

How can you maintain your sanity in a toxic workplace?

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The **Surviving Work in the UK** series is produced by [Surviving Work](#).

There is no question that workplaces have taken a perverse turn, and I mean that in its brutal Freudian sense. We live in a society where receiving chemotherapy means you are [fit for work](#) and ‘toxic leadership’ has become a [mainstream topic](#) on business school curricula. A lot of working life is just unfair.

As precarious work grows, most of us manage our working lives by keeping our mouths shut and withdrawing from each other. A new workplace sport grows: how to avoid human contact with co-workers.

Today we are starting a series of articles by practitioners and thinkers in the field of workplace relations to think about how to make friends and influence people in a context of precarious work. Over the next three months, a weekly *Surviving Work in the UK* blog post will be produced – a co-production from Surviving Work and the LSE Business Review and LSE British Politics and Policy blogs. Blog posts will cover the heart pumping stuff of bullying, racism, metrics, building team working and getting on with the people around you. An e-book will be produced from the series.

The Precarity Paradox

[Precarious work](#) is the new black in academic and policy circles, with some [good data](#) coming out about low wages, temporary agency work and the impact on the regulation of work in the UK. What is much less talked about is the reality of these precarious workers themselves and the impact on their [mental health](#) – depression, anxiety disorders and suicide – and with this omission a substantial de-humanization of the issues.

Many working people are disorientated by a sense of “[liquid fear](#)” at work. This is a state of mind where distinctions between serious and less serious workplace problems can’t be made. The smallest mistake becomes the end of your career and you wake up bolt upright sweating at 3 am wondering how you’re going to handle the next “informal” chat with your line manager. This fear goes right up the management chain, with public and private sector leadership often reduced to talking about, for instance, the very evident [financial crisis](#) only from the safety of retirement.

In the public sector, [impossible targets](#) are managed through command-and-control management and there is a stomach-churning [rise in racism, whistleblowing and victimisation](#). According to the people working in the NHS, our health system runs on a '[pervasive culture of fear](#)'. Yes, our national system for promoting health is itself profoundly sick.

Talking about precarity has an inherent paradox when people are often just too scared to engage in the debates about work. It is not just the immigrant nurses or the young people under 25 flooding private employment agencies that feel insecure; it affects everyone working in this system. Precarity is inclusive, with senior managers equally unwilling to join the ranks of the self-employed by [raising concerns](#) about corporate governance or tax evasion.

Anxiety can do bad stuff to people, encouraging us to retreat into a psychic bunker with members of our occupational tribe ([Armstrong D & Rustin M 2015](#)). In a context of workplace insecurity, one of the great seductions is to believe that we are united in the team. Yet our actual experience can be that when the balance tips in favour of fear our relationships easily break down. This is why any workplace under stress can turn from being a group of benign co-workers to a gangland that splits the them's and us's, the winners from the losers, and people end up [eating their lunch in the loos](#).

This fear and loathing of working life encourages us to put our faith in the magic solutions of strategic reviews and marital mergers. This fairy story version of organisational behaviour promoted by a HRM lullaby sent to rock us to sleep, despite the growing evidence that as the economic crisis deepens so does [conflict at work](#).

Showing Leadership

Comforting as it is to look upon our managerial leaders as a separate form of human life, the reality is that most of them are ordinary people who started out wanting to do something worthwhile. It is the workplace playground that downgrades our humanity.

Two occupational hazards stick out. **Firstly** the people that go into leadership roles are [highly motivated](#) to do so. One of the problems with this genuine desire to do something productive is that this belief can, with surprising speed and ease, turn into a sadistic [guilt-pumping sense](#) that it is your duty to save the organisation. Add to this a certain degree of the old superhero syndrome where, despite the managerial casualties littering the corridors, somehow you believe you've got what it takes to turn the organisational tide. Managers can become unrealistic at best, or careless, demoralised and burnt out at worst.

A **second** occupational hazard is that to protect our hearts and minds against the disturbing organisational complexities that exist in real workplaces, we become managerially defended. This is a position where our beliefs become facts, certainty replaces anxiety and all's well with the managerial world: a fundamentalism which measures workplace realities through metrics, absence management and where the computer always says no.

In his work [Sex, Death and the Superego](#) (worth carrying around with you in order to secure a seat on public transport) and [Between Mind and Brain](#), the psychoanalyst Ron Britton explores the leadership mind. He argues that a fundamentalist position where the workplace can be divided into winners and losers, productivity and targets, is a reaction to the profound human experience of needing to manage our anxieties in groups. In those times at work when we can't maintain a very human position of 'moderate scepticism', we fall into a world of absolute certainty or absolute doubt. If our anxiety dominates, our need for certainty goes up hence the growth of increasingly command and control management culture in our workplaces. Britton writes that it's not what we believe but *how* we believe that determines whether we can work together, and find a way out of the paradoxes inherent in the experience of precarity.

A Relational Model of Surviving Work

One of the main traditions in the UK to understand workplace dynamics is a psychoanalytic or 'group relations' tradition. Psychoanalytic ideas offer us a humanistic and relational model of how to make friends and influence

people based on a deeply unpalatable menu of dependency, death and, in the most sobering of Freud's ideas, that we should aim to just be [ordinarily unhappy at work](#). This model of working in groups is a long way from the shiny stuff of talent management and positive thinking, but it offers a profoundly humane and humanising model of how to actually build relationships at work.

Psychoanalytic ideas question a model of measuring work using the box-ticking of the metric age, promoting more profound processes about how to get on with people we don't like and how to grow up. Psychoanalysis offers ways for us to carry out the central task we all have to do when we go to work, to learn to tolerate other people.

As a result it is also a model that promotes talking, not the positivity pumping stuff of listening exercises, but rather the establishment of a containing space. This is sometimes called a transitional space, using the work of [Donald Winnicott \(1951\)](#), where you can say what's on your mind and I am open to being influenced by what you have to say. It is a developmental (rather than managerial) process which accepts that we are all amateurs when it comes to getting on with people at work.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, and the proposal running through this series of blog posts, our only way out of the precarity paradox is to build our relationships with each other. This offers us a relational model of solidarity at work, an ideal that exists precisely because we are all capable of acting defensively and against our own human interests. Working life involves us making the best out of a bad lot – building relationships with the people we actually work with, in all their imperfect, frustrating and diverse glory. This involves accepting that surviving work is not so much about brilliant ideas or leadership qualities, rather it is about learning how to play nicely with the other children in the workplace playground.

In a context of workplace violence, if there is a fight to be had it is a psychological one. To continue to take the risk of making contact with other people who are not the same as us, who are not perfect and who can really get on your nerves.

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Notes:

- *For the full list of articles in the [Surviving Work in the UK](#) series, click [here](#); for a list of contributors to the series, click [here](#).*
- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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