

Toxic Team Player or Top Performer? ¹

Aina Aliieva

Do you have individuals on your team where the glass isn't half full – it's practically empty? Do you feel that just being around these individuals affects your mood and productivity?

We all have experienced negative attitudes, whether from our colleagues or within a circle of family and friends. It's discouraging to be surrounded by negativity towards change, other employees, clients, and values over and over again. However, it is our job as leaders to change this. First, let's start with the definition of *toxicity*.

There are many ways to describe it, and there is no right or wrong answer. *A toxic person* to me is an individual who doesn't share and respect company/team values.

What kind of toxicity can the employee have?

There are way more but let's have a look at the most common:

- Non-productive complaints about clients, coworkers, and leadership, the business itself;
- A belief that he/she is smarter than others and demonstrating this on any occasion;
- Gossip about coworkers, leadership, or clients;
- Criticizing and labelling others rather than offer some help;
- Manipulative behaviour. Denying to take responsibility. Avoiding making decisions. Learned helplessness;
- Constant disagreement with leadership and team members;
- Take a hostile position towards new ideas or process improvements. "That will never work!"
- They are quick to the point of mistakes of others;
- Self-oriented, rude and arrogant behaviour.

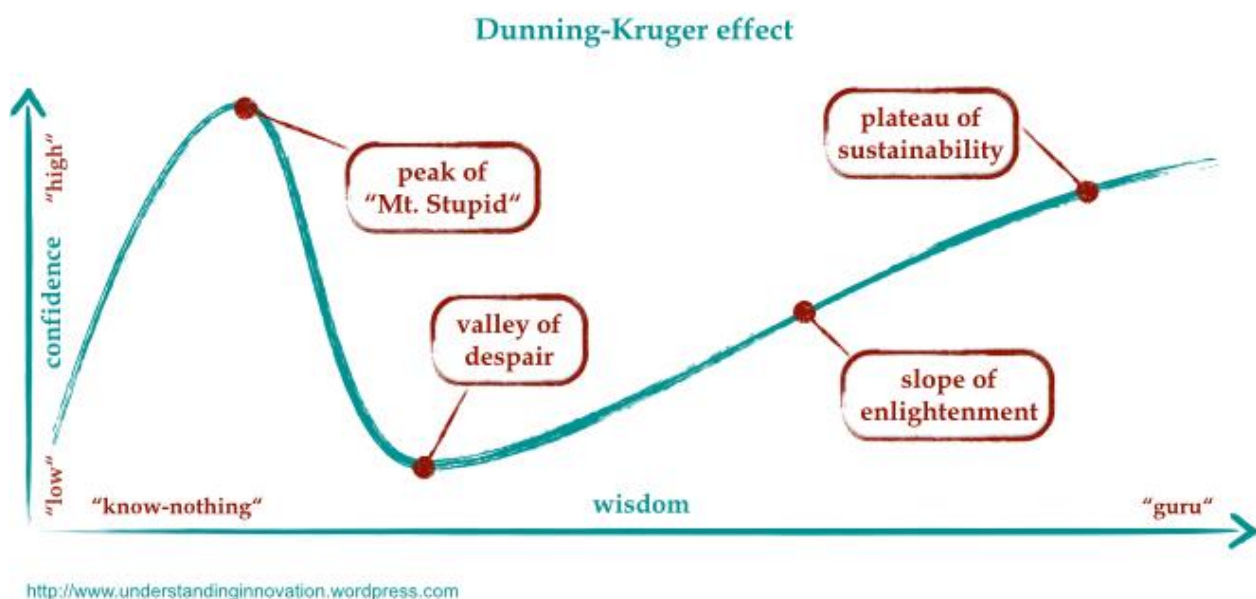
All of us have either worked with or supervised one of these types of negative employees. What's more, some of us even behaved in these ways ourselves. As leaders, we need to learn how to motivate and coach these individuals towards more collaborative behaviour.

The key to success in this situation is an individual approach.

