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How to handle 5 common toxic job situations

Do you need help navigating tricky work scenarios?

by **ROSIE GIZAUSKAS** NOV 12, 2019



Being stuck in a toxic job sucks, and it can – like a bad relationship – knock your confidence and make you feel like you’re going to be there forever. "Work is a breeding ground for bad behaviour because any situation with more than one person involved has potential for conflict," says careers coach [Karen Kwong](#). "Add egos and pride,

and that dynamic is amped up." So how should you handle these stomach-churning, anxiety-inducing situations? We asked the experts.

How to handle a mean boss

The situation: You're not going to get praise from your manager all the time – they are meant to guide you with constructive criticism, after all. But if you feel as though they have a personal axe to grind and you can't seem to do anything right, this can be crushing.

What to do about it: Take a deep breath, as this won't go away on its own. But how you handle it depends on the situation. "There's no hard and fast rule," says Rachel Suff, senior policy adviser at the [CIPD](#), the professional body for HR. "If an incident is at the lower end of that scale, some people may want to raise it directly. If you feel you're being bullied, you may want to make it more formal."

Dealing with it by yourself? Try to be as non-confrontational as possible. Say something like, "I want to have a good working relationship with you and I've got the sense that you might not be happy with my work. Can you let me know where I'm going wrong?" Then, together, put a plan in place as to how you can improve. If you think it borders on bullying, you could ask an HR representative or another manager to have a quiet word. HR raising the issue could be enough. While you may never be best friends, it's your boss's duty to stay professional. Take comfort in the fact that your HR department or another manager will be trained in dealing with this kind of situation.



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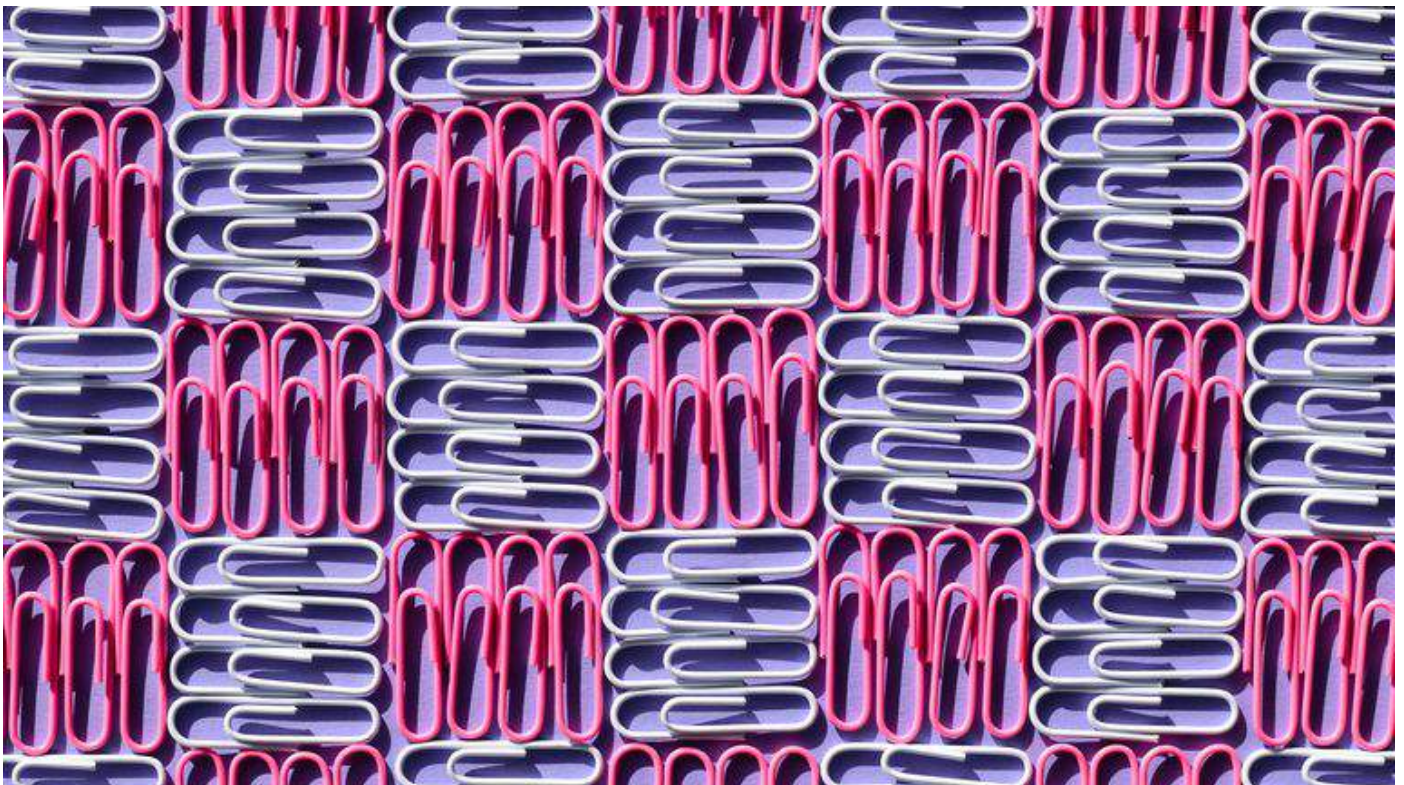
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How to handle little to no progression

