



PRESSURE LANDS ON EVERYONE.
ALMOST EVERYONE.

A GCHECK COMPLIANCE FOR GOOD® REPORT · THE TRUST RECESSION RESEARCH SERIES

THE CONSEQUENCE GAP

Companies got harsher with everyone except the people the harshness was for.

An August 2026 national survey of 1,500 US workers on who absorbs workplace pressure, who escapes it, and what unaccountable behavior costs a team.

2026 · 1,500 US workers surveyed.

Key findings

61%

What 1,272 workers who have had such a colleague say they saw happen

Most toxic colleagues never face consequences

85% of US workers have worked closely with a colleague whose behavior consistently made work life worse. In **38%** of those cases nothing happened to that colleague, and in **23%** they were rewarded, promoted, or protected. Only **36%** eventually left or were removed.

"Companies got harsher with everyone except the people the harshness was for."

40 vs 10%

What workers say they themselves did, by what happened to the colleague

Turnover follows the consequence gap

Where the toxic colleague was rewarded, **40% of workers left the job before that colleague did**. Where the colleague was removed, **10%**. The exits follow what the organization did, not what the colleague did.

"Everyone got harder to be around except the person who should have."

36 vs 21%

What workers saw happen: 119 cases involving a manager, 342 involving a junior colleague

The higher the rank, the softer the consequences

Toxic managers and senior leaders were rewarded or protected in **36%** of cases and removed in **21%**. Toxic junior colleagues faced nearly the opposite odds: 24% protected, 41% removed.

"Accountability, as workers experience it, flows downhill."

36 vs 14%

What workers say they themselves did, by what happened to the colleague

Unaddressed behavior replicates

Where the toxic colleague was rewarded, **36% of exposed workers began adopting the behavior themselves**; where the colleague was removed, **14%**. At least 21% of all exposed workers admit they started acting like the colleague, and asked behavior by behavior, 62% report at least one change.

"When bad behavior gets rewarded, everyone notices."

52%

What all 1,500 workers say would help

Workers want consequences, not comfort

Asked what would most keep toxic behavior from spreading, workers rank **managers addressing it early** first (61%) and **real consequences regardless of the person's performance** second (52%). Nothing on their list asks for gentler standards.

"Workers aren't asking companies to be softer. They're asking them to aim."

The toughness went everywhere except where it was aimed

American workers describe a job market that has hardened around them: four in ten say they have become more cynical than they used to be, trust their coworkers less, and feel more drained or short-tempered than before. Against that backdrop, this study asked a pointed question. When one colleague's behavior consistently makes work life worse, an experience **85% of workers** report, what actually happens to that colleague?



36%

eventually left or
were removed

38%

faced no visible
consequence

23%

were rewarded, promoted,
or protected

As reported by the 1,272 workers who have had such a colleague.

More than six times in ten, the person the toughness was supposedly for **walked away untouched or better off**, and the gap widens with rank: harmful managers were rewarded or protected far more often than harmful juniors (36% vs 24%) and removed at half the junior rate. Everyone else absorbs the cost. Where that colleague was rewarded, workers adopted the behavior at **two and a half times the rate**, reported **double the personal damage**, and left the job before that colleague **four times as often** as where the organization acted.

The study also measured what unaddressed behavior does over time: **at least 21% of exposed workers admit they started acting like the colleague**, asked behavior by behavior, roughly three times as many report at least one change, and **43%** of those who adopted the behavior **carried it into jobs where the colleague never worked**. The report closes with what workers say would stop the spread, and their answer is not a softer workplace. It is **consequences that hold regardless of the person's performance**.

