

Seven Cures for a Toxic Culture

The culture of your church is essentially comprised of who you are, what you value, and how you get things done.

All churches begin with an enthusiastic vision of a culture that is so inviting people can't resist. But leading a church is complicated. Vision for the culture will not naturally stay aligned without diligence and intentionality.

Candidly, it's easy for a church to lose its way.

Even in the healthiest of churches, culture can drift. New people come, new staff gets hired, culture drifts. It needs constant attention.

Perhaps your church, however, has passed common drift. It's possible that your culture has become unhealthy.

Here are some symptoms of a toxic culture:

- Consistent and unresolved conflict among the leaders.
- The morale of the staff is low.
- There is a sense of "politics" in the church.
- Critical decisions are delayed or unwisely made.
- There is more conversation about problems than stories of life change.
- There is high defensiveness.
- Trust is low.
- There are very few visitors.
- There is a lack of vision.
- There is little joy.

Please don't read this list and panic. Even the best churches can experience one or two of these symptoms for a short season. That's normal.

In a healthy culture you name the problem, talk about it openly, make the needed corrections and go on.

No church is perfect. The idea here is to help churches where it's evident that the culture needs improvement.

Let me be candid and name the number one problem of a toxic culture:

No one is taking ownership and responsibility for the condition of the culture.

Until a leader, the leader, steps up and says, '*The culture of our church is not healthy, and I own that problem. I take responsibility for the solution.*', the church will remain in trouble. This

doesn't necessarily mean the leader is the cause of the problematic culture. He or she may have inherited it, but ultimately it doesn't matter. The leader must step up and take ownership.

I don't know your story or what you are going through, but I've worked with hundreds of churches, and I'm confident that while this plan may not be custom for you, it will serve you well as a general guideline.

1) Own it.

Again, the current condition of your church's culture may not be your fault, but as the leader, it is your responsibility. However, if you have been there for a while, whatever culture, behavior and results you have, you have either created or allowed.

I love the book [*Boundaries for Leaders*](#), by Henry Cloud. Chapter two is worth the book. "**You are Ridiculously in Charge.**" He tackles this topic in more depth; I highly recommend it.

2) Tend to your soul.

It's easy for you as the leader, whether as the senior pastor of a small or large church, executive pastor, campus pastor or department leader in a mega-church, to carry the weight of an unhealthy culture almost as if you did something wrong.

There are no perfect churches. It's your job to help your church become healthy, not perfect. Give yourself grace as you get ready to lead this change. Take plenty of time for reflection and prayer.

3) Identify the gap.

Write down how you describe the current culture. Write it from three perspectives:

1. How visitors experience it.
2. How long term attendees experience it.
3. How staff and key leaders experience it.

Be as objective as possible.

Gather a small, but trusted group to help you.

1) Choose five words that describe the problem/culture.

- You might write keywords like defensive, distrust, political, silos...etc.
- Then, write one sentence for each word to describe what that means in your context.

2) Write five words of how you *want* the culture to be experienced.

- Such as loving, bold, trusting, empowering, fun, honest...etc.
- Write one sentence describing specifically what that means.

Don't make the lists long or complicated. *The difference between the two lists is the gap.*

Note: It is possible that you will write a different experience for visitors than for long term attendees, leaders, and staff. If that is true, describe why.

4) Lead toward solutions.

The solutions are the specific plans that you design to close the gap between what your current culture is to what you want it to become.

These conversations can get tense. It's easy to be tempted to ascribe blame; resist that temptation, that never helps. It is, however, essential that you are honest about your current reality and speak very candidly about what is necessary to bring change. (Close the gap.) Remember, you will get what you allow.

5) Consider getting outside help.

It is possible that you may hit an impasse and need an independent outside voice to help you walk through at least the initial stages of change.

You are not looking for a consultant to assist you with ministries and mechanical programming and processes. (What you do and how you do it.) You need a reliable and trusted leader who can guide you through the nuances of the experience of your environment. More of what it "feels" like to be part of your church. This is not as "fuzzy" as that might sound. Remember how particular your sets of five words are. Stay focused.

6) Make tough decisions.

This is the part where you first go back and re-read the chapter on "You are Ridiculously in Charge."

The absence of these means you choose to allow things to remain as they are. This is a costly process. You may lose some people. No one ever wants that to happen, but it's often necessary to realize change.

7) Plan for the long term.

Don't bail at the first sign of rough water. It may get rocky; keep in mind this will take time. The larger the church and more problematic the culture, the longer it takes. I can promise you this, **if you continue to pour your energy into practical ministry without tending to your unhealthy culture, all you will get in return is exhaustion.**

Think long term. Get some help. Lean into God (wisdom and favor) and don't give up. It's worth it. Changing your culture is possible.

Another great resource is the book [Cracking Your Churches' Culture Code](#), by Sam Chand.

[Talk with an Auxano Navigator to learn more about dealing with a toxic culture.](#)

> [Read more from Dan.](#)