Navigating Negative Workplaces

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Webinar Companion Handout

This handout accompanies the 'Navigating Negative Workplaces' webinar delivered at the Fundraising Everywhere Culture & Change Conference (November 2025). It restates the key points from the webinar, provides reflective exercises, and lists further resources for your information.

About Matt Middler Coaching

Hi, I'm Matt Middler, a leadership coach specialising in supporting charity sector leaders to perform at their best.

I have 25 years experience of working and volunteering for charities across Scotland, as a fundraiser, trustee, public speaker and now as a coach.

I specialise in one-to-one coaching and facilitating Action Learning Sets for Third Sector leaders, as well as delivering webinars, workshop and public speaking appointments.

Get in touch today

Book a time for us to have a free, informal chat about your particular challenges or goals.

1. Recognising a Negative Workplace

Before we start, it's useful to propose a shared understanding of what we mean when we talk about a negative workplace culture. Here is my attempt to summarise what we mean for the purposes of this webinar:

> *"A negative workplace culture is one where communication is poor, staff feel unsupported, competition or blame is excessive, and bullying, harassment, or unethical behaviour are tolerated or ignored —often reinforced by leadership and organisational systems."*

Why it matters?

Why important to be able to recognise a negative workplace culture?

Leaders and HR professionals: it will harm your organisation and limit your ability to achieve your charitable aims

Individuals: Working in such an environment for a long time could harm your mental and physical health.

What the research says

UK data reveals widespread conflict, stress, and burnout—especially in the charity and fundraising sector.

- One in four employees experience workplace conflict,
- Nearly four in five report moderate-to-high stress, and
- Stress-related conditions caused over 16 million lost working days in 2023/24.
- In charities, only 36% now find workloads achievable, and
- Just 12% say their organisation is equipped to handle burnout.

Negative culture red flags

Poor communication – unclear messages & low transparency.
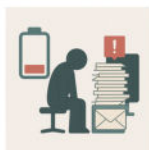
Overwork & burnout – excessive workloads treated as commitment.

Lack of trust – employees don't challenge; lots of micromanagement.

Weak employee voice – feedback ignored; whistleblowing distrusted.

Blame culture – mistakes punished and not learned from.

Low morale & disengagement – high turnover, quiet quitting.

Bullying & exclusion – inappropriate behaviour normalised/excused.

Values misalignment – leadership actions contradict stated values.

Which of these signs feel familiar to you? Two or more may indicate you are in a workplace with a negative workplace culture.

2. Focusing on What's in Your Control

When you're in a difficult workplace, focusing on what's within your control helps you reclaim energy and agency.

"We can't control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond."

The Circle of Control Model

The Circle of Control model invites us to focus our energy on what we can control, influence what we can, and let go of what we can't.
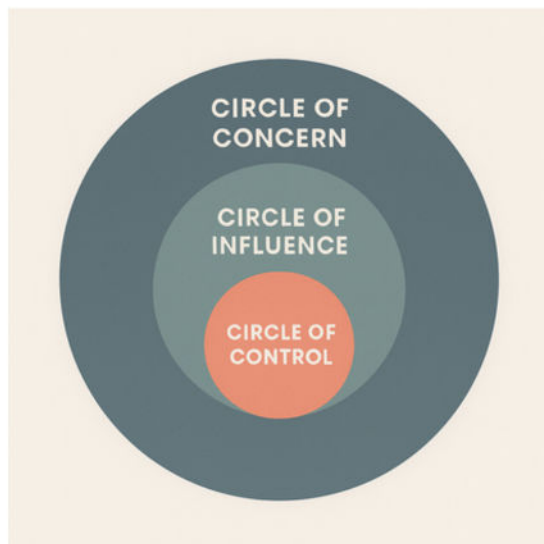
Exercise:

Take three columns labelled 'Control', 'Influence', and 'No Control'. List your current workplace challenges in each. Reflect and identify 2–3 actions you can take now.

Control	Influence	No Control

List two or three actions you can take to focus more of your energy on the things that are within your control:

1)

2)

3)

Start / Stop / Continue Feedback Model

For many of us, giving feedback can be a daunting task. Especially in the charity sector where many managers want to keep everyone happy or keep the peace. But the void of feedback can quickly be filled with our negative self-talk, leading to a negative experience at work. The start/stop/continue feedback model helps structure feedback constructively, making it easier for both the person giving and the person receiving the feedback.

Why it's useful

- **Balanced** – not just negative or positive.
- **Actionable** – focuses on specific behaviours, not personality traits
- **Simple** – easy for both giver and receiver to remember.

Typical uses

- Performance reviews
- Team retrospectives
- One-on-one coaching conversations
- Peer feedback sessions

Catagory	Purpose
Start	Suggest new behaviours, actions, or approaches that would improve performance or outcomes. (What am I not doing that you feel I should start). *Example:* "Start holding short check-ins at the start of each project to clarify priorities."
Stop	Point out current behaviours that are unhelpful, ineffective, or counterproductive. (What am I doing that you feel I should stop). *Example:* "Stop replying to all in long email threads unless everyone truly needs the info."
Continue	Recognise and reinforce effective behaviours worth maintaining. (What am I doing that you feel I should continue or do more of). *Example:* "Continue providing clear meeting agendas—it keeps everyone focused."

