

# Toxic Leaders Publicly Humiliate and Poison Employees

Bosses need healthy alternatives to emotional, toxic outbursts at work.

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Leaders must eliminate publicly demeaning treatment of employees. No reasons, logic, rationalizations, or excuses make it OK to publicly embarrass colleagues or subordinates. Yes, [leadership](#) must point out flaws, express disappointment, and clearly communicate poor performance - but this requirement to identify the negative should not be confused with a few Fortune 500s' unspoken sanctioning and looking the other way re: public acts of [humiliation](#). Private showdowns behind closed doors are very different than sternly speaking out before fifteen or fifty employees that your bank teller, assistant professor, cashier, pilot, or new trial attorney has fallen short and performed below expectations.

Leaders take heed, it is quite simple but against the grain: thou shalt not provoke public loss of face in employees. The price to be paid is typically steep, and the act of publicly demeaning employees is toxic and it ultimately seeps into organizational culture. It is not fun to be a member of a [workplace](#) where disapproval means a public flogging. Some toxic leaders cause loss of face by including a half a dozen or more administrators and colleagues in on an email that seriously scolds and belittles a targeted employee. Whether face-to-face or via email – deep damage can be perpetuated through this misinformed technique.

Why do I come on so strong about publicly demeaning treatment? As a consultant and trainer I spent time in Tokyo and learned first-hand how Japanese business culture condemns leaders who cause loss of face. Suffice to say that as one of the older cultures, the Japanese have had a few thousand years to cultivate and carefully chisel their thoughts on the central role of “face” in workplace relations, [teams](#) and performance on the job. Their verdict is very clearly on the side of going to great lengths to keep strongly negative criticism out of the public eye. As masters of indirect communication and subtlety, I have witnessed Japanese bosses who imply that something may be wrong with performance through such phrases as “your work product on this project is curious to me...it is very interesting...and we should speak more later when we both have had a chance to reflect.” In contrast, the Japanese old school, type A, theory X, in-your-face alternative, is the senior manager, president or CEO who gets far more pointed and negative behind closed doors of the executive suite. The private venue provides much more latitude for pointing out workplace problems, but the “save face” agenda still has relevance. Even a private reprimand is best softened and situated within a dialogue that also points out positive behavior.

In sharp contrast witness corporate leaders who are holier-than-thou about their divine right to publicly demean and straighten out their employees. I have had a few conflicts with top dogs who refuse to yield and are (in *their* minds) naturally endowed and eminently qualified to publicly scold, and even abuse, subordinates. We've all heard their presumptuous, poisonous, and condescending justifications.

For example: "I am only yelling at you, scathing mad, and publicly disrespecting you because I care about you. It is for your own good. Learn how to cower like a man! You need to feel small and absorb the pain I inflict. Own up to your own incompetence. You may not quite understand my tough love right now, but as you mature and turn the corner you will someday come back and thank me."

Unfortunately, there is one very serious flaw in this twisted logic: leaders must learn, themselves, to distinguish between public and private venues for correcting underlings. Private quarters are far more [forgiving](#) than are public venues. Japanese corporates taught me that public loss of face can churn up deep and deadly animosity, [fear](#), hate, and commitment to retaliate. [Memory](#) of workplace humiliation is far reaching and loss of face goes viral - it spreads, undermines profits, and unhinges solidarity and spirit.

Go ahead and cause your employees to lose face in public, but the poison of the humiliation spreads and turns toxic. Who will be next? Transforming this toxic scenario requires that you restrain your reach and modify technique. Reconsider what may actually be outbreaks of emotional unintelligence, control your spew of lava and restrain the highs and rush felt when you sanctimoniously unleash on a shell shocked employee, and censor the public negativity.

A publicly explosive leader knocks on the doors of toxicity; do not continue nurturing Napoleonic tendencies. So called “brute honesty” and shooting from the hip may in fact be wildly toxic for your organization. If you must, go moderately negative in private and be a bit more subtle by limiting lashings to more constrained private affairs. Reprimanding emails sent to multiple employees are not an option. Consider healthier workplace options such as limiting touchy critiques to behind closed doors - business emails are not a depository for venom and slashing alleged shortcomings and stupidity.

Consider Aretha’s revelation in song singling out “R-E-S-P-E-C-T.” Unfortunately, respect does not permeate leadership. Revisit the infinitely likeable former CEO of Southwest Airlines, Herb Kelleher. Kelleher confirms in no uncertain terms that disrespect is poisonous. Lack of respect in the form of a leader publicly demeaning employees emanates into a thousand and one negative companywide consequences. Maybe a few leaders should consider demoting or even eliminating their truth and justice sermons and vitriolic vendettas aimed at correcting the uninformed heathens. Employees may even have smarts you haven’t suspected or at the very least, the capacity for serious smarts.

Do the Southwest thing. Publicly respect all workers - even those in the lowliest positions. Disrespect will bite you and your stakeholders and wreak havoc with bottom lines where the sun doesn’t shine. Rethink how you chew employees out - is nice an option? Chill and begin to transform your dark side and propensity for toxicity into more uplifting and healthier behavior. Seize a bad employee performance as a golden opportunity for improvement. Identifying toxic elements in your leadership style opens doors for saving face turnarounds and remember that small acts of public humiliation metastasize and poison departments, divisions, clients, and entire organizations. Are hot, emotional outbursts worth these consequences? Do emotions control your logic?

Publicly wild, negative language in the workplace sometimes has the impact of machine guns and scud missiles injuring the pride and self-confidence of colleagues and subordinates. Is this a healthy workplace? What are your true motives as a leader - to embarrass or to inspire? Think on these things during a quiet moment or the next time your mind meanders while at a café; maybe positive change is still within reach.