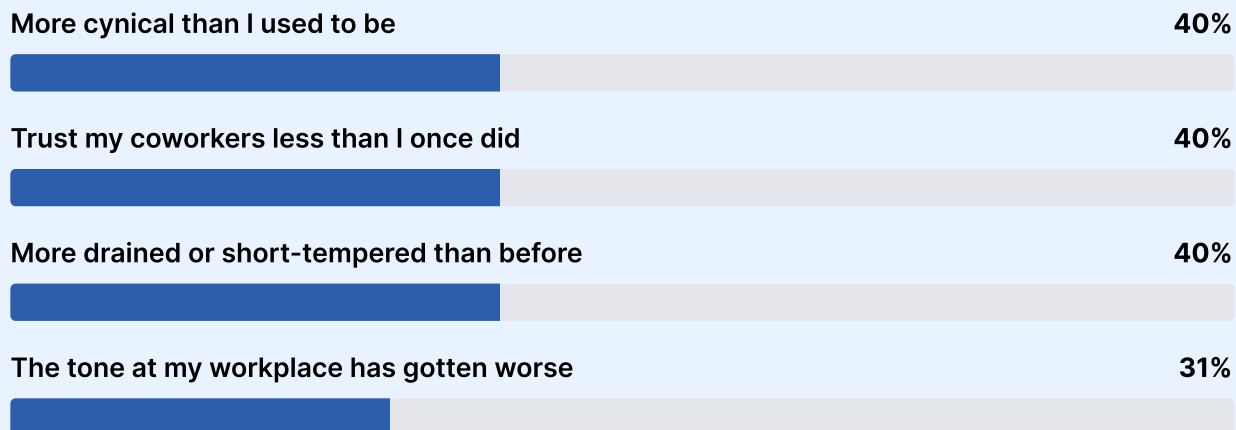
READING THIS REPORT

Every figure says who was asked and how many. All change is self-reported: workers describing themselves and what they saw, which shows a pattern, not proven cause. Full methodology, bases, and measurement notes on page 14, including findings that cut against the report's premise.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY GAP

American work got harder. The accountability didn't.

By their own account, US workers are operating in a tougher room (each statement was put to all 1,500 workers on its own):



The standard explanation for a harder workplace is a harder market: tighter standards, leaner teams, tougher management. This study tested the part of that story nobody audits. If workplaces really got tougher on bad behavior, the one colleague whose conduct consistently made work life worse should be the first to feel it. **85% of workers have had one.** In **more than six in ten** of those cases, **nothing happened to them, or something good did.**

THE CONSEQUENCE GAP

is the distance between how hard a workplace is on everyone and how hard it is on the specific person making it worse: the colleague whose behavior goes unpunished, or rewarded, while the pressure lands on the people around them.

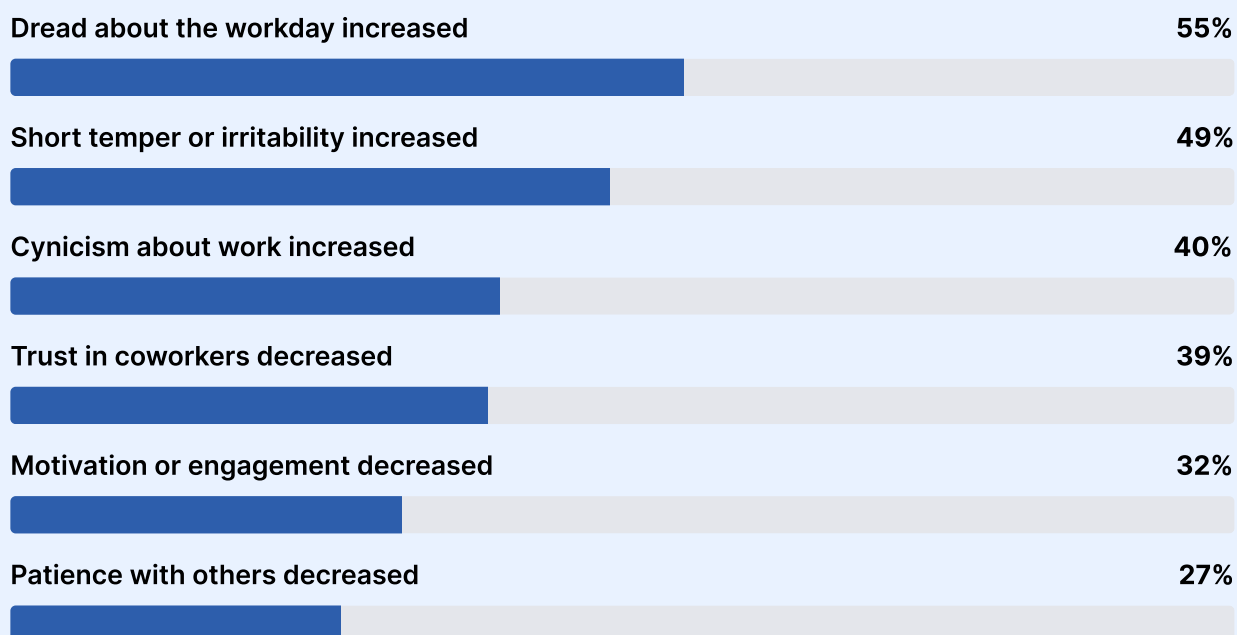
The chapters that follow measure the consequence gap three ways: who absorbs it, who receives it, and what it costs, ending with the fix workers themselves rank first.



