

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

*Recognizing and Managing Problem Behaviors
Before They Bite You on the Butt*



By Judith Munson

The Seven Deadly Pitfalls IN THE WORKPLACE

Recognizing and Managing
Problem Behaviors Before They Bite You
On the Butt

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“No One Can Get Your Goat
If You Don’t Show Them Where It Is”
- Zig Ziglar -

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Table of Contents

Preface.....	4
Introduction.....	8
Chapter One, Intention	14
Chapter Two, Incompetence.....	17
Chapter Three, Infidelity.....	20
Chapter Four, Insensitivity.....	23
Chapter Five, Intrusion.....	26
Chapter Six, Institutional Forces.....	29
Chapter Seven, Inevitability.....	31
Toxic Handlers.....	33
References.....	36
About the Author.....	37
How to reach Judith.....	37

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Preface

How many times have you found yourself feeling poorly or exhausted at work, then tired and depressed later, when away from your job? Has your enthusiasm for your job or co-workers waned? Do you dread staff meetings?

As a manager or business owner, are you finding your employees are not as happy as they once were? And does this unhappiness now manifest itself as criticisms and complaints, in staff meetings, in poor customer service, or in lower productivity?

Does any of this sound familiar? Many of us have these same feelings. We go to work everyday constantly feeling angry and frustrated, not knowing where these feelings come from. We think there's something wrong with us.

There's nothing wrong with us! There are toxic emotions in our workplace that are a normal by-product of organizational life. That's a fact already appreciated by human resource departments, counselors, and therapists.

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Common sources of toxins in the workplace include:

- Changing procedures or systems
- Upgrading computers, email, or phone systems
- Moving the workplace to a new location
- Leadership change
- New hires
- Adding new departments
- Creating new products or services
- Expanding geographically
- Outsourcing at home and around the world
- Company buyout or merger
- Layoffs
- Eliminating benefits
- Eliminating departments
- Eliminating products or services

Frequently, the organization or business lacks flexibility or funds to smooth out such transitional phases. The inevitable and tangible consequences follow:

- Increased absenteeism
- Diminished productivity
- Employee turnover
- Direct medical and legal fees
- Increased insurance costs
- Workplace violence

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Toxic emotions can be subtle or obvious, but they are a very real part of our work world. They are something that may escape an employer's awareness. And that ignorance can jeopardize the creativity, productivity, and possibly the health, of their employees. These emotions can be found in any size company or non-profit organization. They can even be found among your customers or clients if you're self-employed.

How do these toxic emotions develop? How can we recognize the situations that create them? How can we deal with them once we do recognize them? How can we safeguard ourselves against what these toxins can do to our emotional and physical health?

This e-book is a guide for you to find answers to these questions and be able to recognize when toxic emotions are invading your workplace. It is also designed to teach you how to prevent the pervasive toxicity that develops from common workplace changes, such as layoffs, mergers, and new hires.

- As an employee, know that you are entitled to having your emotions at work, as long as they are acknowledged and do not become toxic to either yourself or your co-workers.
- As a manager, learn how to manage your people with compassion and how to institutionalize compassion by writing it into your company's policies.

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

- If you are a business owner, this e-book will show you how to establish and maintain boundaries with your customers and clients and keep them from controlling you with their toxic emotions.

The ideas presented in this e-book offer solutions to common but troublesome workplace conflicts. By informing yourself, your manager, or your company about the causes and effects of a prevailing dilemma you may be preventing a downward spiral in productivity and profits. This is equally true of large or small businesses, as well as non-profits.

Don't let toxic emotions cause employees to make a mass exodus from the company. That could result in financial ruin for the company and the loss of your employment.

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THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Introduction

Emotional pain is a fact of organizational life. Corporations will merge, people will lose their jobs, and bosses will make unrealistic demands. The emotions that accompany these events aren't in themselves toxic. *The key is in how these emotions are handled* in the workplace by the people involved: clients, employees, managers, and business owners.¹

This involves a hidden or largely invisible aspect of working for an organization today. It doesn't matter whether it's a small, service-oriented business, massage therapy, an accountancy firm, a corporation, or a non-profit.

