

How to use the interview to determine if a workplace is toxic

Slides at:

career.ucsf.edu/toxic-workplace

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What's the problem we're trying to fix here?

They say: *"Remember, you're interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you," but....*



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1. Candidates are often more preoccupied about making a good impression than they were about assessing if an environment is toxic/bad fit.
2. Unable to define what factors would be considered red flags.
3. So impressed by the pedigree of an institution and what doors they thought the opportunity would open, that they missed or dismissed red flags during an interview.



What's the problem we're trying to fix here?

- As a result, some students and postdocs we talked to accepted postdocs, residencies and jobs that were toxic/not a good fit for them
- and their choice delayed or derailed their career progress and/or adversely affected their self confidence and general sense of well being.



That's not good. But, you can be a better interviewer if you know 3 things

Our Agenda:



1. Define what a 'toxic work environment' is
2. Describe what to do and note before, during and after the interview to determine if it's a healthy fit for you
3. Accept the factors that will make it difficult for you to accept the red flags you see



What exactly is a toxic environment?

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A **toxic work environment** exists when culture, a person/the people, and/or something about the the execution of the work itself causes you such distress that is seriously disrupts your morale or productivity and/or negatively affects other aspects of your life.



Toxic for everybody



Toxic for you = Bad Fit

Source: <https://lifehacker.com/how-to-handle-a-toxic-work-environment-1627385030>

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- Many different behaviors and factors all combine to create a toxic environment
- Usually people lack the conceptual frameworks and/or vocabulary to recognize or describe a toxic environment

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Verbal

What the person says

Para-verbal

How the person says it

Non-Verbal

How the person acts

Someone engages in language, behaviors or actions to frighten, humiliate, belittle, degrade or frustrate you, e.g.:

Word and Sentence Usage

- Frequent use of words with negative connotations
- Consistently states things as fact that can be open to interpretation/use of declarative sentences
- Persistent or egregious use of abusive, insulting, threatening or offensive language directed at you
- Frequent use of imperative sentences: (e.g.: language that suggests a person is demanding rather than asking.)
- The absence of social niceties: please, thank you, etc.

Content Focus

- Impugns your character, intentions or actions of others without proof
- Spreads misinformation or malicious rumors
- Inappropriately shares confidential information
- Regularly inappropriately teases or makes you the brunt of pranks or practical jokes
- Repeatedly makes inappropriate comments about your physical/cognitive abilities, appearance, orientation, lifestyle, family, culture, race, religion or beliefs
- Repeatedly corrects you in public

Tone/Intonation

- Angry, intimidating, insistent or sharp
- Accusatory
- Bored
- Mocking or Contemptuous
- Dismissive
- Frustrated

Pitch:

- Higher than their normal pitch (suggesting derision or anger)
- Lower than their normal pitch, like a growl

Volume:

- Raised voice, screaming, yelling
- Angry whispering

Speed:

- Speaking rapidly (with increasing agitation)
- Speaking very slowly and/or carefully enunciating each word (suggesting you have poor comprehension skills)

Body Actions:

- Clenched Jaw/tight smile
- Eye rolling
- Failing to make eye contact
- Gesticulating
- Glaring/staring/narrowing eyes
- Laughing at you
- Leering
- Sneering
- (Heavy) sighing
- Sucking one's teeth
- Tensing body
- Turning their back

Actions:

- Unwarranted physical contact, or close proximity to you (looming/hovering)
- Pushing, punching, pinching or slapping
- Throws or slamming objects
- Blocks you from leaving (by standing in their doorway, etc.)
- Ignores you, doesn't listen to a you when you are speaking
- Interrupts your or speaks over you

Sabotage or Gaslighting

What the person does

Someone uses power, authority or resources to intentionally harm you, e.g.:

- Hides necessary materials or withholding relevant information
- Makes false accusations about you
- Excludes you from decisions that affect you
- Sets unreasonable expectations or setting you up to fail
- Steals your work
- Rebukes or humiliates you publicly
- Purposefully inappropriately excludes isolates, or marginalizes you from normal work activities or opportunities

