

# Character and . . .

## Crisis

Volume 8 / 2022

ANNALEE R. WARD

*Character and Crisis*

### Articles

JOSH THOMAS

*Healing a Fractured World*

KEN TURNER

*Science and Integrity: A Pandemic Lens*

MICHELLE A. GRACE

*Character and Crisis: Toxic Workplaces  
and Culture Change*

MOLLY HEIN

*Social Influencers: FOMO and  
Identity Crisis*

### Response

MARK A. E. WILLIAMS

*Surviving a Crisis by Not Being an Idiot*



## Editors

Annalee R. Ward, Executive Editor

Mary K. Bryant, Managing Editor

*The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.*

---

## Contact Information

Wendt Center for Character Education  
University of Dubuque  
2000 University Avenue  
Dubuque, IA 52001

563-589-3440 (office)  
563-589-3243 (fax)  
wendt@dbq.edu (e-mail)  
[www.dbq.edu/wendt](http://www.dbq.edu/wendt) (website)

---

## Copyright Notice

Copyright ©2022 by the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque; all rights reserved. Any uncredited images are copyrighted by the Wendt Center for Character Education. Brief portions of material in this publication may be copied and quoted without further permission with appropriate citation of the sources of the excerpt included in the copy. Copies may be made for classroom use if 1) the material is distributed without charge or fee above duplication costs; 2) the material includes full bibliographic citation and the following statement: "Copyright by the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque. Reproduced by permission of the Wendt Center." This policy extends also to electronic copies or links posted in online course management or e-reserve systems, provided access is restricted to students enrolled in the course. This statement serves as the Wendt Center for Character Education's official permission for using material under the conditions specified above.

---

The *Character and . . .* Journal is published by the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa, and uses parenthetical citations in the style of the 9th edition of the *MLA Handbook*.

# Character and Crisis: Toxic Workplaces and Culture Change

---

Michelle A. Grace

## Abstract


*No workplace is perfect, but anyone with co-workers knows that office culture is the difference between a job that you love and a place that you dread! Toxic workplaces can make the most dedicated employee lose productivity, disengage from the culture, and even leave the company. Extreme cases of a toxic culture sometimes lead to the end of the organization. Understanding the characteristics of a toxic employee or workplace can help identify the issues and work toward fixing the problem. This article explores toxic situations and strategies that people of good character can employ to remedy the situation.*

---

“Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk,” said a former marketing executive at Amazon. It is no wonder, considering the company practices “purposeful Darwinism.” Employees coined this phrase in response to processes in which Amazon frequently thins its workforce and only the strong survive (Kantor and Streitfeld). This includes dismissing employees who are recovering from cancer, miscarriages, and other personal issues—employees who are not fully focused on their work and Amazon’s leadership principles. None of these practices are illegal, but they certainly do not make me want to work there. Is this just unpleasant or is it toxic? Workplace analysts see reports of incivility and toxicity on the rise (“Is Your Workplace Tough—or Is It Toxic?”). The effects of a toxic work environment often manifest in physical and emotional symptoms of individual employees.

In a survey of 14,000 workers and 800 managers the effects of workplace incivility on individuals produces sobering results. Those working in toxic environments report decreases in work effort, spending less time at work, and decreased quality of work. It is troubling that 25% of those surveyed admitted to taking out frustrations on customers (“Is Your Workplace Tough—or Is It Toxic?”).

The most disturbing result of workplace incivility (to me anyway!) is that employees can experience personality changes due to stressful workplace relationships (Gangal). Human personality is receptive to nearby changes. Think of soldiers in an active battle. During traumatic times, people may change their beliefs due to confusion, anxiety, and turbulent decisions. Think about that—the character that we have developed through family, friendships, and experiences over a lifetime can be altered by work? Work—that thing we do to pay the bills and create a “good life” for ourselves and our loved ones. Something is not right here!



*The crisis of toxic workplaces can be solved by people of character doing the work to repair the culture.*

There are several ways to fix the problem of working in a toxic workplace. The first (and quickest) is to leave the organization and find a better fit with your personal values. A lengthier process is to repair the culture of the organization. This is not easy; it takes time and fortitude to achieve. The crisis of toxic workplaces can be solved by people of character doing the work to repair the culture.

## The Nature of Crisis in an Organization

---

Before we delve into solutions for toxic organizational culture, we must first examine the problem and define some terms. In this section, I will define organizational culture, crisis, and toxic culture. We will also look at some examples of toxic workplaces and how they came to be.

Let’s begin with organizational culture. According to Gotham Culture, an organizational consulting firm, culture includes an organization’s expectations, experiences, philosophy, as well as the values that guide member behavior, and is expressed in member self-image, inner workings, interactions with the outside world, and future expectations (Cancialosi). While that is a comprehensive description, my favorite definition comes

from an old communication textbook: “Organizational culture is the way things are done around here” (Deal and Kennedy 125). I have always liked this definition as it makes the culture almost seem like a tangible thing, an element that surrounds us like oxygen.



