

As we navigate through these uncertain times, supervisors and insider threat professionals should be aware of potential behavior changes within the workplace. With global tensions and economic instability on the rise, the outcome of various international events could leave many people feeling unsettled. Issues such as climate change, geopolitical conflicts, economic fluctuations, and social justice movements may exacerbate our coworkers' stress and tension in the workplace. While adherence to organizational policies is required—and most will manage their concerns in constructive ways—leaders may observe behaviors that could erode order, discipline, and mission focus, potentially leading to insider threat acts.

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# SPECIAL ISSUE

DIFFICULT TOPICS >>> IN THE WORKPLACE

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ADDRESSING CORROSIVE BEHAVIORS

Leaders must monitor for and address corrosive behaviors that can erode workplace cohesion and address employee feelings that may prevent or shape dissatisfaction before they evolve into grievances, crises of conscience, or feelings of moral injustice. Engaged leaders can identify and

address these behaviors before they grow into insider threats that require intensive reactive interventions, potentially leading to the loss of time, resources, and mission effectiveness. The focus is on what leaders can proactively do when they identify negative behaviors before they escalate.

“Leadership is not easy, it is the practice of imperfect humans leading imperfect humans.”

- Anne Morriss

## PROACTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS<sup>1</sup>

Leaders play a critical role in shaping the culture, and overall well-being of their teams. Poor management can exacerbate employee dissatisfaction and counterproductive behaviors that may grow into grievances, workplace violence, or espionage,<sup>1</sup> while effective organizational responses are essential to prevent escalation. Leaders should acknowledge up front that there are likely people who feel anxious or uncomfortable about global events and address behaviors of concern directly, utilizing ‘difficult conversation’ skills. These discussions are crucial for maintaining transparency, resolving conflict, and building mutual trust. A difficult conversation “is anything you find hard to talk about<sup>2</sup>,” in the workplace, examples include, managing interpersonal conflict, setting boundaries, holding people accountable for unacceptable behaviors, or disciplinary actions. These conversations are most successful when they focus on concrete events, are done privately, and avoid inflammatory or extreme language.

### FOCUS ON FACTS

“You said your coworker was rude and disrespectful, can you tell me what she said that made you describe it that way?”

### ASK CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

“I’m not sure I understand what X means. Can you explain it to me?”

### GIVE PEOPLE SPACE

“This is a difficult topic. Should we take a moment to regroup?”  
(These conversations should be done privately when possible)

### AVOID EXTREME WORDS (Always/Never)

“I understand you said he has done this a few times. Do you have a sense of how often?”



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## CORROSIVE

# BEHAVIORS



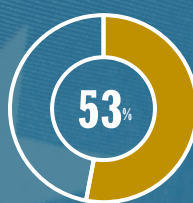
## EXAMPLES OF CORROSIVE BEHAVIOR

- › Comments such as “people like you” jokes targeted at specific groups, or targeting specific socio-political topics
- › Lingering, unresolved resentment against co-workers, supervisors, or organization with passive aggressive or obstructive work behavior
- › Verbal or non-verbal communications in the workplace, during duty time that show displeasure with a particular social cause
- › Isolation of team members/coworkers and development of ingroups

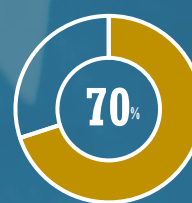
## WHAT CAN LEADERS DO TO COMBAT CORROSIVE BEHAVIOR

Unhealthy disgruntlement (especially when combined with a maladaptive organizational responses) can be a significant stressor that can lead an insider down the ‘Critical Pathway<sup>5</sup>.’

- ✓ Leaders should strive to identify workplace aggressions and behavioral indicators of organizational stress before it leads to grievances that could put national security at risk.
- ✓ Align top-down messaging that provides clear boundaries involving appropriate workplace conduct and hold people accountable.
- ✓ Leaders should promote a culture that values honesty, respect, mutual trust, and policy neutrality.
- ✓ Be transparent about processes regarding concerns rather than definitive about the expected outcomes, which may be impacted by situational factors beyond a leader’s control. Giving someone an incorrect answer may increase their feelings of distrust, but explaining the steps and processes can decrease tension.
- ✓ Leaders should consult Human Resources, Ombudsman, EEO, EAP and other organizational partners for support in managing workplace conflict and facilitating difficult conversations with employees.



53% of employees are handling “toxic” work situations by ignoring or avoiding them<sup>3</sup>.



70% of employees are avoiding difficult conversations with their boss, colleagues, or direct reports.<sup>3</sup>

## IMPACTS OF UNCERTAINTY

- › Fear of the future: anxiety, depression, anger, etc.
- › Lack of flexibility, risk averse problem solving and overly rigid behavior
- › Irritableness – hostility, angry outbursts, short temper
- › Pre-existing/unaddressed employee conflict that could be aggravated by pre- and post-election rhetoric
- › Hyper-focused on possible negative outcomes or worst-case scenarios, (catastrophizing)
- › Decline in performance – quality of work, enthusiasm, etc. Distraction at work, expressions of being overwhelmed
- › Withdrawal – a noticeable change in participation/engagement at work or withdrawal in homelife (may be evidenced by visible signs of degradation in self-care/grooming etc.)
- › Avoidance-based decision making

HEALTHY ORGANIZATION

### CORROSIVE CULTURE:

Maladaptive/Adaptive  
Microaggressions  
Anxiety/Depression  
Unaddressed Stressors  
Unaddressed Grievances  
Unidentified Toxicity

### INSIDER THREATS:

Threats  
Substance Abuse  
Disruptions  
Direct Conflict  
Grievances  
Misconduct

TARGETED ATTACK

1. PERSEREC. (2021). *The Art and Science of Speaking Up and Being Heard*.  
2. Stone, Douglas, Patton, Bruce, Heen, Sheila (2023) *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York: Penguin Books. 3. Bravely (2019) *Understanding the conversation gap: Why employees aren't talking, and what we can do about it*. 4. LifeStance (2024). *The 2024 Election Cycle's Impact on Mental Health & Relationships*. 5. Shaw, E. D., & Sellers, L. (2015). Application of the Critical-Path Method to evaluate insider risk. *Studies in Intelligence*, 59



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