Dealing With a Toxic Team Member Reporting to You

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Why this issue deserves more urgency than it often gets

Research by Will Felps and colleagues, widely referenced in organisational behaviour literature, suggests that a single team member exhibiting consistently negative behaviour, sometimes termed a "bad apple," can reduce overall team performance by a significant margin, often more than the positive contribution of a strong performer can offset. Leaders who delay addressing toxic behaviour, hoping it will resolve itself, usually allow disproportionate damage to accumulate across the whole team, not just in their interactions with the individual concerned.

Defining the problem precisely, before acting

"Toxic" is used loosely and can mean several different things: someone who is consistently negative or cynical, someone who undermines colleagues, someone who is difficult but highly skilled and therefore protected, or someone whose behaviour crosses into genuine misconduct. Being precise about which specific behaviours are the actual problem, rather than relying on a vague overall impression, is essential both for giving clear feedback and, if needed, for any formal process later.

A practical approach

Document specific incidents, not general impressions. Before any conversation, note concrete examples, what was said or done, when, and the observable impact. This both clarifies your own thinking and provides a solid basis for the conversation itself.

Have a direct conversation before escalating. Using the same Situation-Behavior-Impact structure referenced elsewhere on this site, name the specific behaviour and its effect clearly, and give the person a genuine, explicit opportunity to respond and to change. Patrick Lencioni's The Five Dysfunctions of a Team argues that avoidance of this kind of direct accountability conversation is itself one of the most common and damaging team failures, more so than the original behavioural problem.

Distinguish a skills or stress issue from a genuine values or character issue. Some behaviour read as toxic is actually a symptom of burnout, an unaddressed personal issue, or a genuine skills gap in communication or collaboration, which may respond to support and coaching. Behaviour rooted in a genuine disregard for colleagues or a pattern of deliberate undermining is a different, usually more serious, issue requiring a firmer response.

Set a clear, time-bound expectation for change. Vague hopes for improvement rarely produce it. A specific, written expectation, with a defined timeframe and clear consequences if it is not met, gives the person a genuine chance while also protecting the rest of the team and creating a clear basis for further action if needed.

Protect the rest of the team in the meantime. While a formal process unfolds, which can take time, actively check in with affected team members, and be willing to make interim adjustments, to workflows, project assignments, meeting dynamics, that limit ongoing harm.

When performance seems to excuse the behaviour

A particularly damaging pattern is tolerating toxic behaviour from a high performer because of their output. This is consistently identified in leadership and organisational research as corrosive to team trust, since it visibly signals that results matter more than how people are treated, and it is very often reported, after the fact, as one of the clearest ways a leader loses the trust of an otherwise strong team.

When it does not improve

If, after a clear conversation and a genuine opportunity to change, the behaviour continues, moving toward a formal process, in consultation with HR, is usually the right next step, both to protect the team and to ensure the individual is treated fairly and consistently with organisational policy.