*“Organizational culture is the way things are done around here.”*

So, what is the image of a positive work environment? Many people (especially iGen and Millennials) envision free food and beverages, foosball tables, and flexible work schedules. While appealing, this is just scratching the surface of company culture. For many companies, the culture does not align with the values of the employees. Often, a culture changes with every management shakeup. An employee who was once satisfied and enjoyed their work environment may become disenchanted by a new CEO who has a different view of success than the founder or previous leadership team. When this happens, the workplace may become toxic.

Can an unsatisfactory organizational culture really be defined as a crisis? According to the Washington State Department of Social & Health Services the three basic elements of a crisis are 1) a stressful situation, 2) difficulty in coping, and 3) the timing of intervention (“Crisis Intervention”). That definition seems tailor-made for working in a toxic workplace.

So, how does an organizational culture become toxic? It is often hard to define a toxic culture. The first sign is often anxiety (that pit in your stomach) and “mustering all of your energy” just to enter the workplace. A culture can turn toxic situationally—a new supervisor from outside the company, a critical deadline, or restructuring. While a toxic culture can sneak up quickly, fixing a toxic culture takes much more time and intention.

Suzanne Benoit, human resources consultant, defines a toxic workplace as “a place where surrounding work units are distracted by gossip, drama, and unproductive employee activities” (9). Toxic workplaces are often considered the result of toxic employers and/or toxic employees who are “[m]otivated by personal gain (power, money, fame or special status),” use “[u]nethical, mean-spirited and sometimes illegal means . . . to maintain or increase power, money or special status” or “divert attention away from their performance shortfalls and misdeeds.” Toxic workers do “not recognize a duty to” their employer or “their co-workers in terms of ethics or professional conduct toward others.” They define their relationships with

co-workers by whether they like or trust them, rather than by organizational structure (14).

Basically, whenever an entity (an individual, a division, the leadership team) puts its own interests above those of the organization or above other entities of the organization, there is the likelihood of a toxic environment. In the next sections, I will share examples of a toxic culture. Toxic culture can be a small blemish in the history of an organization, the reason a company closes its doors, or the motivation to restructure and repair a tarnished image. In most cases, a toxic culture is due to a group of individuals whose actions do not align with the mission and vision of the organization.

*Toxic Workplace Culture* I doubt that most organizations set out to be toxic or even view their practices as toxic. Many people find themselves in a toxic environment after responding to postings for creative, spontaneous, forward-thinking candidates, only to find themselves in organizations seeking employees that they can control (Coccia 32). How does an organization's culture become toxic? Can a company change its culture?

You might be surprised to learn the consequences of company culture. Any organization can fall victim to culture problems. A tragic example of this is one of the most respected organizations world-wide: the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, better known as NASA.

NASA has signified innovation and success for decades. Life and death decisions are made daily in this organization designed to push the limits of humanity. Granted, mistakes are made in every workplace. Many of us learn valuable lessons from those errors. A superior once comforted me after I made an error by telling me, *it's not rocket science*. The stakes are clearly higher when human life hangs in the balance and it *is* rocket science! What is worse is when no decision is made because no one wanted to be "that guy" who delivered the bad news.



*High stakes rocket science*

On January 18, 1986, the nation was collectively stunned to watch the Space Shuttle Challenger explode 73 seconds after takeoff. The official cause of this accident was cold weather and o-rings. An o-ring is a small piece of rubber designed to create a seal at the junction of multiple parts. O-rings are common and very inexpensive, but can degrade when there is too much

pressure or exposure to extreme heat or cold. Cold temperatures caused the rupture of the o-rings on the Challenger, but the o-rings only had the chance to rupture in the cold because of NASA's flawed decision-making process and the silencing of dissenting voices.

Like any other organization, NASA has goals and deadlines. Such was the case in the Challenger launch. This event was seen as critical by NASA executives as media interest in its missions had decreased. With the inclusion of a high school teacher on the Challenger crew, televisions were tuned to the launch in every American classroom—including my own eighth grade class. Do the stakes get any higher?

Those of us who remember this tragedy often forget that the launch had already been delayed due to unseasonable cold at the launch site in Florida. With the world watching, further delays could not be tolerated. The launch happened as planned against the advice of a few opposing voices and resulted in catastrophe.

In 1990, the Augustine Report was issued after a thorough investigation. The results pointed to the culture of NASA as a key factor. "The most fundamental ingredient of a successful space program . . . is the culture or work environment in which it is conducted" (*Report of the Advisory Committee*). The committee members proposed several recommendations for beliefs and assumptions that should characterize NASA going forward:



*Challenger catastrophe*

- The success of a mission should take precedence over cost and deadlines.
- Space flight requires open communication in which individuals are encouraged to report on problems or anomalies.
- The space program cannot succeed in an environment where avoiding failure is seen as an important role.
- The space program should not get spread too thin by working simultaneously on different projects (Miller).