- Threatens to take steps that threatens your safety/security (e.g. visa, funding, job)
- Inappropriately interferes with your personal property or work equipment or materials
- Encourages you to behave inappropriately/unethically (e.g.: asks you to lie, steal, etc.)
- Suggests that you will not advance without some form of 'payment', e.g. sexual favors, etc.
- Inappropriately shares confidential information about you
- Inaccurately represents you or your work
- Refuses to recognize your progress or achievements
- 'Tattle tales' or accuses/reports you inappropriately
- Overemphasizes your mistakes (without cause)
- Withdraws support without appropriate cause
- "Negs" you: offers a complement attached to an underlying insult (e.g., *You didn't say something stupid this time. Great job!*)
- Scapegoats/blames you for something that is not your fault
- Circulates inappropriate or embarrassing information or media about you

Lack of Support

What the person does

Someone doesn't set you up to succeed, e.g.:

- Insufficient training for the task
- Insufficient staff/resources for the work
- Lack of clear goals/metrics of success
- Lack of clear policies or procedures
- Insufficient oversight
- Lack of org. support for work/life integration
- No stated boundaries to limit overwork
- No autonomy because there is no trust
- Not recognized for your contributions

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1. **Your values** (family friendly, work life balance, non-academic careers, etc. You want a collaborative environment, they are competitive)
2. **Your strengths** (mentoring, problem solving, responsible, etc.)
3. **Your approach** (you advocate holistic care approaches to treat mental illness, they are medication centered. You believe intersectionality is relevant to address in your interventions, they don't)
4. **Your work style** (the way you make decisions, communicate, handle change, handle conflict is different from their way)
5. **Your goals** (you want to publish in mid-tier journals, they only recognize Cell. You want time off to teach, they want you in the lab. You want to ramp up seeing patients, they want you at a full patient load now)

....are not recognized and rewarded by your boss or the organization



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Interview here:
people are faking job
satisfaction
throughout your
interview

...but interview here:
people really do have
job satisfaction. But
it's still toxic to you!



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3. Accept the factors that will make it difficult for you to accept the red flags you see





Candidates wish that the signs of a toxic environment would be obvious in an interview

JOIN US

- There are many reasons why you'd miss seeing an organization is toxic, if you weren't expressly looking for signs.
- Unfortunately, people won't be candid. So don't look for **candor** – look for **consistency**.



Before the interview: prep

1. Ask for the agenda of who you'll meet
2. Google the organization and individuals (Glassdoor, LinkedIn, the organizational website, etc.)
What is the brand the organization and the individuals who are associated with the organization wish to portray themselves?
3. Create and review your values, skills and interests list. This is your benchmark
4. Review sample questions you may be asked – consider what you can learn from them. (search the career.ucsf.edu website, keyword: 'interviewing')
5. Ask the thoughts of anyone who has worked there/is currently working there
6. Go in as a non-judgmental observer, devoted to yourself



During the interview:

Think like Sherlock Holmes...but behave like Watson

- A. Look for red flags
- B. Give people space to talk
- C. Look for consistency, not candor



A. Look for Red Flags: You've traveled to a new land...

2



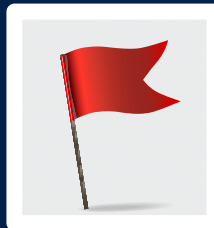
THE PEOPLE

1. Do people seem
 - motivated?
 - satisfied?
 - engaged?
 - happy?
 - respectful towards each other?



THE ORGANIZATION

1. Is the organization set up so that people are 'work ready'?
 - Do people have the resources, information and support they need to do the work asked of them?
2. Does it feel welcoming?



YOU



1. What you feel and sense?
2. What stands out to you?
3. Are you excited? Are you happy?

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B. Give people space to talk...

2



People do have tells....

1. Picture in your mind the **best** boss (if not boss, teacher, mentor, etc.) you've ever known.
2. Take 1 minutes each and answer: “How does your boss support you?”
3. Picture in your mind the **worst** boss (if not boss, teacher, mentor, etc.) you've ever known. Call them “Dr. X”
4. Take 1 minutes each and answer: “How does your boss support you?”

