

Episode 3 — Toxic Positivity from the lens of companies

Overview: What does toxic positivity look like from the lens of companies? What are the consequences for businesses when toxic positivity is present in employees' day to day? And how can employers design an organizational experience that fosters strong corporate cultures and productivity but still leaves room for an individual's authenticity and for honest problem-solving?

Featured Guests:

Dr. Sonia Kang, *University of Toronto*

Transcript

Sonia Kang: So, even if people stay in the company, their performance is gonna be impacted, because they're gonna be spending time, energy, resources coping with these negative thoughts and feelings that they are not allowed to express, suppressing them. So you're gonna see these decreases in performance, in creativity, the risks that people are willing to take. So even if you don't see that turnover and you see employees staying within the company, that could lead, not only can lead to decreased performance, can also lead to burnout, where people are too tired to do a good job. Then you might have absenteeism. So even if people do stick around you're going to have those impacts when you are looking into different kinds of performance metrics.

Simone Lima: Hi, my name is Simone, my pronouns are she/her, and this is Positively exhausted - Stories of toxic positivity in the workplace, a limited podcast series from GATE audio productions. In this series of three episodes, I will talk to psychology researchers, business scholars and people in the workforce to understand why toxic positivity has entered our work lives, its impacts and how to identify it. I will also try to answer a few questions about my personal journey along the way.

In the third episode, we will examine toxic positivity from the lense of companies. What are the consequences for businesses when toxic positivity is present in employee's day to day? And how can employers design an organizational experience that fosters strong corporate cultures and productivity but still leaves room for individual's authenticity and for honest problem solving? Before we start, here are some important disclaimers. First: This series contains examples of work relationships that may trigger some listeners, so listen responsibly. Second: Even though some of the discussion you will hear mentions "female" and "male" individuals, I recognize the existence of other gender identities and that toxic positivity might affect these individuals differently. Since research on this topic is still nascent, I made the decision to not discuss other genders and I hope this podcast is really just a starting point for further work on toxic positivity and its impacts on individuals of different gender identities. Now, on to the show.

In the previous episodes of Positively Exhausted, we explored what toxic positivity is and how it impacts employees when it shows up in the workplace. We learned that, although there isn't a whole lot of research on what is popularly called toxic positivity, science already knows that not having the room to understand and process what one is feeling can take a toll on an individual's mental health and deeply impact their relationships with themselves and others. We also uncovered how female identifying employees can have an even harder time dealing with the consequences of toxic positivity at work because of society's expectations around how females are supposed to act when in groups.

But how about the employers? Are they impacted by toxic positivity at all? And what can they do to still nurture an environment of productivity without denying employees the space to discuss what might not be going so well in their work routines? To try to answer these questions, I had a chat with Dr. Sonia Kang.

Sonia Kang: My name is Sonia Kang. I'm an Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management and also Canada Research Chair in Identity, Diversity and Inclusion. And I am a faculty research fellow with GATE.

Simone Lima: Sonia uses her expertise in behavioral sciences and organizational design to create a path towards diversity and inclusion for individuals, for organizations, and society as a whole. The first thing I wanted to explore in our conversation was the perceived gap between how companies presented their culture to potential and actual employees, and how workers truly experienced it, day in and day out. Both in my personal experience and that of many of my interviewees, organizations brag about allowing employees to bring their true selves to work – you can wear whatever you want, you can work from anywhere, with flexible work hours to fit your hobbies and personal aspirations into your day. But this authenticity can only go so far. The moment when authentic questions arise that do not paint the company in a positive light, these claims can be quickly dismissed and HR and leaders can jump into toxic positive tactics, intentionally or not.

Sonia Kang: On the one hand, there is this kind of push for people to be authentic, right? This is like a buzzword right now, authenticity. So employers really want people who are their authentic selves. But at the same time, people don't really feel comfortable with emotion, right? So they don't necessarily mean authentic in the sense of expressing your true emotions and, you know, telling people how you really feel. And so there is kind of a bias against really showing your emotions and being emotional at work.