To many of us, the recommendations above may seem like simple fixes. But in an environment of strict procedures and clear leadership hierarchy,

change is easier said than done. Going from a “keep your head down and your mouth shut” atmosphere to a “speak up loud and clear” culture does not happen overnight. Change must start at the top and requires constant reinforcement. Later in this article, there are some suggestions for initiating change and removing toxic elements.

NASA is certainly not the only organization with hierarchy and control issues. The pursuit of power and profit can change the culture of a department or organization. This was certainly the case with Theranos, a medical technology startup in Silicon Valley. While profit was greatly important to this organization, the cause of the toxic environment at Theranos was not so much about dollars but about power and control. Many former employees named secrecy, lying, and the lack of interdepartmental transparency (open sharing of information, communication, and accountability) as reasons they left the company (Dunn et al., “Ex-Theranos Employees”).

Theranos began as the brainchild of Elizabeth Holmes while she was a student at Stanford University. She was passionate about her idea to test for hundreds of medical conditions with “just a few drops of blood.” Her mission was to prevent premature deaths due to undiscovered illness. After losing a beloved uncle, she wanted to bring her idea to the masses to make testing easier and to diagnose illness early enough to treat. The question was how.

The story of Theranos spans a mere fifteen years from inception to demise (2003 – 2018). The early years make a great success story—the first female billionaire entrepreneur, over \$6 million in funding shortly after the founding of the company, a stellar board of trustees, creation of hundreds of jobs, and a partnership to have a Theranos testing center in Walgreens drug stores all over the United States (Kent). But in 2014 doubts began to creep in about the validity of the company and its products. The environment changed and employees once dedicated to the cause began to reevaluate their allegiance to Theranos and Holmes.



*Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes*

Up to this point, the public, Theranos trustees, and even the media viewed Theranos as an unmitigated success (Weisul). In October of 2015, articles published in the *Wall Street Journal* lifted the curtain on the very secretive company and its founder. John Carreyrou had uncovered scathing evidence of poor management, employee dissatisfaction, and overstatement of their

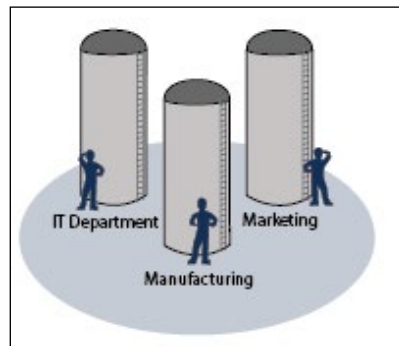


products' capabilities. Statements that over 1,000 tests can be performed with "just a few drops of blood" were disproven even as Holmes went on a media campaign to minimize the effects of the *Wall Street Journal* article (Volk).

After this, things went downhill quickly. Investors sued Theranos and criminal charges of fraud soon followed. By June of 2018 Holmes and her Chief Operating Officer Sunny Balwani were indicted on 11 charges, including wire fraud. These are just the criminal charges. What happened inside the walls at Theranos was equally disturbing. Bullying. Intimidation. Subterfuge. Outright threats. In comparing the environment at Theranos to Benoit's definition of a toxic workplace, you can check off items like a shopping list.

1. *A place where surrounding work units are distracted by gossip, drama, and unproductive employee activities* (Benoit 9). Former Theranos chemist Erica Cheung spoke out about the expectation to work all hours of the day and night to process samples and the need to run tests multiple times to get the expected result. She had reservations from day one while witnessing paranoia and secrecy among leadership and the requirement that every employee sign a non-disclosure agreement (Berke).

The secrecy also took on a different form at Theranos—silo mentality. On farms, silos are great. In business, they can be toxic. Silo mentality is a mindset in which departments or sectors do not share information with other parts of the company. This reduces efficiency and morale and can contribute to the demise of a productive organizational culture (Gleeson). Theranos used this technique to hide the lack of progress in their product development. By only allowing employees access to certain information, no one was able to see the full picture—no one but Holmes and her right-hand man, Balwani.



*Silo mentality*

2. *Toxic workplaces are often considered the result of toxic employers and/or toxic employees who are "[m]otivated by personal gain (power, money, fame or special status)," use "[u]nethical, mean-spirited and*

*sometimes illegal means to . . . maintain or increase power, money or special status” or “divert attention away from their performance shortfalls and misdeeds”* (Benoit 14). Tyler Schulz is a name you will see again. Schulz began his career at Theranos as an intern after “Falling in love with her (Holmes’) vision.” Over his time at Theranos, this feeling drastically changed and he decided to let Holmes know. Schulz is not just your run-of-the-mill employee. He learned about Theranos from his grandfather, former Secretary of State and Theranos board member George Schulz. For this reason, the younger Schulz felt that his opinion would be respected. He was wrong.