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Dunning-Krueger effect

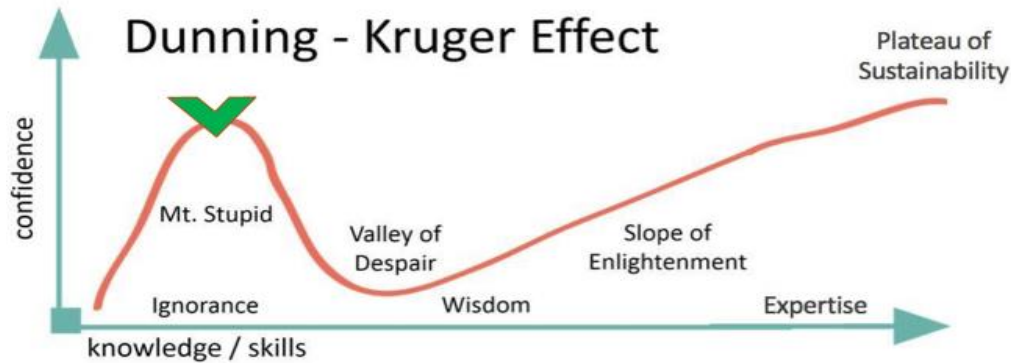
Many leaders might look at all negative coworkers as something solid and use one approach to communicate with all of them. However, for example, being self-oriented and arrogant is the opposite of avoiding taking responsibility. If we treat both of these individuals equally, we won't have the effect we desire. Let's look at the Dunning-Krueger curve to see the difference.



The **Dunning–Krueger effect** is a **cognitive bias** in which people with low ability at a task overestimate their ability. It is related to the cognitive bias of **illusory superiority** and comes from people's inability to recognize their lack of ability. Without the **self-awareness** of **metacognition**, people cannot objectively evaluate their level of competence. (Wikipedia)

We can see on this graph that being at the different stages of mastering skills, people have a different feeling of confidence, level of knowledge and different perception of their work. So, identifying the place on this curve for a specific individual will help us a lot in creating an approach to coach or mentoring this individual.

1. The Top of the Mountain



Some individuals who typically just graduated or switched their career passes, or moved to another organization, can appear at the Top of the Mountain. They have a high level of confidence, enthusiasm, ambitions. On the contrary, they have a lack of knowledge and skills yet in working for this specific organization or in their field in general. They might have a lot of theoretical knowledge from a university or from attending courses but not much practice.

How this makes them is toxic?

Their desire to climb the career ladder ASAP might affect team productivity. These individuals are self-oriented and forget to take into consideration team goals and team North Star. They might think that they know everything and try to show off without learning what is going on in the organization and their team. For example, these newbies can overshare internal information with stakeholders they shouldn't communicate with at all. They also might try to change everything at once without thinking that somebody could have tried this before, and why this didn't work. Also, these types of people tempt to label other coworkers and demonstrate arrogant behaviour.

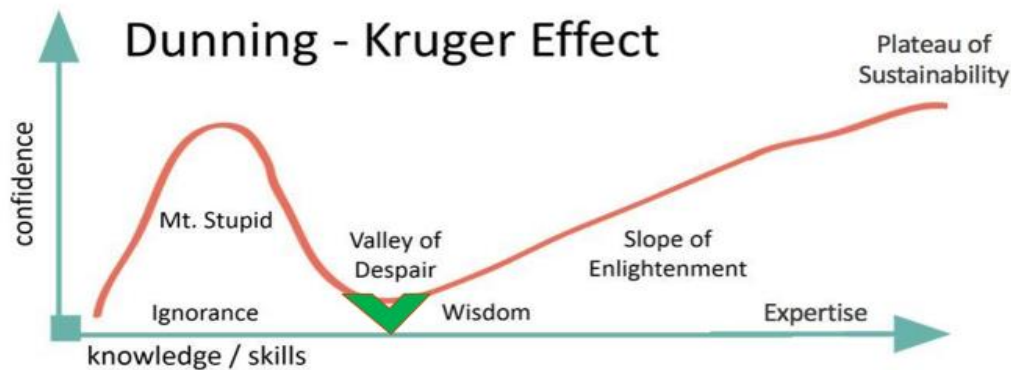
What to do?

Never blame these people or call them toxic. They have lots of potential. As leaders, we need to redirect them to get positive results.

- They want to perform at maximum, so demand this maximum from them;
- Don't give new theoretical knowledge, they have enough at this stage. Don't send them to training or webinars. Load them with challenging practical tasks;
- Evaluate their performance from the client and team's perspective;
- Don't give too much freedom. These employees are not ready to be independent yet.

Use Directing leadership style.