The emotional pain creates the operational dilemma. That dilemma stems from using an outdated business model to address the many new challenges facing today's workplace.

These archaic workplace models were created by earlier needs from the Industrial era and were later imposed on an accepting small business and corporate culture that was then based on conformity. These earlier models are no longer appropriate for our current economic business climate.

¹ Frost, *Toxic Emotions in the Workplace*, 2003

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

The rules of doing business have changed. They continue to change at a rate that makes it hard for human emotions to adapt.

So what is it that makes normal, emotional responses to upsetting organizational change transform a work environment from effective to toxic? It is the insensitive attitudes and actions of clients, co-workers, managers and company policies. Individually, these people are insensitive because of their personal fears and their need to control others

Add this to changes in the workplace. Now you have a threat to the company's bottom line. What happens when corporations merge? Departments are downsized, systems and procedures change, people and jobs are eliminated. Those who survive the merger may be transferred to a different department, their job re-defined, or they may simply have their desk or cubicle moved. This last may seem somewhat trivial, but these changes strike the same chord of insecurity in all of us.

Now add the usual financial stresses that frequently accompany such dramatic job changes. They directly affect everyone involved. Here you have a recipe for emotional toxicity and a potential for business disaster.

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

It is at this critical point that the immediate success of the company's implemented changes may be in jeopardy. It is at this point that the insensitive attitudes and actions of clients, coworkers, managers, and company policies can become accepted as normal. Troublesome issues evolve into workplace toxicity that affect us personally as well as the company's bottom line.

If not addressed in a positive and pro-active manner, this emotionally toxic situation, this combination of business events and insensitive people, will wreak havoc. The toxicity will drain and depress some of the people involved. It will create unresolved anger and frustration in others. Feelings of betrayal, blame and "you owe me" will be stimulated.

Passive-aggressive behavior will surface. That will lower morale to the point that people are wondering when the ship will sink and whether they should jump before it goes down.

Havoc and confusion about company routines and deadlines will ensue. The rumor mill will be stimulated and office politics will become a destructive force.

Due to increased absenteeism, lower productivity will be the order of the day. Customer service will suffer since employees will be doing their own jobs plus the work of those people who had been laid off.

After a short time period key staff will possibly make a dramatic exit, perhaps en masse.

Employees may be motivated to openly search for their next place of employment while at work.

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

An atmosphere of tension could easily be created in the workplace. This atmosphere would most certainly be felt by customers, clients, suppliers and the surrounding business community.

These very real problems can even develop into what's known as "dead moose carcasses". That's the mental game of sweeping the toxicity under the carpet while everyone willingly steps over the emotional debris. This is the familiar game of denial. The game is most effectively played only when everyone involved agrees to wear blinders and hold their noses while stepping over the moose mess.

The measurable consequences following this type of work environment definitely include lower profits. Based on a study by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, organizational change of any kind – a change in leadership, downsizing or mergers – can lead to a loss of 75% productive work time. Further, workplace stress is estimated to cost \$300 billion annually due to absenteeism, lower productivity, employee turnover, direct medical, legal, and insurance fees, and workplace violence.

Workplace toxicity develops from workplace stress. We see how workplace stress creates emotional pain and how those people unaware of the negative impact of their words and actions handle this pain. Hopefully, we can be instrumental in correcting their insensitive approach, halting the organization's downward spiral

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

To help identify emotional pain in workplace stress, we will look at the seven ways in which toxins are introduced. The following are the chapter headings:

- INTENTION
- INCOMPETENCE
- INFIDELITY
- INSENSITIVITY
- INTRUSION
- INSTITUTIONAL FORCES
- INEVITABILITY

We will examine each of the above chapters for its role in causing individual emotional pain. When handled insensitively, the topics are a source of toxicity.

We'll look at solutions that can be used immediately whether you are an employee, a manager, or a corporate Human Resource (HR) department instituting policy changes.