THE PRESSURE LANDS ON THE BYSTANDERS

The people who didn't cause the problem carry it

Workers exposed to a toxic colleague, meaning someone whose behavior consistently made their work life worse, report measurable change in themselves (each change below was asked about separately, of all 1,272 such workers):

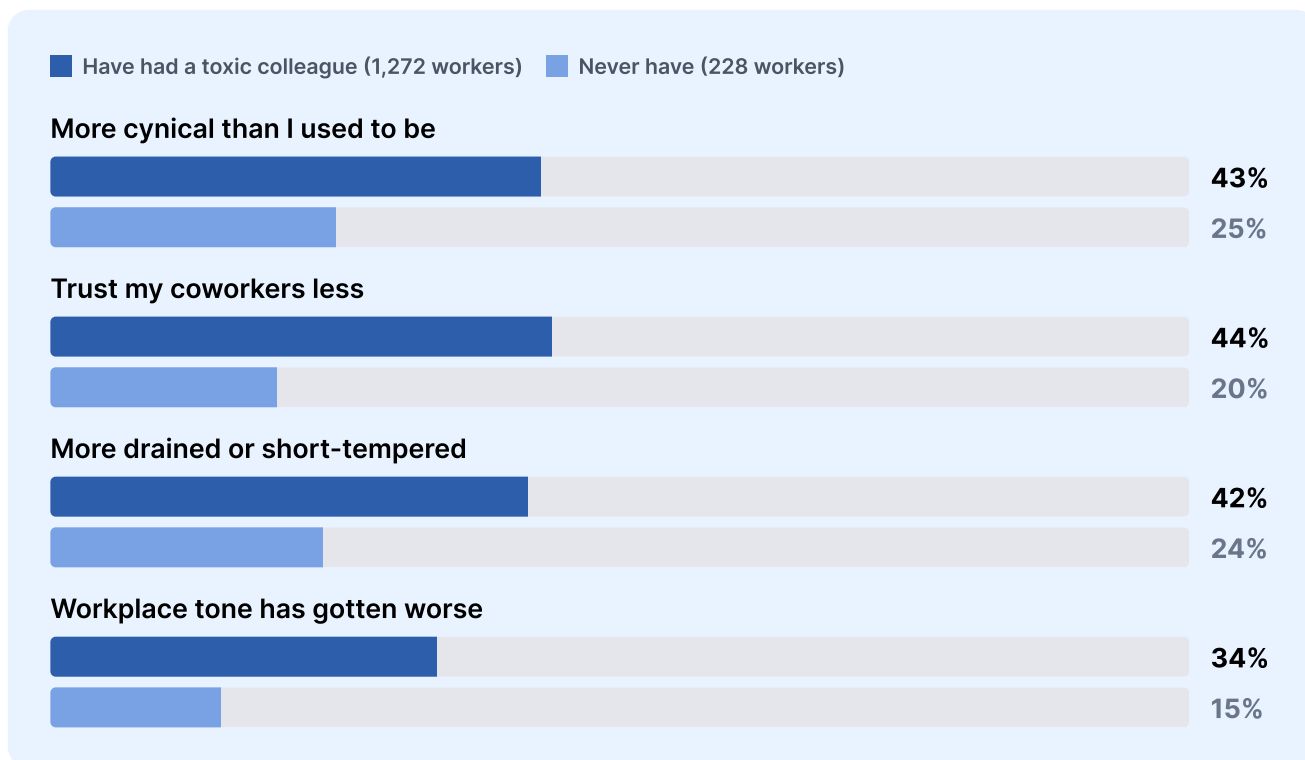


What the colleague actually did, reported behavior by behavior (workers could name more than one): constant complaining and draining negativity 59%, escalating minor issues or weaponizing rules 51%, directing people without authority 50%, friendly in person while undermining privately 49%, credit-taking 39%. And it is mostly not a boss story: in 47% of cases the toxic colleague was a peer; only 10% named their manager or a leader above them. **The most common source of workplace harshness sits at the next desk**, which is exactly why blanket toughness from above keeps missing it.

ISN'T EVERYONE JUST MEANER NOW?

Some of it is just the times. One bad colleague doubles it.

Maybe the hardening is just the times. The design anticipated that objection: the 228 workers who have never had such a colleague answered the same questions, and the gap between the groups is what this report claims.



A quarter of workers who never had a toxic colleague report rising cynicism too; some of the strain is simply the era. But **exposure widens every erosion measure by 18 to 24 points**, roughly doubling the trust and tone complaints. The general hardening of work and the specific damage of an unaddressed colleague are different problems, and the second one has an address.

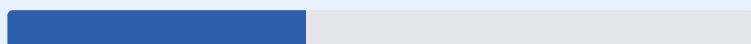
"The times made work harder. The consequence gap made it personal."

TURNOVER FOLLOWS THE CONSEQUENCE GAP

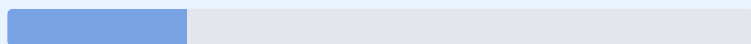
The exits follow what the organization did, not what the colleague did

Who left first: the worker or the toxic colleague?