If you would like a free handout template for use at your workplace, get in touch today.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

Nonviolent Communication is about how you talk and listen so that people understand each other without blame or attack. It has four main parts:

1) **Observation** – Say what's happening without judging.
   - Instead of: "You are always rude."
   - Try: "When you raise your voice during meetings…"

2) **Feelings** – Say how it makes you feel.
   - "…I feel stressed and discouraged."

3) **Needs** – Say what's important to you or what you need.
   - "…because I need respect and calm to do my best work."

4) **Request** – Ask clearly for what might help.
   - "Would you be willing to discuss feedback with me privately instead of in front of the team?"

How this helps in a toxic environment

Nonviolent communication can help you navigate negative cultures and interactions:

- You stay calm and clear, instead of reacting with anger or shutting down.
- You protect your own mental space — focusing on your needs instead of blaming others.
- You make requests instead of demands, which can lower tension.
- You can communicate boundaries respectfully (e.g., "I need a moment before continuing this discussion.").
- You model healthier behaviour, which sometimes encourages others to do the same.

Even if others don't change, you gain more control over how you respond — and that reduces the harm of the negativity around you.

In what situations might communicating using the NVC model be helpful to you?

3. When Change Isn't Possible – Planning a Safe Exit

As a coach, I always work with my client to focus on what is in their control - be that their thinking, behaviours, communication or relationships - but sometimes

Top Tips: Protecting Your Health

If your health is being affected by a negative or toxic workplace, it's important to take active steps to protect your wellbeing while deciding how to move forward.

1. Prioritise your mental and physical health.
Recognise the signs of stress early—trouble sleeping, headaches, anxiety, or exhaustion—and treat them seriously. Use your GP or occupational health services if symptoms persist.

2. Set healthy boundaries.
Limit unpaid overtime and avoid taking work stress home. Communicate clearly about your capacity and take full breaks and leave time.

3. Keep a record.
Document incidents of bullying, exclusion, or unreasonable workload. Helps identify patterns and protects you if formal action becomes necessary.

4. Seek support and don't isolate yourself.
Talk to trusted colleagues, friends, or family about what's happening. Many employers have Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) that offer confidential counselling.

5. Reach out for professional or external help.
If you can't access internal support, contact external organisations like ACAS, Mind, or Citizens Advice for guidance. Therapy or coaching can also help you process experiences and plan next steps.

6. Know your rights and options.
Understand your organisation's grievance or whistleblowing policy, and use it if needed. If the environment remains toxic and harmful, consider an exit plan that protects your health and finances.

7. Reconnect with your values and purpose.
Toxic workplaces can erode self-worth. Remind yourself of your strengths and why your work matters—this can help maintain motivation and self-belief.

List two or three actions you can take to protect yourself in your current situation:
1)
2)
3)

You deserve a safe, respectful, and healthy workplace. Protecting your wellbeing isn't weakness—it's essential for long-term health and professional sustainability.

Your Career Timeline

The career timeline is a simple reflective tool that helps you step back and look at your whole working life—not just the difficult moment you may be in right now. When you're feeling stuck, overwhelmed, or questioning your future because of a negative workplace, it's easy for this moment to feel like the whole story.

Mapping your career highs and lows on a single line helps you regain perspective: you can see the progress you've made, the challenges you've already overcome, and the conditions that helped you thrive. This exercise is especially useful when you need to reconnect with your strengths, values, and long-term direction, or when you're considering a career move and want clarity on what will support—not damage—your wellbeing going forward.

Draw your timeline

Draw a horizontal line representing your career journey from your first job to now (if you are early in your career then include your education). Mark high and low points to visualise your experiences and patterns.

High points

First job   Now

Low points

Reflect

Once you have done this, step back and try to take in the journey of your career from a wider perspective:
- What lessons can you learn?
- What was happening when you were happy and motivated?
- What factors were in play when you had negative experiences?
- What does this all mean for your future career path?

4. Summary and further reading

In summary, my hope for attendees of this webinar is that you are in a better place to recognise the signs of a negative workplace culture and the impact it may be having on you. I hope you have one or two tools or new ideas that you can try out to either improve your situation or move on safely.

Websites

Health & Safety Executive - Key figures for Great Britain (2023/24) - https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/overview.htm
Mental Health Foundation England - Key workplace mental health statistics for 2024 - https://mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/blog/Key-workplace-mental-health-statistics-for-2024/
Acas - gives employees and employers free, impartial advice on workplace rights, rules and best practice - https://www.acas.org.uk/
Mind - mental health at work - https://www.mind.org.uk/
The Center for Nonviolent Communication - https://www.cnvc.org/

Books

Nonviolent Communication, A Language of Life; Marshall B. Rosenberg. "If *violent* means acting in ways that result in hurt or harm, then must of how we communicate could be called *violent communication.*"
Loving What Is, Four Questions That Can Change Your Life; Byron Katie. "When you argue with reality, you lose—but only 100% of the time."
The Power of a Positive No, How to Say No and Still Get to Yes; William Ury. "A Positive No says Yes to what matters, No to what doesn't, and Yes to the relationship."

Book your FREE coaching taster session today

Experience the power of coaching with a free, 30 minute call with me to discuss your unique challenges