Q: What was different about how they spoke and behaved?

That awkwardness? That defensiveness? That's the tell.

B. Give people space to talk... and pay attention to what they fill that space with

2

Verbal What the person says	Para-verbal How the person says it	Non-Verbal How the person behaves	
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Non detailed, generalized responses that anyone could say about anyone2. Vague answers3. Repeating use of particular adjectives4. Answers your question with a question: 'what do you mean by 'difficulty' etc.5. Evasive responses: "That's a good question"6. Silence or rambling			



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~~Impress!~~ Listen!

2

Common Tell: *When someone uses 'anchoring techniques' to rationalize something that is not okay. Shifting the situation from 'their problem' to 'your problem'.*

Unreasonable thing
they want you to
accept

False complement

We need someone who can jump
right in and start seeing a high
patient load/pick up this project
immediately

'Anchors' in some way to
widen your distribution
curve of what is
reasonable to expect

Why is this a problem?

~~Impress!~~ Listen! What does skillful defensiveness look like?

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you're from UCSF, aren't you?
Impressive.

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I can't agree to your request of work flexibility

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- C. Look for consistency, not candor**



C. Look for consistency, not candor: Bosses, peers and supervisees

Agenda

Questions

Boss:
The Lead Scientist

How do you orient new staff to their
role in the first 3 months?

Your job talk

Peers:
Panel of people at organization

How did the boss orient you to your job
in the first 3 months?

Peers:
Lunch with members of your team

How were you oriented to your job in the
first 3 months?

Supervisees:
People you would supervise

What would help someone orient to this place in the
first 3 months?
Was that was your orientation was like?

Boss:
Sr. Leadership: The VP of Research, etc.

What experiences do you think are important for new
staff in the first 3 months to succeed here?

HR

Boss:
The Lead Scientist

What support will
you get in your
first 3 months?

Does everybody give
a thorough answer?

Does everyone give
the same type of
answer?

If you get different
answers: that is a flag
and you have a
problem

C. Look for consistency, not candor: Bosses, peers and supervisees

2

Agenda

Questions

Will this program
support my
professional
development?

Think terms like:
consistency,
high N,
reproducibility,
high level of
confidence

Boss:

The Program Director

What types of professional development opportunities do you encourage your residents to partake in?

The Tour

Ask the tour guide: What type of professional development opportunities do people take part in?

Boss:

Chat with an Attending

What types of professional development opportunities do you encourage residents to partake in?

Peers:

Lunch with Several Residents

What have you appreciated most about the types and level of support regarding your own professional development?

Boss:

Chat with Attending

What types of professional development opportunities have residents taken part in?

Boss:

Meet Director

What types of professional development opportunities do you encourage residents to partake in?

Peer:

Check in with the Coordinator

What are the best professional development opportunities for residents to take part in?

Boss:

The Program Director

C. Look for consistency, not candor: Bosses, Peers and Direct Reports 2

**Your boss,
chair,
program
director, etc.**

Your Peers

**Your
Direct
Reports**

C. Look for consistency, not candor: Bosses, Peers and Direct Reports 2

	Priorities?
Your boss, chair, program director, etc.	What would you see as the priorities the person in this position should focus on in the 6 months?
Your Peers	What do you think should be the priorities for this position in the first 6 months, and why?
Your Direct Reports	What do you need from me in the first 6 months?

C. Look for consistency, not candor: Bosses, Peers and Direct Reports 2

	Priorities?	Institutional Issues
Your boss, chair, program director, etc.	What would you see as the priorities the person in this position should focus on in the 6 months?	What's the biggest challenge the department currently faces – and what's been effective in addressing the issue?
Your Peers	What do you think should be the priorities for this position in the first 6 months, and why?	What's the biggest challenge the department currently faces – and what's been effective in addressing the issue?
Your Direct Reports	What do you need from me in the first 6 months?	What's the biggest challenge the department currently faces – and what's been effective in addressing the issue?