Finally, we'll discuss the role of the *toxin handlers* who are the people who play a pivotal role in dealing with the emotional pain in their workplace. They serve a dual role by contributing positively to the emotional and physical health of both their company and their co-workers. However, missteps in handling the emotional currents by playing the

THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

role of compassionate listener, mediator, mentor, or buffer can have unwanted, unexpected repercussions of toxicity. This happens at a great personal cost to them and to those they attempt to help.

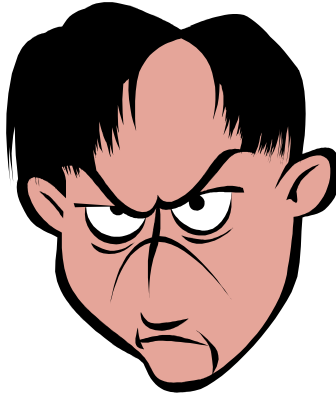
We are talking about the phenomenon of *toxicity generation*. This is the result of absorbing the initial toxin in order to help the organization, while failing in not releasing it themselves in a positive or constructive manner. The risk becomes the venting of their acquired toxicity. The victims of this venting can be the entire organization and all the people within.

It is my hope that this e-book will inspire you to correct the imbalances that you see in your own workplace, adjust to the demands of an ever-changing work world, and share your toxin-free perspective with your co-workers

~~~Judith Munson

# THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

## Chapter One



### INTENTION

To inflict emotional pain on someone as a means  
to control them

The first of the seven deadly pitfalls, intention, can often be traced to the behaviors and attitudes of managers. Other sources can be company policies and practices. What they have in common is the intention of inflicting emotional pain on employees in order to control them, degrade them, or to undermine their confidence and self-esteem. This of course, is most effectively done in front of other subordinates. The people receiving this treatment are clearly being abused and used as examples to also control the behaviors of others.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Some managers deliberately seek out staff members to launch a personal attack on them as a way of displaying their power. The people most often targeted are those who are highly sensitive people (HSP). These are people who are sensitive to change in their environment, and who process information on a much deeper level than their co-workers.

Other managers develop grudges, or keep score, or use the comparisons between employees to stimulate departmental competition. This type of manipulation is most effective with those who have a fear of authority, a strong need for their particular job, or a perceived lack of employment options. These are examples of power plays to show the staff who is in control.

The emotional responses of people treated like this are fear, anger, confusion, and resentment. Often, employees focus on “covering their tracks” or playing it safe so as to not create trouble for themselves. Most commonly, people will seek out other employment and leave their job as quickly as possible.

Over time, such behavior results in lower work performance, absenteeism and an increase in employee turnover. But the fact is, most abusive behavior goes unreported or undisciplined in many organizations.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Self-employed people may have clients who are abusive and controlling. They may think that because they are self-employed they have to accept any client or customer who comes to them, in order to earn a living.

Working for a non-profit can also involve abuse. Sometimes, you may be expected to give more than you can afford for the sake of the organization. To ask for more of anything, including support, may be considered to be asking for too much. Non-profits can be infected with a “poor me” mentality that can be draining to the individual.

### **Solutions:**

- Set boundaries. They provide for healthy relationships.
- Be clear in your reasons for why you are working with this department, business, organization, or client.
- Set your intention to not be a victim of someone else's insecurities.
- Resolve your own issues with authority. Learn to be comfortable with assertiveness.
- Resolve the question of why this manager, company, or client is in your life at this time.

# THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

## Chapter Two

### INCOMPETENCE

Managers with poor people skills



Incompetence is primarily found in managers who are hired or promoted because of their expertise with the company product, their sales ability, their technical ability, or their connection to company leaders.

As competent in their field as they may be, they can't lead their people or manage their department. Maybe they don't know how to delegate, or they are poor communicators and they don't accept responsibility. Even more likely, they know they shouldn't have been hired or promoted to their position of authority.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Chances are that they are in avoidance mode and are waiting for their incompetence to be exposed.

Examples of this source of organizational toxicity includes both procrastination and vacillation on departmental decisions. Abilities required for the job may be absent. Knowledge of company procedures might be lacking. There may be a tendency to drop the ball at crucial points in the game.

