



# Living

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They're the radioactive jerks at work: the whiners, bootlickers, slackers, glory hogs and nags. Meet your ...

# Toxic co-worker



Illustration by SCOTT THIGPEN

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**N**othing transforms the office into Chernobyl with cubicles faster than a toxic co-worker. Antics of a malcontent corrode workplace chemistry and reduce productivity: Constant complaining. Browbeating. Rumor mongering. Glory-hogging. All trigger the middle-management Geiger counter.

"In our cubicle world, it is almost impossible to avoid the toxic co-worker. They thrive in this environment," said Luis Valdes, vice president of Atlanta-based Corporate Psychology Resources, which provides coaching and leadership development for midsize and large businesses.

"Liars, drama kings and queens, paranoids, slackers, sociopaths, self-centered narcissists all seem to create different types of chaos in the workplace. These people are a constant source of frustration, aggravation, irritation and low morale."

But there's hope for workers trying to survive the daily onslaught of unabashed negativity.

► Please see **CO-WORKERS, E8**

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Dealing with the offending employee is a delicate dance, especially for co-workers. Running to management isn't the first choice, experts advise. What appears toxic to one person might be innocuous to another. Nastiness isn't illegal.

Among the tips from various workplace consultants, in increasing order of volatility:

► **Ignore the behavior.** Toxic people crave attention like oxygen. End the fuel supply, end the problem.

► **Don't take it personally.** Separate style from substance. Annoying as it is, adjustments may be required for the resident genius. Accept quirks and embrace the quality of the end product.

► **Tell the boss.** This can be as casual as a conversation or as formal as an annual review. Be careful, though. You might get tagged as a malcontent or someone who's not a team player.

► **File a complaint with human resources.** This is a high-risk option, for the problem may grow wider. It can be tricky, especially if no company rules or laws have been violated. Be dispassionate. Be prepared to document.

► **Quit.** If the situation becomes untenable with no solution at hand, leave. "Life is pretty short," said Chester Elton, a work culture consultant and author. "Why work at a place that's miserable?"

# Co-workers: Some personalities create chaos

► Continued from E1

"Toxic employees tend to be fairly self-destructive. They tend to get fired," said Chester Elton, a work culture consultant and co-author of "A Carrot a Day" (Gibbs Smith, \$12.95), a tome about improving office relations.

As Elton lectures employers about quelling noxious attitudes, he spotlights Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver-turned-wrecking-ball Terrell Owens, suspended by the team after a series of work-related flameouts.

"If you don't think one toxic person can blow up an entire organization, look at the Eagles," Elton said.

Before the season started, Owens threatened to skip training camp because he was unhappy with his contract. He invited the media to his house to watch him do sit-ups and shoot hoops. He criticized his quarterback Donovan McNabb, refused to talk to teammates and told his head coach to shut up.

Owens remained unscathed — until he called the Eagles classless when they didn't commemorate his 100th career touchdown pass this season. Philadelphia then suspended him for "conduct detrimental to the team."

A Super Bowl team last year, the Eagles are in danger of not even making the playoffs this year.

But not every problem creates a made-for-TV drama. Some cubicle-mates are more slyly insidious.

When BJ Gallagher worked as a training manager at the University of Southern California, a male peer flirted for months and made off-color jokes. Gallagher, a workplace expert and author of "Who Are 'They' Anyway?" (Kaplan, \$14.95) wrote him off as a jerk and ignored him.

One day when he asked her to do a work favor, she refused. "See if I ogle you anymore," he told her.

That set Gallagher off. After consulting with a trusted friend, she decided to confront



At the office, a loose cannon such as Eagles wide receiver **Terrell Owens** can dampen team spirit.

her colleague, telling him she had a problem with the way he treated her. Instead of blaming him, she framed the misgivings from her point of view: "When you say things like that, I feel like a sex object," she told him.

The approach made her co-worker less defensive, and their professional relationship moved on.

Richard Laermer dealt with his own employee imbroglio — minus the news cameras and ESPN commentary. Still, his

New York public relations office stirred like the Eagles locker room when "Barbara" came to work, a woman Laermer called "pathologically insolent. It was like she was raised in a barn."

It was common for her to stand at her cubicle, call out a co-worker by name and announce he was worthless, stupid and couldn't do his job. On another day, she told one client about offering a reporter oral sex to get a story in the paper. She took one prospective hire to lunch — and he never came back.

But she handled many complicated accounts during the dot-com boom of the late 1990s. "I had the crazy, ill-conceived notion that I couldn't go on without her."

Laermer said the office became "mutinous." He spent many hours "talking people off a cliff," counseling managers and workers how to cope with her. Still, several top performers quit during her 14-month stint.

The end came soon after she told one client, Sesame Workshop, that she wasn't allowed to watch "Sesame Street" growing up because it was considered "white trash."

"Get out," he finally told her.

That was a day for celebration, Laermer said. He bought a bottle of champagne and opened it with his three managers.

"I applaud the Eagles," Laermer said. "They knew when to stop the buck."

## TOXIC OFFICE CHARACTERS

► **Rage-oholics:** Tempers flare at every little thing.

► **Dodgers:** Always there to catch praise. Not around when things go wrong.

► **Gossips:** Make up truths in the absence of real information.

► **Napoleons:** Short guys with big egos. Blowhards.

► **Queen bees:** Arrogant women who respect one opinion: theirs.

► **Detail drones:**

Nitpick things to death.

Bottlenecks happen here. Also known as the micromanager.

Source: BJ Gallagher, California-based workplace consultant



CBS

Newsroom boss Lou Grant (**Ed Asner**, right) was a rage-oholic, often because of anchorman/office dimwit Ted Baxter (**Ted Knight**), on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."