2. Valley of Despair



These are individuals who fell from Mt. Stupid. They might rush in getting promoted or truly believe that they are the only ones who understand the best way to work. They didn't consult with a team or a manager, being drunk with enthusiasm. They failed. Probably they failed again. They understood that their knowledge and expertise is not enough. These employees became desperate. Since they failed a couple of times in a row, they started being afraid of a future failure, so they started denying responsibility, started avoiding difficult tasks, became manipulative. By this time, they already got enough practical experience to be able to take responsibility, became independent and perform, but they also learned how to feel helpless.

How this makes them is toxic?

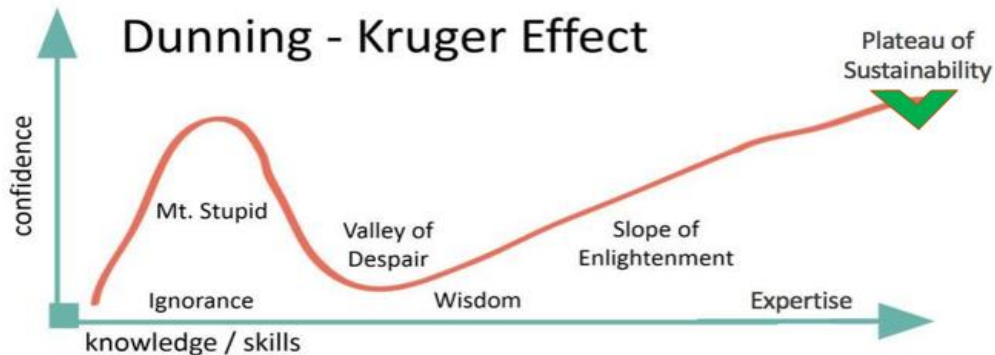
Since these types of people avoid taking responsibility, they delegate their tasks to other team members in a manipulative way. There is no value in such employees anymore. Their colleagues do their work for them.

What to do?

Never blame these people or call them toxic. They have lots of potential. As leaders, we need to help them to believe in themselves, to grow their confidence so they can become loyal and dedicated team players.

- Help them to decompose their work;
- Give this person a task he/she definitely can accomplish. Praise him/her. Help to grow their confidence;
- Never agree to do work for them;
- Be patient;
- Encourage them to take responsibility
Use Mentoring leadership style.

3. Plateau of Sustainability



After spending years doing the same job, people reach the stage when they feel that they stopped growing. They've already gotten enough expertise to manage difficult problems; junior people come to them for advice, their opinion is valid even outside of their team. They are gaining power but losing interest.

How does this make them toxic?

These employees might have arrogant behaviour, disrespect leadership (especially if the leader joined the team after it was formed), disrespect others' time. This person can show up 15 minutes late to a meeting and not even apologize since he/she knows that their team can't find a solution without him/her. The team members become dependant and stop growing. This employee can be rude to others, label them and not let their teammates express their opinions.

What to do?

Never blame these people or call them toxic. They still have lots of potential. As leaders, we need to help them bring their interest back and find challenges for them.

- Give a brand new project or have them research a new tool for the organization. This task needs to be challenging. It should be something this person didn't face before;
 - Organize Knowledge Transfer. The reason for such disrespectful behaviour is that this person has too much power;
 - Divide his responsibilities with the other experienced team members so they can grow to his/her level. Ask them what they need to achieve such a level of expertise;
 - Give her/him a junior team member to coach. She/he might then control her/his behaviour and become more respectful;
 - Provide feedback and a 360 performance review;
 - Give autonomy
- Use Supporting leadership style.*

We also should remember that there are things outside of our control that could be happening in our teammates' personal lives. They are responsible for their attitude. We can give them the tools and opportunities to change their mindset, but it is up to them to go through these changes.

About the Author



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Aina Aliieva is a Scrum Master with 5 years of experience in Project Management and 4 years in an Agile environment. She is also CEO and instructor in Bee Agile Tutoring. She teaches Project Management, Agile and goal setting for organizations around the world. She has managed and consulted on projects for the technical, construction, and engineering disciplines.

Aina has a Masters's degree in electrical engineering and an MBA in technology. She has PMP and PMI-ACP certificates. She is an active member of PMI CWCC (Canadian West Coast Chapter), PMI Ukraine Chapter and UAE PMI. She is also a Program Manager, Disciplined Agile in PMI CWCC.

Aina is an experienced public speaker and coach. She also helps in personal planning and setting up goals. In her free time, Aina participates in different mentorship programs, speaks at webinars and interviews people for her personal blog.

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