The situation: There's nothing more frustrating than being stuck in what feels like a dead end at work – whether you've been told that you're not ready for a more senior role, or a colleague has been promoted ahead of you for a job you had your heart set on. Or it could be that – no matter how good you are – there's simply nowhere for you to go.

What to do about it: Has a colleague pipped you to the post? Or have you been told you're not quite ready yet? Time to bring in the F word: feedback. "Ask for honest examples where you've shown apparent ineptitude and when," says careers coach [Karin Peeters](#). "It might be hard to hear, but this will give you the opportunity to improve. Then, work together on a plan of action to help you get to where you need to be. Is there any training that they can provide? Be proactive, be mature and grow from this experience – and then prove them wrong."

If there simply isn't the opportunity to progress within your department – for example, if jobs are being cut – then it might be time to take the nudge to move on in good faith and start looking for roles elsewhere. Love your company? See what's happening in other departments – there might be a sideways move you can make internally that will allow you to flourish.



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How to handle sexual harassment in the workplace

The situation: If you feel at all uncomfortable then trust that feeling – even if the other person seems to have no idea that what they’re doing is wrong. “Sexual harassment at work covers a very wide spectrum of behaviour, from verbal comments to offensive jokes and unwanted touching – including what some people may write off as ‘banter’,” says Suff.

What to do about it: There’s lots of different support out there, and the key thing is speaking up. Keep a detailed diary of inappropriate remarks and incidents as evidence that you can refer back to when making a formal or informal complaint. “If speaking to the person face-to-face feels too uncomfortable, go to a trusted manager or someone from HR. Trust your instincts and decide who to approach to discuss the issue,” says Suff.

If you feel you can’t, perhaps because the people that you would approach are male, she recommends confiding in a senior female colleague who can describe the behaviour involved to them without necessarily identifying you. If you want to remain anonymous, HR can issue a communication to all staff, reminding them of what isn’t appropriate, which may be a wake-up call to the person concerned.

If you’re worried HR isn’t taking you seriously, make it clear you’re prepared to submit a formal grievance, as employers who fail to follow the correct process can face additional financial penalties at any subsequent employment tribunal. It might feel like you’re drawing unwanted attention to yourself by speaking out, but you’ll be helping to stop the same thing happening to others in the future. You can also contact organisations such as Citizens Advice and Acas for more help with sexual harassment.

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How to handle cliquy colleagues

The situation: Finding out that half of your team were at the pub without you via Instagram isn't a nice feeling, and cliques at work often create a bad atmosphere for those who aren't "in".

What to do about it: First, think about what you really want from work pals before calling them out. "What's hurting you most? Deep inside, you might not even want to be part of their 'tribe', but would just like to feel as though you have friends at work," says Peeters.

"Hang out with people who *do* appreciate you. Look around your workplace – is there anyone else who isn't fully 'accepted' either? Having one friend in the office will make a huge difference." Once you start going for lunchtime walks with the shy new girl and find out that she's hilarious, you'll begin to care less about the others. However, if you feel the exclusion is bordering on bullying behaviour, speak to HR or raise it with your boss.



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How to handle finding a new job when it feels like nothing's out there

The situation: Looking for a new job when you're working a 9-5 is pretty soul-destroying, especially if you keep getting knockbacks when you do have interviews.

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What to do about it: It's worth taking time to sit down with a pen and paper and write down what you want from a career. "It may be that you need to move outside your comfort zone. Think carefully about how your skills and experience could be transferred to a wider range of new job opportunities," says Suff. Speak to recruitment agencies such as Michael

Page (which has 25 different niches, from banking to fashion), InterQuest (which recruits for IT and tech jobs), or Blue Arrow (which specialises in hospitality and retail vacancies).

"You should also think about doing extra training to enhance your CV," adds Suff. "When looking for jobs, don't make a knee-jerk reaction to quit just because you've had a bad week. However, if you have been unhappy at work for six months or more and things don't look like they're changing, taking a role that isn't necessarily your dream job might make sense. A sideways move could be just as beneficial. It may even be worth considering a less senior role if it gets you a job with a good employer that can offer longer-term opportunities." It might even be time for a bigger, more creative shift: could you take the plunge and go travelling – or apply for jobs abroad?

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