C. Look for consistency, not candor: Bosses, Peers and Direct Reports 2

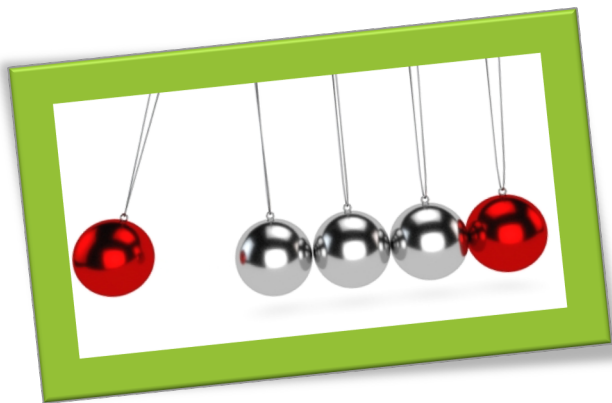
	Priorities?	Institutional Issues	Your Issues
Your boss, chair, program director, etc.	What would you see as the priorities the person in this position should focus on in the 6 months?	What's the biggest challenge the department currently faces – and what's been effective in addressing the issue?	What are key challenges that the selected candidate will face, and what do you need from them?
Your Peers	What do you think should be the priorities for this position in the first 6 months, and why?	What's the biggest challenge the department currently faces – and what's been effective in addressing the issue?	What do you think are key challenges that the selected candidate will face?
Your Direct Reports	What do you need from me in the first 6 months?	What's the biggest challenge the department currently faces – and what's been effective in addressing the issue?	What are some challenges you will face and what would you need from me to support you?

C. Look for consistency, not candor: Bosses, Peers and Direct Reports 2

	Priorities?	Institutional Issues	Your Issues	Professional Dev.
Your boss, chair, program director, etc.	What would you see as the priorities the person in this position should focus on in the 6 months?	What's the biggest challenge the department currently faces – and what's been effective in addressing the issue?	What are key challenges that the selected candidate will face, and what do you need from them?	What types of professional development opportunities do you encourage your staff to partake in?
Your Peers	What do you think should be the priorities for this position in the first 6 months, and why?	What's the biggest challenge the department currently faces – and what's been effective in addressing the issue?	What do you think are key challenges that the selected candidate will face?	What have you appreciated most about the types and level of support regarding your own professional development?
Your Direct Reports	What do you need from me in the first 6 months?	What's the biggest challenge the department currently faces – and what's been effective in addressing the issue?	What are some challenges you will face and what would you need from me to support you?	What types of professional development opportunities have you engaged in previously and what would you like to do next?

C. Look for consistency, not candor

All behavioral 'tell me' questions are fair game



Tell Question

Tell me about a time you dealt with a difficult situation.

Tell me about a time you failed.

Tell me about a time you disagreed with a colleague.

Pendulum Questions

X, Y Z...and that was how I dealt with that situation. That said, could you tell me what types 'difficult' situations will the person in this position face/need to overcome?

X, Y, Z...and I learned a great deal from that. Tell me, as my supervisor/PI/ etc., what are your expectations of how individuals will respond to challenges?

X,Y,Z...and we came to a good outcome. What are your expectations about managing conflict?

After the interview: Did you feel lucky or special?



1. Write

down your impressions that day/the next day as if you were reporting your observations to someone else. Read it again and highlight concerns “Also met with attending. She didn’t seem very nice”

2. Talk

with a friend about it. Have them ask you open ended questions: what did you like about it? What sticks in your mind? Why?

3. Consider

how easy or hard it is for you to write your thank you notes.

4. Feel

Regardless of what your brain is telling you. How do you feel? Is there a disturbance in the force?