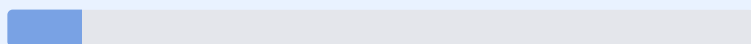
Colleague was rewarded or protected 40%



Nothing happened to them 24%



Colleague was removed 10%



Share of workers who left the job while the toxic colleague stayed. Three groups of 283, 477, and 476 workers; a pattern, not proof of cause

Where the colleague was rewarded, **four in ten workers left the job before that colleague did**. Where the organization acted, **one in ten**. The Society for Human Resource Management has estimated that culture-driven turnover cost US organizations as much as \$223 billion over five years (SHRM, 2019); this comparison shows how that bill gets run up, one team at a time. Turnover in these workplaces is not a mystery force. It is **the bill for the consequence gap**, paid by the people the toughness was never meant for.

Workers also believe they can see the pattern: 44% say the best or healthiest people leave first when a toxic colleague goes unaddressed. The lived record is more mixed; among past cases, the toxic colleague more often left first: **57%**, among the 630 workers whose exposure is behind them. Both are true at once: most toxic colleagues do eventually go, and where they are protected instead, the departures shift decisively to everyone else.



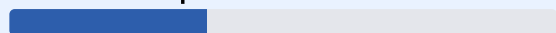
"Everyone got harder to be around except the person who should have."

THE CONSEQUENCE GAP HAS AN ORG CHART

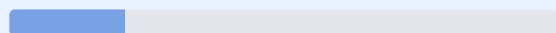
The higher the rank, the softer the consequences

Toxic manager or senior leader (119 cases)

Rewarded or protected 36%

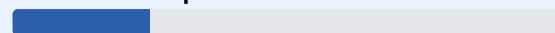


Removed or left 21%

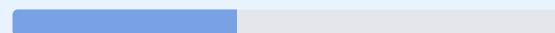


Toxic junior colleague (342 cases)

Rewarded or protected 24%



Removed or left 41%



Toxic peers (603 cases) sit between: 20% rewarded, 37% removed. The manager numbers rest on 119 cases, a smaller group, so read them as directional.