In April of 2014, Tyler Schulz could no longer stay silent about the flaws he saw in the lab tests. He sent Holmes a detailed email about doctored research and failed quality control efforts. After a few days of silence, he received a response. Not from Holmes to whom he addressed the email, but from Balwani, the COO and Holmes’ romantic partner. The email response was eight pages long and written in red font. The email called Schulz arrogant and threatened that if he was anyone else, he would have been fired for his insubordination (Hofmann).

At this point, Schulz had had enough. He left Theranos and began sharing information with *Wall Street Journal* writer John Carreyrou. Once Holmes and Balwani found out about this, they enlisted George Schulz to reason with Tyler. When Tyler refused to sign a second NDA, Theranos took legal action and he lost the very close relationship he had with his grandfather. George told Tyler, “They’re trying to convince me that you’re stupid, but they can’t do that. They can try to convince me that you’re wrong and in this case I do believe you’re wrong” (Dunn et al., “Ex-Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes”). Tyler Schulz’s parents covered his \$500,000 in legal fees and were almost forced to sell their house to defend their son. As the lies, secrecy, and outright fraud hit the news, George Schulz saw the light. He resigned from the Theranos board and worked to rehabilitate his relationship with Tyler. But by this point, serious damage had been done (Hofmann).

3. *Toxic workers do “not recognize a duty to” their employer or “their co-workers in terms of ethics or professional conduct toward others”* (Benoit 14). In the height of the Theranos dream, many employees were recruited from another Silicon Valley giant, Apple. Engineers and product specialists left behind their valuable shares of Apple stock to be a part of the next big thing. Adam Vollmer joined Theranos, motivated

by Holmes' vision and brilliance. According to Vollmer, "we wanted to see her become that billion-dollar leader, literally everybody wants to work for the next Steve Jobs" (Dunn et al., "Ex-Theranos Employees").

What the former Apple employees got instead were the most loathed behaviors in the office—lying, mistrust, and lack of respect. In an article outlining the behaviors of culturally successful organizations, the authors polled thousands of workers. They found that the most highly valued element of culture as rated by employees was respect. In fact, respect for employees is

18 times more likely to predict a high rating for culture than any other factor (Sull and Sull). This was missing in the culture at Theranos. In the resignation letter of engineer Justin Maxwell, he vented his disdain for the lack of respect for employees at Theranos.

*Another key element of a poor organizational culture—putting the aspirations of executives above the core values and cultural elements that matter to employees.*

I wish I could say better things. But I think you know exactly what is going on at Theranos. . . . Lying is a disgusting habit and it flows through conversations here like it's our own currency. But I really truly believe you know it already. And for some reason, I can't figure out why you allow it to continue. (Dunn et al., "Ex-Theranos Employees")

This statement is pretty telling. It also reveals another key element of a poor organizational culture—putting the aspirations of executives above the core values and cultural elements that matter to employees (Sull and Sull).

4. *Toxic workers define their relationships with co-workers by whether they like or trust them, rather than by organizational structure* (Benoit 14). It has already been established that there was no trust between leadership and the employees at Theranos. This was the case with Ian Gibbons, chief scientist at Theranos. Gibbons was hired by Holmes in 2005. As a scientist, he was concerned about the data he was seeing and became increasingly vocal about the discrepancies and errors being reported. After several years of his findings and advice falling on deaf ears, Gibbons was called into a meeting with Holmes in May of 2013. After seeing what happened to others who spoke up, Gibbons was afraid

he was about to get fired and attempted suicide. Gibbons died a week later. Rather than offer her condolences to his wife Rochelle, Holmes instead demanded the immediate return of all Theranos confidential property to the company headquarters (Hartmans).

## Addressing Crises in Organizational Culture

---

Earlier we questioned whether a toxic culture could be repaired. All of those leadership books were right, an organization *can* modify its culture . . . for the better! For an individual working in a toxic workplace the answer might be to leave the organization. For others, leaving the organization is not enough. Those brave enough can take the crisis public through a process known as whistleblowing. For leaders who want to reform the organization, they must choose a plan to combat the specific elements of toxicity. I will share some frameworks for reforming a toxic workplace culture. We will also look at a success story of a company that overcame their culture crisis. It was not easy or fast, but Matthias Müller was able to steer Volkswagen (VW) out of a global scandal and simultaneously repair the corrupted internal culture. But first, whistleblowing. As an individual in an organization, one may feel that this is the only option to bring issues to light and to repair a toxic workplace.

