

In the Trenches by Francie Dalton

Neutralize toxic dumpers who kill work's atmosphere

So you're sitting at your desk, working productively, when in comes the Toxic Dumper — again. Flopping down into a chair with a heavy sigh, the person proceeds to commandeer your time, using you as a dumping ground for complaints of all types.

Let's be generous and assume that your toxic dumper only ruins 10 minutes of your day. That adds up to a week per year (10 minutes per day multiplied by 240 work days per year equals 2,400 minutes equals 40 hours). And because the dumping involves at least two parties, it really wastes two weeks per year.

Why should you act to eliminate the toxic dumper from your life?

■ You're reputed to be like those with whom you are in frequent company. Do you really want to be known as someone who meets often with the office's worst malcontents?

■ We become like those with whom we're in frequent company. The constant complainers in our lives do have a negative impact on us. They rob our joy, erode our serenity and creep into our subconscious with negative chatter.

■ Your productivity takes a hit as a result of granting air time to your toxic dumper. Can you really afford that opportunity cost?

■ Believe it or not, others are aware when the toxic dumper is being thwarted. Taking steps to deactivate the toxic dumper doesn't escape notice. It ushers into your immediate work environment a higher level of behavioral expectations and sets you apart from those who aren't willing to take action.

■ Finally, and quite simply, you'll save an astonishing amount of time.

Neutralizing the toxic dumper is

achieved differently depending upon the person's hierarchical position relative to you. Find the category below that best fits your situation.

If the toxic dumper is your superior:

The moment you notice this toxic dumper headed your way, stand up and start gathering your things as though you're heading off to a meeting. As the person enters your office, look up and smile, saying "I'm almost late for a meeting. We'll have to catch up later. How about lunch tomorrow?"

This next idea works well if the buttons of your phone are not visible to entrants.

When you see this toxic dumper coming, look at your phone and say: "Sure I'll be happy to hold." As the dumper enters your office, say: "I'm on hold; we'll have to talk later. How about lunch tomorrow?"

As the dumper enters your office, simply say: "I'm on an impossible deadline for an urgent project for my boss. Can we talk later? How about lunch tomorrow?"

The good news is that these don't require you to confront the issue directly. Instead, you can skirt the actual issue, while establishing a pattern of busyness that may be adequate to dissuade further interruptions. And, these tips begin to set the expectation that such interactions be limited to lunchtime.

Remember, though, you have a lunch date.

If the toxic dumper is your peer:

If your peer dumper is a friend or if you're uncomfortable with confrontation, one of these fairly benevolent approaches may help:

■ "You know, you've been struggling with this issue for a long time. How about if you take the issue up with the relevant

parties and talk it out with them."

■ "I empathize, but talking with you about your issues during work hours is causing me to get behind in my work. Could we take these conversations off-line? I'd be happy to meet you for breakfast or lunch."

If you'd rather play hardball, consider some variation of the following: "You know, at your level you really need to be identifying solutions to problems — not just talking about them. Why not figure out how to solve the problem and then go implement that solution, instead of complaining to me?"

Or, even harder ball: "Look, it's not that I don't like you, it's just that I can't afford and frankly don't want to spend time giving succor to your complaints. If you wanted help solving problems, that's one thing. I'd be willing to carve out time. But you seem only to want to complain and I'm just not up for that."

If the toxic dumper is your subordinate:

Require your subordinate to identify at least two possible solutions to every problem before bringing the problem to you.

Use the Socratic method. When a subordinate complains, don't respond with advice or solutions. Instead, ask the specific, successive questions that lead the employee through the reasoning process, revealing what you already know to be the appropriate conclusion.

Given the volume of work facing most of us, we simply must be willing to issue "cease and desist" orders to our toxic dumpers.

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