In the era of tightened performance standards, workers watched harmful senior colleagues get **protected more often than harmful junior ones (36% vs 24%)**, and **removed at half the rate (21% vs 41%)**. Accountability, as experienced from below, flows downhill.

The damage flows the other way. Exposed to a toxic manager or senior leader, **76% of workers report increased dread** about the workday (a smaller group: 119 cases), against 53% when the toxic colleague was a peer, and the portion who say the exposure changed them for the worse rises from 26% to 36%. The cases the system is least willing to touch are the ones that hurt the most.

UNADDRESSED BEHAVIOR REPLICATES

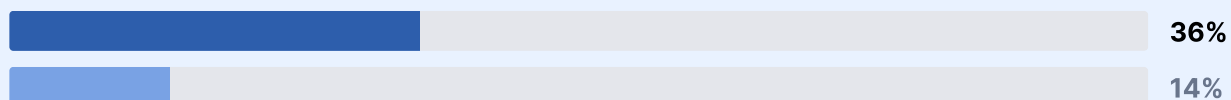
When bad behavior gets rewarded, everyone notices

Outcomes among exposed workers, by what happened to the colleague

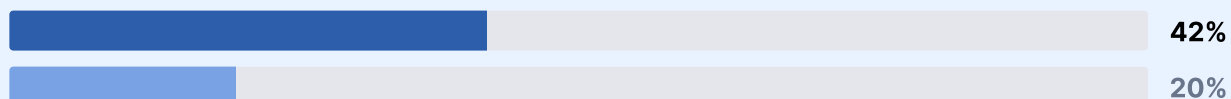
Comparing the 283 workers whose colleague was rewarded with the 476 whose colleague was removed

■ Colleague rewarded or protected ■ Colleague removed

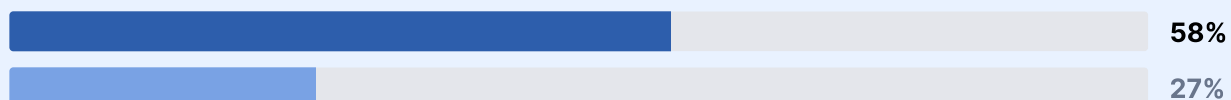
Began adopting the behavior



Changed for the worse



Saw it clearly spread to others



Came through unchanged



Where the colleague was rewarded or protected, **adoption of the behavior ran two and a half times higher**, twice as many workers said the exposure changed them for the worse, and twice as many watched it spread to others. The number of workers who came through unchanged fell by half: **rewarded toxicity leaves almost no bystanders**. Adopters themselves name the mechanism: among workers who admit picking up the behavior, a third say they did it because that behavior got rewarded here (a third of the 254 workers who admitted picking it up).

The same comparison holds a quieter finding. Workers who say the experience changed them for the better saw their colleague removed at nearly twice the rate of workers changed for the worse (42% vs 24%). A workplace that visibly resolves the problem appears to teach a different lesson than one that shrugs.

WHAT REPLICATION LOOKS LIKE UP CLOSE

One in five admit they caught it.
Three times as many show it.

21%

of exposed workers admit they started acting like the colleague, even a little. The true number is almost certainly higher.