*Whistleblowing* Whistleblowing is not for the faint of heart. A typical whistleblower is someone who makes decisions based upon their moral character and who is not influenced by corporate reward/punishment systems (Trevino and Youngblood). While their actions were based on their ethical beliefs, many whistleblowers suffer negative consequences for speaking out. In simple terms, a whistleblower is someone who reports waste, fraud, abuse, corruption, or dangers to public health and safety to an entity in the position to rectify the wrongdoing (“What Is a Whistleblower?”). A survey by the Ethics Resource Center reports that up to a quarter of whistleblowers report retaliation after speaking out (Ladika). A small list of consequences include isolation from co-workers, loss of their job, and even being shunned from their entire industry (Carter 209).

*While their actions were based on their ethical beliefs, many whistleblowers suffer negative consequences for speaking out.*

There are many examples of whistleblowers in our history. Indeed, our country would be a much different place without such heroes as Mark Felt (the infamous Deep Throat who broke the Watergate scandal in the 1970's), Karen Silkwood (who spoke out about dangerous work conditions at a plutonium plant and radioactive contamination of employees), and Jeffrey Wigand (who broke the story about tobacco industry executives secretly adding addictive elements to cigarettes). While brave and now famous (all of these individuals have at least one movie chronicling their story), all suffered for their efforts. Mark Felt lived in fear and secrecy until three years before his death. Karen Silkwood was killed in a car accident on her way to meet with a *New York Times* reporter. Dr. Jeffrey Wigand was once a top executive at Brown & Williamson (a tobacco company). After he blew the whistle, this PhD in Biochemistry ended his career as a high school chemistry teacher (Whelan).

Remember Erica Cheung and Tyler Schulz? Both independently and together, these two former Theranos employees blew the whistle on the unethical and illegal actions they witnessed. Schulz worked with a journalist to get the story out to the public. Cheung sent an anonymous email to a regulatory body reporting the inconsistencies and downright lies in the lab findings being reported by Theranos executives.

There is some good news for current-day whistleblowers. In 2010, Congress passed the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. This legislation was designed to end the “too big to fail” financial service protection and bailouts (Frank). It also includes protection and compensation for whistleblowers. Whistleblowers are entitled to compensation if sanctions are imposed based on their sharing of information. They are also protected by antiretaliation rules that will protect their job or trigger a jury trial if they are terminated so that they can be reinstated in their position and receive compensation for back-pay and legal fees (Frank).

*Leader Led Reform* For those with influence or position, the change in company culture can be initiated from within. This is how Matthias Müller chose to reform the image and culture of Volkswagen. In 2014, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) tests had uncovered discrepancies in road emissions testing on VW vehicles. Months later in 2015, VW admitted



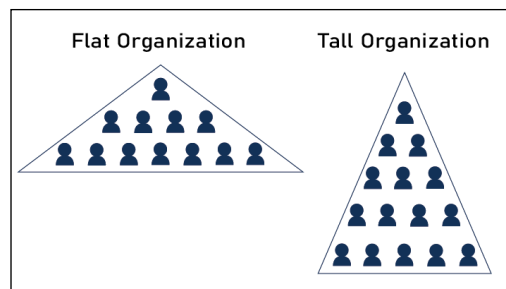
*Matthias Müller, Volkswagen CEO 2015-2018*

wrongdoing in which a software patch was installed in their cars to falsely report emissions data. Volkswagen publicly apologized and planned to refit millions of vehicles affected by the emissions data (Hakim and Ewing). Surviving this scandal would be no easy feat. Sweeping changes were necessary if Müller hoped to secure a future for Volkswagen.

While some internal changes were already in progress, Müller needed to quicken the pace when he was elevated to CEO after his predecessor, Martin Winterkorn, abruptly resigned in September of 2015. While many in the industry expected Müller to pick up where Winterkorn left off, Müller had plans of his own. His main objective: destroy the hierarchy (Boston).

Müller considered the “old guard” responsible for the emissions scandal and set forth to dismantle the decision-making bottlenecks caused by the multiple layers of management. He flattened the organization chart and gave control back to the individual brands. “We don’t need any ‘yes men’. The future belongs to the courageous. I am appealing to the curious, to the nonconformists, to the pioneers” (Boston et al.). That is a culture-breaking statement if one was ever said. Any employee who believed that they were not valued was ready to listen. As was Müller. He shared his mobile phone number directly with decision makers. Now they had direct access instead of the layers of handlers previously in place to shield the CEO from management (Boston).

Müller instigated further hierarchy-busting changes; he moved board members between the parent company and its core brands, attacked executive privilege by selling the corporate jet, implemented an open-door policy, and cut the levels of management needed for approval. Müller signaled his



Organizational Hierarchies

plans for a secure future by creating two new positions—chief of strategy and chief of digitization. In a 2016 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, a chief designer for the VW brand stated, “There is no more hemming and hawing. They make decisions, we are moving faster” (Boston et al.).

