

'Toxic,' but still successful professionally?

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Toxic personality is a term used to describe people who behave greedily, immodestly and unfairly and take the truth very lightly. Dr. Mareike Kholin, Bastian Kückelhaus and Prof. Dr. Gerhard Blickle from the Department of Psychology at the University of Bonn found out why such people can still succeed in their careers. The trick that leads to the top is

social skill. The results are presented online in advance in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*. The print version will be published in April.

Social skills are in themselves a good thing in the workplace. They can open locked doors and help to cope with daily stress. But they can also be used to deceive others, abuse trust or construct a façade of harmlessness beyond which actually lurks deceitfulness. Dr. Mareike Kholin and the research team determined that toxic personalities who are considered socially adept by their colleagues were considered more capable by their superiors and occupy a higher hierarchical position. "We have to get used to the idea that [social skills](#) can be a double-edged sword," says Kholin.

In [personality tests](#), "toxic" persons have low scores in the categories "honesty" and "modesty." "Such personalities tend to focus on themselves all the time," says Blickle. "Good social skills enable them to deceive others." On the other hand, those who are distinctly honest and modest are a real joy for their team: Such individuals behave fairly and allow colleagues to share in their successes.

Low values for the characteristics "honesty" and "modesty"

Psychologists from the University of Bonn investigated the phenomenon by interviewing various work teams: First the participants completed an anonymous online survey and assessed themselves on the characteristics "honesty" and "modesty," among others. Then colleagues provided information on the social skills of the participant. The participant's supervisor then gave an appraisal of his work performance. The researchers were able to collect data from a total of 203 of such "trios" of employees, colleagues and superiors.

The results showed that workers with low values for honesty and modesty can nonetheless succeed in their careers if they balance the toxic parts of their [personality](#) with social skills. Bastian Kückelhaus: "Trickery, disguise and deception are the dark side of social skills."

How can toxic personalities be assessed more accurately?

But how can companies and teams respond to these findings? "In order to slow down the ascent of toxic personalities, more attention should be paid to actual performance and less to the good impression when selecting staff and making assessments," advises Prof. Blickle. This is particularly difficult in activities where it is important to impress and arouse interest, such as in sales or leadership positions. "Here, it makes sense for instance to also look at the sickness and notice rate of employees, or customer loyalty," Blickle adds.

More information: Mareike Kholin et al, Why dark personalities can get ahead: Extending the toxic career model, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2019.109792](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.109792)

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