Incompetence can be masked with passive-aggressive behavior, anger, and blame. An inappropriate dependence on the rest of the staff can exist in order to cover up what the incompetent person doesn't know or won't do.

Micromanagement can also indicate incompetence. It can consist of constantly reminding staff members of their duties while watching over their shoulders to make sure they do things correctly while finding fault with every detail. These are examples of someone covering up their own in competencies by picking at those around them.

This type of toxicity can also reveal a blackmail mentality. The mentality is that of manipulation of reality. It shifts the responsibility of who is really in charge of what. It saves the incompetent and helps them to retain their positions.

The effects of incompetence on the people who must work with them includes frustration, boredom, decreased motivation and poor self-esteem. Deadlines slip by, work piles up, and the staff holds back and waits, hoping the incompetent manager will be exposed and removed.

## THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

### **Solutions:**

- Document all your work in detail. This will give you control.
- Decide if the greater good of the department or business is served by putting up with this person.
- Decide if you or the department can teach them about their job, the specifics of the product, etc.
- Write down all communications on projects, deadlines, responsibilities, etc. And use this as a visual reference.

# THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

## Chapter Three

### INFIDELITY

The act of betrayal



I'm sure we've all experienced this more than once in our working lives. It's the empty promises of raises, bonuses, promotions, benefits, time off, vacations, etc. Even promises of better communication between employees and management can end in feelings of betrayal.

This source of toxicity is always in the news. Just look at the union contracts that are up for renewal. Look at the government's withdrawal of some forms of subsidizing. Take note of the reduction of pensions and the elimination of pension plans. And look at the CEO's going to prison.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Betrayal is the stuff of murder mysteries and with good reason! It plays on the most basic human quality of trust. It requires assumptions of honor and integrity, honesty and truth. As humans, we need to trust our fellow human. As staff members, we need to trust our co-workers. As employees, we need to trust our managers and our companies.

When this trust is compromised, we feel betrayal. The people we once trusted have acted with infidelity towards us and devalued our contributions. Our self-esteem drops, our trust in our own abilities to judge people and situations correctly is questioned. We develop a self-righteous anger and start looking for allies against the perpetrator.

In the workplace, this situation creates doubt in the minds of the employees about the motives of the managers, the company, or the directors. Suspicion of why things didn't turn out as expected leads to fears about what could happen in the future. The next time a promise is made or an act of trust is required we are liable to hesitate or simply turn our backs.

Infidelity in the workplace is demoralizing and destroys the motivation employees have to contribute additional effort in improving company performance, participating fully in department affairs, or achieving their personal career goals. Apathy develops and is lethal to customer service, meeting deadlines, improving products or distribution, and to company profits.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

### **Solutions:**

- Get promises in writing.
- Clarify everything and document it.
- Follow up to ensure that what you have been promised is on schedule.

# THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

## Chapter Four

### INSENSITIVITY

A lack of emotional intelligence



Insensitivity is really the source of most organizational toxicity. It is based on a lack of emotional intelligence and of sensitivity on the part of the people in charge.

Specifically, they lack social awareness and empathy towards others on their staff. This is a common, and usually unconscious way of controlling people by invalidating them. These managers just don't get it; they are mindless.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

They can also radiate a doom and gloom mentality. This energy can be used as a way to motivate and control their staff to greater production through fear.

Emotional intelligence often relies on intuition to determine what and when something needs to be said and appropriate action taken. Managers who lack this quality neglect to give credit where and when credit is due. They blunder about the workplace stepping on their staff's toes. And they create unnecessary dramatic hoops for their people to jump through. They maintain a high level of tension in their departments which they hope may be interpreted as productivity.

Examples of this type of manager are the red-faced tyrant, yelling at his employees, and the hard-hearted Scrooge. The people most often targeted are those who are highly sensitive people, who are sensitive to changes in their environment and who process information on a much deeper level than their co-workers.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