Simone Lima: So while Merriam-Webster defines authenticity as to be “true to one's own personality, spirit, or character”, the term seems to have a narrower definition when used to describe workplace cultures, as if your whole self involves what you think and do, but not what you feel. And, once again, women are generally disproportionately affected when they are perceived as maybe too authentic during their careers.

Sonia Kang: You know, one of the reasons why women have traditionally been seen as lacking leadership ability is the stereotype that women are too emotional, right? So they can't be trusted with these difficult decisions, because they're going to let their emotions get in the way. And this has been kind of one of the reasons that people have put forward “Well, of course, women aren't good leaders because they're too emotional”. So there is this implicit and very explicit connection between emotion especially, you know, negative emotionality and lack of leadership ability and skill.

Simone Lima: In a [Harvard Business Review article on the paradox of authenticity](#), INSEAD professor Herminia Ibarra defends that complete authenticity at work, disclosing every single thought and feeling one might have, can be both unrealistic and risky. Ibarra's research focuses on executive leadership, and she notes how maintaining strict coherence between what one feels, says and does can make leaders lose credibility, or not adapt fast enough in rapidly changing environments. Although she does not focus on gender aspects in the piece, Ibarra showcases the story of Cynthia, a general manager in a healthcare organization, who saw herself in a challenging new role, with lots more responsibility than she had in the past. Cynthia chose to be vulnerable with her team and shared how being in such a position was a bit scary, and that she would need everyone's help ramping up. According to the article, Cynthia's authenticity backfired, and she ended up losing credibility among employees rather than fostering the collaborative environment she was looking for. Ibarra argues for a more flexible frame of mind for leaders, so that “sticking to one's true story” doesn't become a self-imposed limit that will prevent employees from growth and from taking on challenges. Sonia told me about the notion of identity formation and that part of how we make sense of who we are comes from

our assessment of things such as our status and the respect we are given. We build this assessment through our interactions with other people, in places such as work. Apart from feeling othered in workplaces which can lead to what she calls identity threat, individuals from minority groups also have to deal with workplaces that are less tolerant with them, especially when they are being vulnerable and authentic.

Sonia Kang: Anytime you have a marginalized group, you are going to have less leeway in terms of stuff that you can do that's not perfect. If you are a member of a group that's traditionally held power, then you have a lot more leeway in terms of the way that you can act and make mistakes and, maybe, like, express negativity, or express emotion now, and then. But if you're a member of a group that already is on the line, where people are like "Oh, I don't know, is this person gonna be able to perform?", let's say, you're a woman, or a woman of color, or let's say, you're someone who has a disability. People are already thinking that maybe there's some weakness here, or there's some over emotionality. And so the kind of degrees of freedom that you have to express any negative emotion is even lower, you're almost held to a higher standard in terms of pushing through and maintaining a positive attitude. And I think that, that is really taxing, right, because we talked about that identity threat cycle. If you're constantly having to suppress any negative emotions, that's going to eat up your cognitive resources, it's extremely distracting, you are not going to be able to do your work. People who are part of those marginalized groups who are feeling that identity threat more often who are already being held to this higher standard, are going to be impacted more, because they're going to have to deal with this more, they're going to be distracted from their work more, their performance is going to suffer. And it's really related to those allowances. Some people are allowed to act in certain ways that, you know, some people have access to behaviors that people from stigmatized groups.

Simone Lima: In her Harvard Business Review article, Ibarra also discusses when and why authenticity became such a buzzword in corporations. The author points out that in the beginning of the 2010s, following numerous corporate scandals, trust in business leaders fell to an all time low according to the Edelman Trust Barometer. For example, in 2013, only 18% of the employees surveyed trusted business leaders to tell the truth and less than 50% trusted leaders to do the right thing. In addition to that, employee engagement seemed to be dwindling. A 2013 Gallup poll studied 180 million employees worldwide and found that only 13% declared to be engaged at work. Ibarra credits these trends in public confidence and employee morale to the shift in workplace cultures, and the increase in corporate training initiatives encouraging authenticity in the workplace and motivating employees to embody their true selves to work. But, as Sonia pointed out, the opportunity to be authentic at work is not the same for all individuals. It seems that the whole rhetoric around authenticity and positivity at work started as a reaction to employee disengagement and leadership lack of credibility. However, from personal experience and from talking to friends, peers and interviewees, it is as though authenticity and positivity are not meeting the initial goal of motivating teams, and, even worse, are actually impacting workers' mental health negatively. I asked Sonia what are the alternatives for companies when it comes to boosting employee motivation and a healthy engagement with work.

