

## **Managing Toxic High-Performers in Healthcare**

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Managing toxic high performers is one of the most difficult leadership challenges in any organization but is especially prevalent in healthcare. These individuals deliver exceptional results, often exceeding targets and driving measurable success, yet their behavior can undermine team morale, collaboration, and long-term performance. The dilemma for leaders is clear: how do you address harmful behavior without losing valuable employees?

The first step is to recognize that performance and behavior are not separate issues—they are intertwined. A high performer who creates conflict, dismisses colleagues, or fosters a culture of fear can erode trust and reduce the effectiveness of the entire team. Over time, this can lead to employee disengagement, the creation of factions or “cliques”, increased turnover, and even erode patient safety and satisfaction. Healthcare leaders have often dismissed this behavior when the toxic employee is highly skilled or efficient, allowing a toxic culture to prevail.

Clarity of expectations is essential. Organizations should define not only what success looks like in terms of outcomes, but also how those outcomes are achieved. This means embedding values such as respect, collaboration, and accountability into performance evaluations. When behavioral expectations are explicit and consistently enforced, it becomes easier to have objective, constructive conversations with toxic high performers.

Direct feedback is critical, but it must be handled carefully. Avoid vague criticisms; instead, provide specific examples of problematic behavior and its impact on others and the organization. For instance, rather than saying “you’re difficult to work with,” a manager might explain how interrupting colleagues in meetings discourages participation and limits idea sharing. Framing the conversation around impact rather than intent helps reduce defensiveness and keeps the discussion productive.

Equally important is offering a path forward. Toxic high performers are often unaware of how their behavior is perceived, or they may lack the interpersonal skills needed to improve. Coaching, mentorship, or targeted training can help them develop emotional intelligence, communication skills, and self-awareness. The goal is not just correction, but transformation—turning a high performer into a positive influence on the team.

This isn’t an easy task, and toxic employees may be resistant to change. Leaders must be prepared to hold them accountable and move into the disciplinary process, if needed. Frequent, objective feedback is key during this process so that the employee is given every opportunity to meet their performance goals.

Ultimately, managing toxic high performers requires courage and consistency. Leaders must balance short-term gains with long-term health, holding all employees to the same standards of behavior regardless of their output. By doing so, they not only protect team culture but also create an environment where high performance and positive collaboration can coexist.

\*To continue the conversation, join Michelle for an upcoming ACHD webinar on **April 21 at 10:00 AM PST**, where she will share practical strategies to improve employee retention and strengthen workplace culture.

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