This is a great example and gives us hope for the salvation of other toxic organizations. Organizational change takes time, effort, reinforcement, and support. Müller certainly did not achieve this on his own. He had a team

and a strategy to turn his vision into reality at Volkswagen. After many years of work and reparations, Volkswagen is again a respected brand in the automobile industry.

### *Guiding Principles and Strategies for Achieving Cultural Change*

To properly plan modifications to your organizational culture, there are five guiding principles to evaluate. This may seem like a simple list, but a deep and honest look at the existing cultural elements below will determine whether changes are needed.

- Cultural change takes place more effectively when worked at three levels: organization, team, and individual.
- Culture change is accelerated by connecting individual beliefs to organizational results.
- Culture change requires a planned and disciplined implementation cascade.
- Culture change is accelerated by using a “Leader Led Learning” approach.
- Technology should be leveraged for communications, measurement, and reporting success to reinforce cultural change (Heckelman et al.).

If further action is needed to modify the culture of the organization, there are many strategies that can be implemented, depending on the type of changes needed. I will focus on two possible models. Attraction, Selection, Attrition (ASA) is a good strategy to utilize when broad changes need to be made in personnel. The BEAR model is useful when the change element is the behavior of individual organizational members.

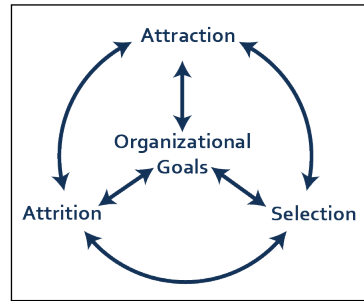
*ASA: Attraction, Selection, Attrition*      Organizational psychologist Ben Schneider created the ASA framework to examine the culture of an organization through its people. ASA asks three questions:

- Who is drawn to a given organization?
- Who ends up being selected?
- Who stays? (Neville and Schneider 42)

The ASA framework works best in a culture where the employees are the toxic element of the organization. By analyzing the type of individual that is attracted to the organization, who is hired, and who stays, the ASA model can help to reframe the hiring and training processes of an organization. This

is not an immediate culture fix, but it will right the ship and allow it to smoothly sail into the future. The ASA framework was used by Matthias Müller in his reformation of Volkswagen following the 2014 EPA emissions reporting scandal.

- **Attraction:** Organizational culture is influenced even before an employee joins the company. Organizations should review their recruiting materials and interactions with potential employees. If those applying for positions with the organization do not meet the mission and values of the firm, changes should be made in the method of recruitment and the language used in materials.



ASA Framework

- **Selection:** Analysis of those employees who are offered a position and how those individuals differ from the population as a whole will show the shared personality of the organization. By identifying personality traits and undesirable behaviors, employers can change the selection process of hiring by concentrating on the positive elements that they want to infuse into the organizational character.
- **Attrition:** It is true that the organization shapes the individual, but attrition is a huge factor in the formation of the culture. Attrition refers to employees who leave the organization due to resignation or retirement. This is a huge element to study in a toxic culture. Those who stay longest are most compatible with the organization. Determining who is staying provides a snapshot of the existing culture. Examining who is leaving shows the culture elements that are not accepted by the organization as a whole (Neville and Schneider 42).

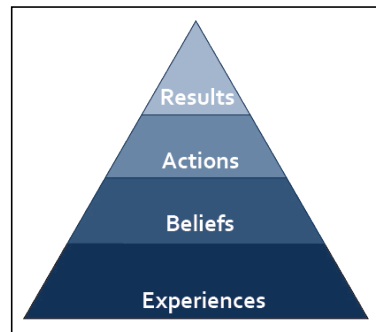
*The BEAR Model*      The BEAR model is a good framework for changing behaviors. BEAR (Beliefs, Experiences, Actions, and Results) speaks to the link between the beliefs of the individual and their behaviors. The desired outcome of the BEAR model is to emphasize core beliefs to maintain organizational culture and to contribute to future success (Heckelman et al. 27).

- **Beliefs:** Beliefs define what a person values, prioritizes, and what motivates what they do and why. Individual organizational members need to see the link between their beliefs, and how they affect the organization as a whole.



- **Experiences:** Experiences help to shape beliefs. The lack of alignment of the employee's beliefs with the values of the organization can cause individuals to be less motivated to act in a manner that produces positive effects for the organization. It is important to assess the individual's beliefs through surveys, focus groups, or direct conversation to determine appropriate ways to motivate employees to achieve positive results.
- **Actions:** The beliefs people hold cause them to act and behave in a particular way. This is especially important if there is a misalignment between the values and beliefs of the organization's leaders. If leadership is viewed as disingenuous, it will affect the beliefs and actions of organization members.
- **Results:** What a person does causes an outcome/result. For this approach to work, leaders need to create experiences to reinforce beliefs. Employees must be empowered to make decisions and this needs to be supported by leadership (Heckelman et al. 25).