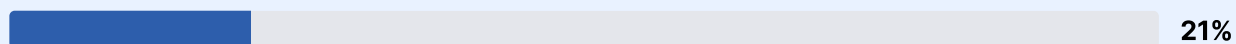
Asked of the 1,272 workers who have had such a colleague



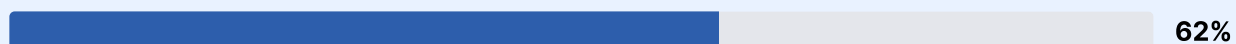
Admitting it versus showing it

The same 1,272 workers, asked two different ways; "none of these" was always an option

Admit acting like the colleague



Report at least one adopted behavior



Said no or not sure, yet report a behavior

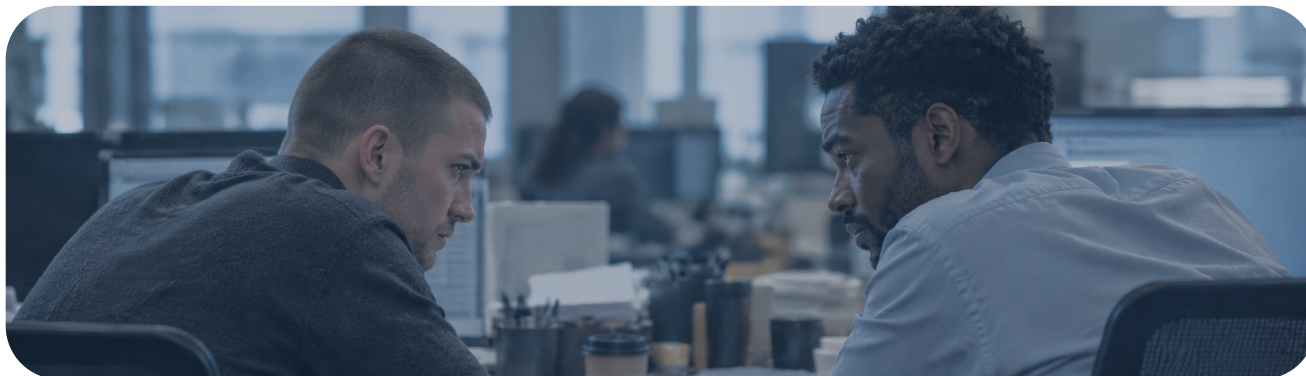


Asked the global question, most workers say no. Asked behavior by behavior, **62% report at least one change** they noticed in themselves, including **55% of those who had just declined the admission**. The behavior items record what started after the exposure, not proven imitation, which is why the report leads with the harder number.

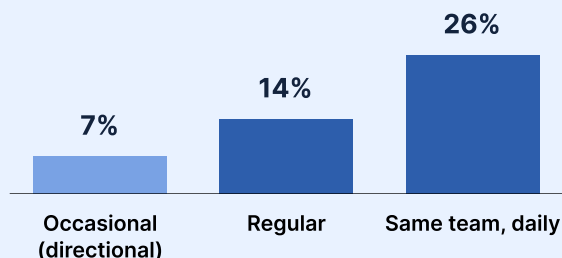
The motives make the workers the casualties of the consequence gap, not its beneficiaries: **94% of adopters cite at least one coping motive** (to cope with the stress 57%, to protect myself 49%, to stop being taken advantage of 47%), while purely competitive motives are rare. **People were protecting themselves, not auditioning for promotion.**

IT MOVES THROUGH CONTACT, AND ONE IS ENOUGH

Proximity is the dose; negativity travels first

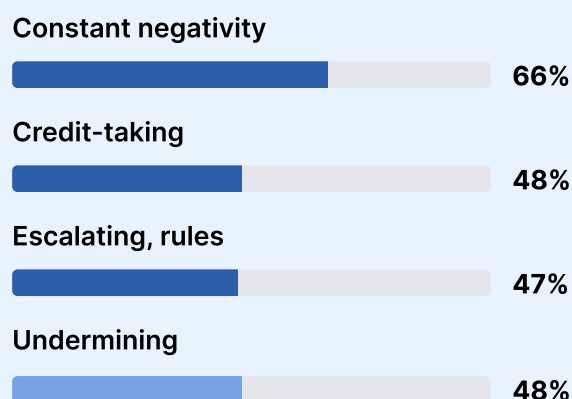


Adoption, by how closely they worked with the colleague



How closely people worked together mattered; how long they endured it mattered much less.