The consequences an insensitive person has on the company's bottom line include:

- Employees avoid the manager when at work.
- High absenteeism occurs.
- Employees refuse to accept responsibility for projects and deadlines.
- Employees resist giving any more of their time, creativity or productivity to the company.
- High employee turnover results because people feel invalidated.

### **Solutions:**

- Managers need to improve their emotional intelligence by improving their social awareness and sensitivity.
- Managers need to learn how to interpret an employee's body language in order to know what that employee may need to do his or her job well.
- Managers must listen with compassion and empathy.

# THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

## Chapter Five

### INTRUSION

#### Seduction



Intrusion refers to manipulation by blatant seduction. Intrusion is personified by the charismatic person in the workplace who manipulates others into buying into his own vision of the company or department's success.

To accomplish this, he steps up the pace and leads the crew into an intense workload, setting the example himself. He seduces the staff into working long hours, coming in early, working through lunch, and leaving work late with the belief that it's for the good of the company. Hopefully, they will receive some sort of personal benefit. Perhaps they will have the satisfaction of a great performance. Employees may also hope for company wide recognition.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

The trouble is that you have to play his way to be in the game. There is no moderation allowed, no excuses and no distractions of a social or family nature. There is the fear of being singled out by your peers and your manager as not being good enough if you refuse to play.

Then either he burns out himself, quits, gets transferred to another department, or is fired. He fails to attain the goal he has everyone striving for. However it ends, he goes out suddenly. There is no explanation for those left behind holding the bag and wondering what just happened.

Momentum, sense of purpose, and camaraderie that kept everyone going through setbacks and defeats now has no direction and no driving force. People are left first with a frustrating adrenaline rush, then with a physical and emotional let down. They are angry, deflated, and disappointed.

For the business or company there is a costly time lag in replacing such a performer. Who would want to step in and clean up this mess?

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

### **Solutions:**

- Create balance in your life. Have various social activities in which to participate.
- Develop an exercise program and stick to it. People committed to their own health are less likely to look for outside motivation.
- Keep a good perspective on what role work plays in your life.
- Ask yourself, “Is there benefit to having this driving behavioral force in my life now?”
- Why is this charismatic person determining the daily flow of your life and career?

# THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

## Chapter Six

### Institutional Forces

#### Corporate Agendas



Institutional forces are often products of a serious lack of communication between policy makers and staff in the trenches. Decision makers may betray a failure of understanding of the issues impacting business.

Corporate agendas are a common source of much toxicity in the work world. But the toxicity is usually unintentional. It stems primarily from outdated policies and procedures. The enforcement of them results in employees feeling manipulated and controlled on issues that are not related to their job performance or the company product.

Such inappropriate control affects company morale by invalidating the employees' sense of self-worth. When the issue is a dress code, the staff's personal identities are invalidated, turning them into robots.

Companies that mandate a uniform when it has nothing to do with the sale of the product or customer service are sending a message to the staff that they are subordinates and by definition are not good enough to be management.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Other examples could be disallowing cubicle staff to decorate their space with pictures, plants or trinkets from home. There are plenty of examples in employee handbooks or manuals given to new hires listing company rules and regulations.

Managers who adhere to these rules are using the written word as authority rather than managing their people and departments by leadership qualities. It is a form of manipulation and control when used to enforce conformity among the staff.

The consequences for the company of this type of controlling behavior are high employee turnover, covert or open defiance of company rules, lack of staff commitment, and a resistance to meeting deadlines.

### **Solutions:**

- Company manuals on rules, regulations and policies should be reviewed for dated material that invalidates the employee as an individual.
- Companies should focus on their product and financial goals, not extraneous issues such as making the staff conform to an image that has nothing to do with the product or service.
- Company structure should be evaluated for a “top down” mentality.
- Diversity in the workplace improves company morale and profits.

# THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

## Chapter Seven

### **Inevitability**

#### Impact of Trauma



A final source of toxicity introduced into the workplace comes from the unavoidable emotional pain that occurs under unusual circumstances. An example of this would be the death of a co-worker, company leader, or a frequent and dependable client.

This can also include unexpected and sudden downsizing or a jobsite catastrophe, such as an earthquake, tornado, or fire. These things need to be openly acknowledged and hurting people need to be supported.

For all these situations and others like them, people need time to grieve in their own way. Not allowing enough time and space to heal wounds by glossing over the event minimizes the person's pain. It further minimizes them as persons who contribute to the benefit of the company and others.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

To behave insensitively causes resentment, blame, and absenteeism. It produces a resistance to meeting deadlines, apathy, and heightened emotions in all areas. A certain listlessness and lack of focus in departmental activities is probably unavoidable.

### **Solutions:**

- Provide on-site counseling to employees.
- Institutionalize compassion.
- Allow time off for handling grief.
- Honor the contribution the deceased made to the company.
- Treat downsizing as an emotional loss that needs time to heal.
- Include employees in the change process.
- Be aware of situations as they develop. Perhaps institute an open door policy during the changes.

## **THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

### **Toxin Handlers**

#### Managing the pain of others

Toxin Handler - What's a toxin handler? In this scenario they are not people handing out gas masks, at least not literally. They are the managers who contribute to both the physical and emotional health of their organization by absorbing the negativity of organizational change and the emotional pain that accompanies it.

## THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Toxin handlers save organizations from self-destructing by:

- They handle company toxins by serving as a buffer, mentor, listener, or mediator.
- They give us compassion when they listen to the emotional pain of their employees and try to alleviate or fix it.
- They also absorb the bad feelings, acting as a buffer during organizational changes.
- They diffuse tense situations at work and take the heat from obnoxious bosses.
- They voluntarily shoulder the frustration, bitterness and anger of others so that the quality of work continues.

These people face repercussions from their often unacknowledged efforts. They can pay a high price emotionally, physically, and professionally. For example, they might become too involved with one of their staff's emotional pain, then not release it, and become toxic themselves.

This becomes *toxicity generation*. When it's intense and enduring it's magnified because most companies don't see the role that debilitating emotional pain can play

## THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

in undermining their successes. Or, they sweep it under the carpet and you end up with what's known as "dead moose carcasses", with everyone in the office willingly stepping over the build up of emotional debris, but not acknowledging it's existence. This is the familiar mental game of denial and is effectively played only when everyone involved agrees to wear blinders and hold their noses while they step over the moose mess.

### **Solutions:**

- Acknowledge emotional pain in others. Notice if a co-worker is having an off day. If they are, compassionately acknowledge it without asking the details of the issue.
- Acknowledgement of someone's emotional pain is not an act of reinforcing the drama of their circumstances, but simply an act of empathy.
- Be "present". Listen totally with eye contact and perhaps rephrasing of the person's words. This way they know you are listening to them at this moment. Also, they can hear what message their words actually convey.
- Deal with it instead of ignoring the pain or minimizing it. Offer suggestions or allow the person to find their own solutions as they talk about it. Generally, people will discover their own solutions as they relate the scenario with minimal guidance.

## THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

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## THE SEVEN DEADLY PITFALLS IN THE WORKPLACE

### About the Author

Judith Munson is the Founder and CEO of Inside the Workplace, [www.insidetheworkplace.com](http://www.insidetheworkplace.com). She's a Certified Coach who brings many years of experience in consulting and training with companies in Conflict Resolution, Mediation and Organizational Change Management. Judith is a published author of "It's Not What They Say, but What They Don't Say in the Workplace" published in the Upstate Business Journal.

Her latest book, Alligators in the Water Cooler will be on the market in the early part of 2008.

Judith's unique manner of training CEO's managers, Supervisors, and employees, providing them the 'secrets of working well together, has proven successful with clients such as the Coporon Law Offices, The Migrant Head Start Teachers of Northern California, and Hagen/Sinclair Market Research. This is to name but a few.

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