pick up on the mood in a room.

The study found that 86 percent of employees strongly agreed empathy is important at work, but only 42 percent strongly agreed that they see it from their colleagues. The study also found that when employees experience lower levels of social intelligence from their colleagues, they also experience lower levels of trust and respect. In addition, employees are less likely to feel safe speaking up.

**Preexisting mind-sets.** "Employee expectations and perceptions about what constitutes respectful behavior are informed by life experience," the report said. "As our workforce diversifies, employee perspectives will likely diversity as well."

Employees carry different perceptions of experiences and conflicts with them, and they often see their perspective as the correct one—amplifying the potential for conflict and misunderstanding. They bring similar diversity and preconceptions about how to resolve conflict. In a scenario where employees were asked how they would address a significant conflict between people with different life experiences, the majority (60 percent) would re-engage their manager later to discuss what happened, but 26 percent would go to HR or a senior leader to discuss or complain, 7 percent would do nothing, and 7 percent would consider job hunting or changing teams at work.

"Teaching healthy conflict resolution skills could make the difference between keeping and losing top talent," the report said.

**In-groups and out-groups.** Most people can easily recognize in-groups from their school days: cliques, popular groups, the "it crowd." At work, these groups can form around race, gender, political beliefs or other factors. People in out-groups receive less trust and support from their managers compared to members of in-groups. For example, 63 percent of in-group employees surveyed said that if they report something, they are confident management will take the complaint seriously. Only 40 percent of out-group employees said the same.

These groups also color how an employee's actions are perceived by their peers and coworkers. For example, when shown a video scene of harassing behavior, employees were less likely to classify the behavior as misconduct when the perpetrator is a person in power or a member of a perceived in-group, Yancey says. Members of more marginalized out-groups were met with less empathy and compassion.

"This research proved out that certain demographics really do have second-class experience," Yancey says. While the separate treatment does not reach the level of a legally actionable different experience in the workplace, it's very subtle—and it adds up—she notes.

**Power dynamics.** The use of hierarchical power by managers can range from coercion to influence to empowerment. "The reason power dynamics are so important in understanding the health of workplace culture—where a manager has discretion over the daily activities, career progress and livelihood of other employees—is that the consequences of employees' speaking up in an unhealthy situation can be so, well...consequential," the Emtrain report said.

While the majority of managers are not tyrants—most survey respondents said it is rare for people to get away with disrespectful behavior because of their authority—nearly one-third of survey participants identified power disparity as causing the greatest level of conflict at work. More common than tyrant managers are clueless managers. Only three in 10 employees said they are unlikely to say no to a boss's inappropriate request, but employees say only one in five managers understand that employees have a hard time refusing.

"The result: managers do not get the feedback they need when they misstep and employees tolerate disrespectful behaviors they would not accept from others," the report said.

Power dynamics can shift in a toxic direction, especially when combined with one or more of the personal cultural factors. If a manager has power but weak social intelligence skills, employees may feel uncomfortable or underappreciated, but could be unwilling to speak out for fear of repercussions.

Imbalanced power dynamics can also be expensive for the organization.

According to July 2019 research from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), workers consider culture and managers to be closely connected. The report, *The High Cost of a Toxic Workplace Culture: How Culture Impacts the Workforce—and the Bottom Line* ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/Toxic-Workplace-Culture-Report.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/Toxic-Workplace-Culture-Report.aspx)), found that 58 percent of American employees who quit a job due to workplace culture say their managers are the main reason they left. This turnover, SHRM reported, cost employers \$223 billion over a five-year period.

**Norms and practices.** These are the spoken and unspoken rules that govern what is and is not appropriate workplace behavior. Deliberate, positive norms are the strongest predictor of healthy culture, and they can counterbalance negative effects from the other cultural indicators, the report said. Norms and practices are essentially a guide to "the way we do things here," the report said.

"We all as humans have our own peccadillos—we all have our unconscious biases, our social intelligence is strong or not so strong, our preexisting mind-sets from our last job or experience. We bring all that with us into the workplace. The way to balance that out is having strong norms and practices," Yancey says.

However, only half of employees see strong norms and practices at their companies. Out of the 125 companies included in the report, the healthiest organizations' employees said they were guided by strong norms and practices, Yancey notes. Among employees who see strong norms at their workplace, 75 percent said their organization is healthy, compared to 32 percent of employees who do not see strong norms.

Without strong norms, however, "it's a vacuum. Anyone's behavior can basically set the culture," she says. "You'll have a culture, it just won't be one that is intentional or proactively set. It's one that is created by usually the worst behaviors and worst elements of the organization."

Strong norms can be built in a variety of ways, including leaders' role modeling, training, skill building sessions, constructive feedback structures and compelling change stories, the report said.

One rapidly emerging hotspot, especially in the United States, is politics, she adds. With a contentious election on the horizon and increasingly polarized political factions, workplaces could face heightened tensions. In addition, the coronavirus pandemic has thrown a wrench into many employees' long-term financial plans and ratcheted up health concerns. Altogether, these are ingredients for an explosive situation that could affect overall workplace culture as well as security, Yancey says.

However, "we're going into a rough business climate, both economically and civically, because of healthcare. Culture can either really help be the rudder that steers the organization forward, or it's toxic, which means there's no rudder and the organization's spinning," Yancey says.

"On one positive note," Millwee says, "the challenges that employers are going through right now, just with the COVID-19 pandemic, really create an opportunity for a reset of where their cultures need to be refined."

"Employees working from home or not working at all may be very anxious or worried about what the future looks like. Sometimes we tend to minimize what others are thinking or feeling, but really their feelings and thoughts are just the same as ours," he adds. "By showing a sense of compassion and mercy—not shooting the walking wounded—you can engage your people and let them know that they can feel safe in your workplace. That can do more for your culture in today's situation than almost anything else."

*Claire Meyer is managing editor at Security Management. Connect with her on LinkedIn or contact her at [claire.meyer@asisonline.org](mailto:claire.meyer@asisonline.org) (mailto:claire.meyer@asisonline.org).*

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