

Workplace toxicity during disruptions

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Workplace toxicity during disruptions

Alisha Ali and Judith Chomitz

Alisha Ali, Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom, is a social scientist researching sustainable development in tourism and hospitality, focusing on information and communication technologies, innovation, work environments and education. Her doctoral research defined a new research domain of Information and Communication Technologies for Sustainable Tourism, and her textbook on this has been described as a 'landmark publication'. She has experience in research design, which led to her involvement in several contract research projects working with government offices, destination management organisations (DMOs) and



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Workplace toxicity refers to low-intensity deviant behaviour, and is often described as a 'social pollution' [1]. Toxic behaviours are rude and discourteous, and have been equated to workplace bullying [2, 3], as they display a lack of regard for the victims or the witnesses. Due to its ambiguous nature, workplace incivility is difficult to detect, and this can cause more stress for the victim who may agonise over interpretations of the behaviours [2]. Examples may include witnessing or experiencing exclusion, sexual intimidation, rumours, and condescension [3]. The turbulent hotel work climate is potentially the perfect breeding ground for toxicity to develop [4] as it is argued that the hospitality industry harbours one of the highest levels of employee incivility. This situation has been attributed to the working conditions, such as the long hours, low pay, heavy workloads, and high levels of emotional labour [5, 6].

The Covid-19 pandemic amplified feelings of stress and threat amongst hospitality employees due to uncertainty over loss of income, fears about the future, and social distancing, which undermined both physical and psychological health [7]. Workplace toxicity is more likely to develop in periods of tension and disruption, such as those experienced by many hotel organisations during the pandemic [4]. The fact that the mental health issues caused by disruptions that manifest in the workplace (e.g., anger, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, fear, insomnia, stress, and confusion) [8], can be the cause of significant negative outcomes, has often been overlooked. Research that details the negative impacts of Covid-19 on workers and the workplace, continues across disciplines, including psychiatry [8,9], and business [10,11]. A substantive multidisciplinary approach has also considered the different aspects of the effects of toxicity on both workers and the workplace; in particular, the negative impacts on both mental health in the workplace, and on the bottom line [12,13]. However, to the researchers' knowledge, little has been published on bringing these two themes together to understand the impact on hotels. As employees are a business's largest single investment, it is important that hotels have available the information and tools to combat and minimise the effects of mental health issues, thereby allowing for a strong and resilient recovery from periods of disruption.

To understand this knowledge gap, the authors undertook a



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scoping study, which reviewed the literature on the pandemic, toxic workplaces, psychological well-being, and the hospitality industry. The aim of this research was to identify whether the mental health impacts caused by a disruption such as the pandemic, can lead to, or contribute to increases in the number of toxic hotel workplaces. The literature elucidated that a pandemic would likely escalate the growth of toxic work environments; it also revealed that a combination of mental health stressors plus toxicity would multiply the potential for negative consequences to workers' mental health [14]. It is possible that throughout the pandemic, hotel work environments have been a hotbed for toxicity to develop, leading to a new type of workplace culture that is unhealthy for hotel staff and the industry, necessitating further primary research to confirm the literature review findings, and identify practical solutions. The first step, as shown in the literature pertaining to workplace toxicity, is to prioritise health and well-being in the workplace, so that employees feel valued, safe, and comfortable [15]. For instance, offering guidance and training, fostering camaraderie by organising outings for team building, and developing new policies and programmes, such as mediation procedures, to combat toxicity in the workplace [16]. Managers can also be positive role models by adopting a no-tolerance attitude towards workplace toxicity, holding offenders accountable. Likewise, they should reward positive workplace behaviours.

This study sheds some light on hotel workplace toxicity while providing recommendations for hoteliers to understand the broader psychological impacts that crises, such as the pandemic, can have on employees, thereby mitigating future shocks.

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