The behaviors most likely to rub off



Share of exposed adopters who picked up each behavior · adopter base · light bar directional (n<100).

65%

say one toxic person is enough to change a whole team's tone. Among workers whose organization removed the colleague, 72%.

Asked of the 1,272 workers who have had such a colleague; 476 of them saw that colleague removed

The people most convinced a single person matters are the ones who watched intervention work. Coworkers saw it happening too: **77% of exposed workers watched the behavior rub off** on other people, 36% clearly.

THE CONSEQUENCE GAP'S LONGEST COST

Most people heal. The habits travel anyway.

One worker's path out of a toxic job

Each step describes the workers from the step before it · bases in the caption below

1. At the toxic job

The worker starts picking up the colleague's behavior. At least 1 in 5 exposed workers admit this happened to them.



2. They move on

The mood recovers fast: most feel like their normal selves again within weeks.



3. At the next job

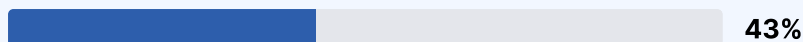
The habit rides along: 43% of those who picked up the behavior say it still shows up in how they work.

Step 1 draws on all 1,272 workers who have had such a colleague. Step 2 draws on the 630 whose exposure is behind them (58% bounced back quickly, 77% within weeks). Step 3 draws on the 236 who picked up the behavior and later worked somewhere that colleague was not. Workers' own accounts; a pattern, not proof.

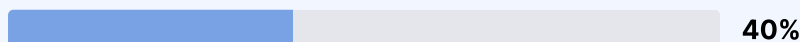
Did the changed behaviors come with you?

Answered by the 236 workers who picked up the behavior and later worked somewhere that colleague was not. Their own account; a pattern, not proof

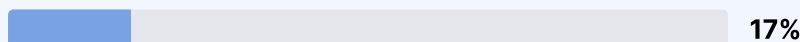
Yes, and I still notice them today



Yes at first, but they faded



No, they stayed behind with that job



Recovery is the norm once the exposure ends: **58% of past-exposed workers bounced back quickly**, 77% felt like themselves within weeks, and 71% say they fully recovered. The part that lasts is the costly part: one in ten never fully returned, 14% say some changes became permanent, and among those who admit adopting the behavior, **more than four in ten still notice it in how they work**, inside companies the original colleague never entered. **Moods recover; habits travel.** This is how one organization's consequence gap becomes another organization's culture problem.