Organizational change is not a light switch; it is more like a sunrise. It must take place slowly and elements for success are revealed as the light increases and the environment warms. There may be clouds on the horizon or rain in the forecast, but warnings and an umbrella are necessary tools for a successful process. Some strategies may fail and some steps may bear repeating. But each new day brings promise and hope.



BEAR Model

## Conclusion

---


American business is in a crisis. The increasing prevalence of toxic workplaces calls for both employees and employers of good character to consider whether their values line up with those of the organization and take steps to correct the course of their company culture, whether through whistleblowing, resigning, or administratively making broad strategic changes.

At the end of 2021, many people were returning to the office after working at home or being reinstated from furloughs during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic gave workers time to reflect on their lives and many decided that they did not want to return to the same culture that they left. With hundreds of people deciding not to return to their pre-COVID job, the job market is in chaos. Even companies with good reputations are feeling the staffing sting. Prospective employees have the upper hand in employment negotiations as employers struggle to fill multiple openings. With one in five Americans leaving jobs due to poor company culture (Cheng), organizational culture is more important now as we struggle with engagement and connection.

Many workers have discovered another desirable element of a positive workplace—work/life balance. Self-care has gone from a nice idea to a mantra in many people’s lives. When going to work is the cause for anxiety or physical manifestations of stress, self-care is no longer a nice idea. It is a necessity.

The easiest way to fix your place in a toxic culture is to leave it. You can wait for a disaster like NASA, tolerate lying and secrecy like Theranos, or you can do what is best for you by finding a new organization where the goals and values align with your own. I will leave you with a slightly modified blessing of my Irish people: May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind always be at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face; may you find joy and satisfaction in your workplace, and find a new one if you don’t!



*Organizational culture is more important now as we struggle with engagement and connection.*

---

*Michelle Grace is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Dubuque. Her areas of study are organizational communication and leadership. Michelle teaches several classes on workplace communication and strategy to undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Dubuque. In addition to her work with communication students, she also consults with UD's Physician Assistant program and coordinates the co-curricular leadership experience for the Master in Management program. Michelle is the founding advisor for the National Society of Leadership and Success at UD. When she is not working with students, Michelle enjoys spending time with her dogs Luna, Stella, and Pippa.*

---

Photo credit p. 48: "Challenger explosion" by Kennedy Space Center, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Photo credit p. 49: "Theranos Chairman, CEO and Founder Elizabeth Holmes" by TechCrunch, CC BY 2.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Photo credit p. 54: "Matthais Müller" by Volkswagen AG, CC BY 3.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

## Works Cited

---

Benoit, Suzanne V. *Toxic Employees: Great Companies Resolve This Problem, You Can Too!* Benoit Consulting Services, 2011.

Berke, Rick. "From Protégée to Whistleblower: A Former Theranos Scientist Says Elizabeth Holmes Should 'Come Forward and Apologize.'" *STAT*, 1 May 2019, <https://www.statnews.com/2019/05/01/from-protégée-to-whistleblower-a-former-theranos-scientist-says-elizabeth-holmes-should-come-forward-and-apologize/>.

Boston, William. "Careers: VW Still a Work in Progress—New Chief Takes Aim at Auto Maker's Culture, Hierarchy amid Large Management Overhaul." *Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition*, 24 Feb. 2016, p. B.7. ProQuest, <http://www.proquest.com/docview/1767521100?accountid=28604>.

Boston, William, et al. "VW Says 'Culture' Flaw Led To Crisis." *Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition*, 11 Dec. 2015, p. B.1. ProQuest, <http://www.proquest.com/docview/1747539471/abstract/2480CFCD89A4B37PQ/1>.

Cancialosi, C. "What Is Organizational Culture?" *GothamCulture*, 17 July 2017, <https://gothamculture.com/what-is-organizational-culture-definition/>.

Carter, Melody. "Deceit and Dishonesty as Practice: The Comfort of Lying." *Nursing Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 3, May 2016, pp. 202–10. *Wiley Online Library*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nup.12129>.

Cheng, Andy. "5 Examples of Excellent Company Culture During COVID-19." *RingCentral*, 13 July 2020, <https://www.ringcentral.com/us/en/blog/5-examples-of-excellent-company-culture-during-covid-19/>.

Coccia, Cynthia. "Avoiding a 'Toxic' Organization." *Nursing Management*, vol. 29, no. 5, May 1998, pp. 32–33. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=afh&AN=1931379&site=ehost-live>.

"Crisis Intervention." *Washington State Department of Social and Health Services*, <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/book/export/html/490>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2021.