➤ **Special** (you’d be a valued part of this enterprise. We’d be lucky to have you)

➤ **Lucky** (we’re a top 10 blah blah, and you’d be lucky to come/be chosen to come here)

Our Agenda:



1. Define what a 'toxic work environment' is
2. Describe what to do and note before, during and after the interview to determine if it's a healthy fit for you
3. Accept the factors that will make it difficult for you to accept the red flags you see

One more thing

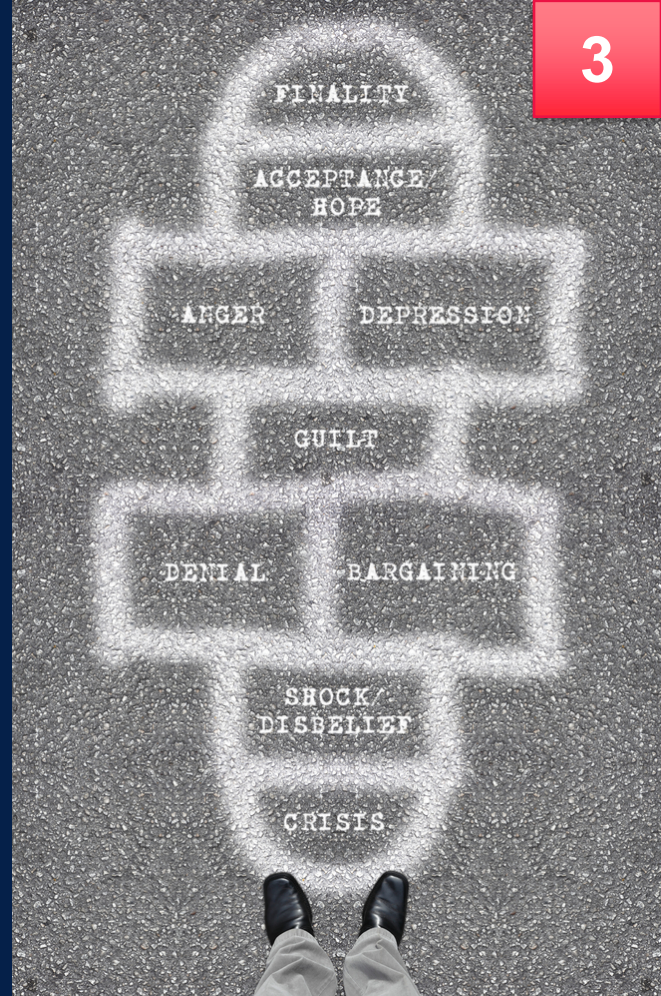
1. If the job is toxic or a bad fit, it's going to be heard to accept what you see.

Depending on how much you wanted it to work out and how you feel about your options, your brain is going to try to minimize things.

2. To interview well, you will have already begun to identify with the organization and imagine yourself there
3. If you're right (and it is toxic or a bad fit for you), you'll never know

Do you hear yourself saying:

- ❖ *Maybe I didn't really see that.*
- ❖ *I saw that, but maybe I misinterpreted what I saw?*
- ❖ *Maybe this happened because (of this convoluted explanation you just made up because you don't want this opportunity to be a shark-infested pit)*
- ❖ *Maybe it's not so bad?*
- ❖ *Isn't every place a little bit toxic?*
- ❖ *I'm sure I can handle it*



And if you do take the position.....

3

- ☐ Start every day at work acknowledging you're in a toxic environment, take breaks and take care (don't pretend it's not happening)
- ☐ Find internal and external allies. As soon as a situation arises, seek help
- ☐ Clearly define your goals while you're there
- ☐ Keep job searching
- ☐ Remember your agency: you chose this (this doesn't mean you deserve bad things to happen to you, but you have agency in thinking about ways you will not perpetuate the situation when you're the one in power)

What we covered today



1. Define what a 'toxic work environment' is
2. Identify steps to research the environment of a lab, residency or job opportunity before the interview
3. Use questions during an interview to determine whether an organization values a healthy environment
4. Articulate strategies and practice language to frame questions, considering that current staff will probably not be candid with candidates if their environment is unhealthy
5. Describe examples of verbal and non-verbal red flags during an interview
6. Describe factors that can make it difficult to recognize and weigh the potential impact of red flags during and after an interview

Need more help?



Schedule an interview prep appointment to talk with a career counselor. Mission Bay and Parnassus appointments available!

career.ucsf.edu/appointments

How to use the interview to determine if a workplace is toxic

Slides at:

career.ucsf.edu/toxic-workplace

Naledi Saul. Director
Office of Career & Professional Development