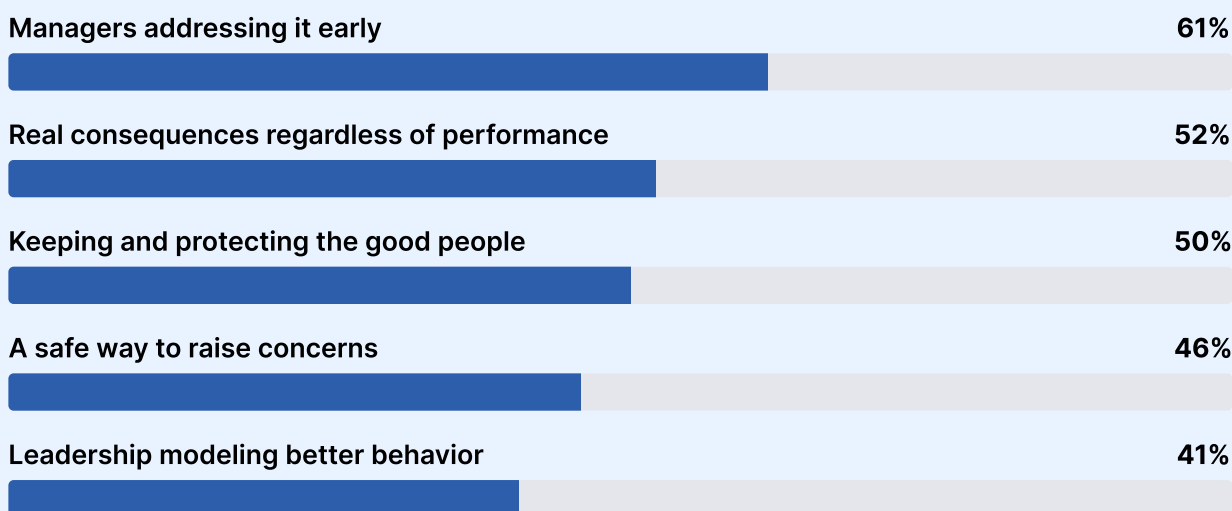


WORKERS ARE NOT ASKING FOR A SOFTER WORKPLACE

The demand is aim, not amnesty

What would most help keep toxic behavior from spreading at work?

All 1,500 workers answered; they could pick more than one



Nothing on this list asks for gentler standards. The second-ranked remedy is explicitly harder than current practice: consequences that hold "regardless of the person's performance," which is a direct answer to the consequence gap and to the rank shield behind it. The fourth speaks to a gap the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission documented years ago: roughly three out of four people who experience workplace harassment never report it, most out of fear of disbelief, inaction, or retaliation (EEOC, 2016). SHRM's culture research locates the responsibility where workers do: 76% of employees say their manager sets the culture (SHRM, 2019).

No monitoring option was offered on this survey, and none is endorsed. The remedy for a culture problem is management practice: intervene early, aim the consequences correctly, protect the people holding the culture up, and keep the reporting channels safe.

"Workers aren't asking companies to be softer. They're asking them to aim."

Methodology and honesty notes

Design Element	Specification
Sample	1,500 US adults employed full-time · August 2026 Pollfish Survey · census-weighted on age, gender, region · non-probability opt-in panel · modeled error estimate ± 2.5 points on full-sample figures (not a classical margin of error)
Routing	Exposure-routed: exposed n=1,272 answered the full instrument; never-exposed n=228 baseline items only
Key bases	Exposed 1,272 · admitted adopters 254 · adopters with an "after" 236 · past-exposed 630 · reward bands 283 / 477 / 476
Question IDs	All IDs reference the fielded Pollfish instrument (survey 395594484), so figures can be checked directly against the questionnaire and dataset
Labels	Every figure carries question ID, base n, and INCIDENCE or PERCEPTION
Discipline	No composite scores or toxicity index; matrix rows and multi-selects reported individually; no demographic analytical cuts; subgroups n<100 directional, n<30 excluded

Findings that cut the other way

Not everyone is changed by a toxic colleague, and this report says so. 49% of exposed workers report no real change in the kind of employee they are, and 21% say the experience changed them for the better (Q10, INCIDENCE, n=1,272). Once the exposure ends, recovery is the norm: most feel like their normal selves again within weeks. And adoption does not deepen much with how long the exposure lasted; closeness, not time, is what moves it (Q6 × Q11, INCIDENCE).

The full questionnaire and dataset documentation are available on request.

Framing disciplines

All change measures are self-attributed and reported as association, not causation. Language about behavior "spreading" or "rubbing off" describes patterns in what workers report about themselves and their teams; it is a metaphor, never a clinical claim. The subject of this report is an incentive system, never a set of suspects, and no monitoring or surveillance remedy appears anywhere in it.



About



GCheck is a modern, hire-to-retire screening platform dedicated to Compliance for Good®, helping organizations hire and retain with speed, accuracy, and fairness. We operate across the entire employee lifecycle, delivering background checks, identity verification, drug testing, employment and professional verifications, continuous monitoring, and compliance management through one unified platform.

Our Compliance for Good® framework is built on three pillars: Transparent Compliance, Fair Compliance, and Protective Compliance, ensuring every screening decision upholds dignity, reduces risk, and strengthens trust. To learn more, visit gcheck.com.

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U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (2016). Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace: Report of co-chairs Chai R. Feldblum and Victoria A. Lipnic. <https://www.eeoc.gov/select-task-force-study-harassment-workplace-report-co-chairs-chai-r-feldblum-victoria-lipnic>