Deal, Terrence E., and Allen A. Kennedy. *Corporate Cultures: Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*. New ed., Penguin Books, 1988.

- Dunn, Taylor, et al. "Ex-Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes Says 'I Don't Know' 600-plus Times in Never-before-Broadcast Deposition Tapes." *ABC News*, 23 Jan. 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/theranos-ceo-elizabeth-holmes-600-times-broadcast-deposition/story?id=60576630>.
- Dunn, Taylor, et al. "Ex-Theranos Employees Describe Culture of Secrecy at Elizabeth Holmes' Startup: 'The Dropout' Podcast Ep. 1." *ABC News*, 12 Mar. 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/theranos-employees-describe-culture-secrecy-elizabeth-holmes-startup/story?id=60544673>.
- Frank, Barney. H.R.4173 - 111th Congress (2009-2010): Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. Public Law 111-203, 21 July 2010, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/house-bill/4173/text>. Library of Congress.
- Gangal, Aditi. "Personality Changes Due to the Stressful Workplace and Healing Methods." *Info That Matter*, 17 Sept. 2021, <https://infothatmatter.com/2020/09/17/personality-changes-stressful-workplace-healing-methods/>.
- Gleeson, Brent. "The Silo Mentality: How to Break Down the Barriers." *Forbes*, 2 Oct. 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brentgleeson/2013/10/02/the-silo-mentality-how-to-break-down-the-barriers/>.
- Hakim, Danny, and Jack Ewing. "In the Driver's Seat." *New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast)*, 2 Oct. 2015, p. B.1. ProQuest, <http://www.proquest.com/docview/1718276116/abstract/D62396FFB024ABDPQ/1>.
- Hartmans, Avery. "The Way Theranos Reportedly Reacted to the Suicide of Its Chief Scientist Was Unbelievably Cold." *Business Insider*, 19 Mar. 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/theranos-ceo-elizabeth-holmes-employee-death-2016-9>.
- Heckelman, Wendy L., et al. "Driving Culture Transformation During Large-Scale Change." *OD Practitioner*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2013, pp. 25–30.
- Hofmann, Sarah. "Theranos Whistleblower Risked His Relationship with His Family to Expose Fraud." *Fraud Conference News*, 25 June 2019, <https://www.fraudconferencenews.com/home/2019/6/25/theranos-whistleblower-risked-his-relationship-with-his-family-to-expose-fraud>.
- "Is Your Workplace Tough—or Is It Toxic?" *Knowledge at Wharton*, Aug. 2015, <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/is-your-workplace-tough-or-is-it-toxic/>.
- Kantor, Jodi, and David Streitfeld. "Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace." *The New York Times*, 15 Aug. 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html>.

- Kent, Chloe. "Theranos Timeline: Where Did It All Go Wrong?" *Medical Device Network*, 4 July 2019, <https://www.medicaldevice-network.com/features/theranos-failure-timeline/>.
- Ladika, Susan. "Whistling While You Work." *Workforce Management*, vol. 91, no. 4, Apr. 2012, p. 26. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=74654142&site=ehost-live>.
- Miller, Katherine I. "Organizational Communication." *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, John Wiley & Sons, 2008. *Wiley Online Library*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405186407.wbieco018>.
- Neville, Lukas, and Benjamin Schneider. "Why Is It so Hard to Change a Culture? It's the People." *Organization Development and Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, Jan. 2021, pp. 41–46.
- Report of the Advisory Committee on the Future of the U.S. Space Program*. National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Dec. 1990. NASA History Division, <https://history.nasa.gov/augustine/racfup1.htm>.
- Sull, Donald, and Charles Sull. "10 Things Your Corporate Culture Needs to Get Right." *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 16 Sept. 2021, <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/10-things-your-corporate-culture-needs-to-get-right/>.
- Trevino, Linda K., and Stuart A. Youngblood. "Bad Apples in Bad Barrels: A Causal Analysis of Ethical Decision-Making Behavior." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 75, no. 4, 1990, pp. 378–85. *APA PsycNet*, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.75.4.378>.
- Volk, Steve. "The Rise and Fall of Theranos." *Discover*, vol. 38, no. 1, Feb. 2017, p. 44. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=119493310&site=ehost-live>.
- Weisul, Kimberly. "The Longest Game." *Inc.*, vol. 37, no. 8, Oct. 2015, pp. 48–147. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=109370323&site=ehost-live>.
- "What Is a Whistleblower?" *National Whistleblower Center*, <https://www.whistleblowers.org/what-is-a-whistleblower/>. Accessed 28 Jan. 2022.
- Whelan, Nathaniel. "History's Most Famous Whistleblowers." *WorldAtlas*, 31 July 2020, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/history-s-most-famous-whistleblowers.html>.