Do you see ways in which the company can really motivate employees in a way that is maybe sustainable in the long term?

Sonia Kang: I think connecting to whatever it is that they're expressing. So instead of, you know, saying to people "Just stay positive, don't worry, it's gonna work out in the end", I think you can be there for them. So ask them like, you know, that really sucks, like, what can I do to help you get through this? How can I best support you? Even like, you know, that must be really hard, like, I'm sorry that you're going through this right? Just recognizing that the emotions that they're having are



valid, and they're true, you believe them about the way that they're feeling, Because I think that like when people are being toxically positive, I think that what is going through their mind, like, it's well intentioned, right? They think like, "oh, I'm going to help this person just like, maintain this positive outlook and just stay upbeat", but really, what you're doing is you're denying their emotion, right? It's like a form of gaslighting. So basically, we're like, yeah, like everything's okay. And so that, again, it creates this disconnection and this distance between you and the person that you're dealing with, or talking to, right. So it's more about finding ways to connect with them. And like honoring their experience. So avoiding just kind of dismissing how they're feeling in an effort to just get them back to being positive.

Simone Lima: A number of reports on workplace trends were read in the making of this episode and each and every one of them mention mental health and wellness support as a top concern that will need to be addressed by employers in the near future.

[Gartner](#) mentions how the pandemic brought mental health to the forefront and drove companies to adopt new wellness benefits since the beginning of lockdown to aid employees in this regard. [Workplace Intelligence](#) shared how employees with mental health struggles are still fearful to look for help inside their companies, because of worries of being ostracized or even losing their jobs. This trend is boosting a market of wellness technology companies, such as Calm and Headspace that are increasingly targeting businesses as their clients. [Microsoft](#) uncovered that 53% of the employees researched are more likely to prioritize health and wellbeing over work than before the pandemic, and [Morgan Stanley](#) mentioned how "companies are broadening the definition of wellness and extending more support at home and at work to help employees de-stress".

What all of these reports have in common is the fact that loosely building a culture that encourages employees to open up, be authentic and vulnerably discuss their issues is no longer enough. Companies are now expected to formally show their commitment to addressing topics that come up in employee's day to day, especially when they may impact their mental health. And from my personal experience, that of my interviewees and survey responders, it is evident to employees how organizing mindful meditation during the day, but still coercing employees to regularly work overtime feels insincere and makes companies lose credibility. I asked Sonia about the role of companies in intentionally designing employee experiences that allow workers to feel secure and do their best work.

Sonia Kang: So, I think a huge part of this is modeling, right? If you're a manager or in senior leadership at a company, and you're really modeling this sharing of emotion, and not just this toxic positivity all of the time, and kind of denying negative emotions, falsely reassuring people all the time that everything's okay, I think that sends a huge signal to your employees about how they, too, are allowed to act. If you feel really uncomfortable with negative emotions, and you're reacting to employees, you're dismissing their negative emotions, falsely reassuring them that everything's gonna be fine, they can feel really disconnected from you, right? And then that's going to lead to feeling this disconnection from the organization as a whole. As a leader, people talk about vulnerability a lot, this is what vulnerability means, it means not just pretending that everything's okay all the time. At the same time, you have to maintain boundaries, you don't want to go and, like, and completely make it this whole negative thing, either. But, you know, it's a spectrum, right, with toxic positivity on, on the far extreme effects. So I think that modeling of vulnerability, the modeling of expressing and experiencing negative emotions, really sets the tone and the norms expectations around how employees themselves are allowed to act.

Simone Lima: Aside from discussing the responsibility of individual leaders, Sonia also touched upon the need for explicit policies that enforce a healthier employee experience.

Sonia Kang: This is like more of a systemic problem, right? And so individuals are kind of stuck within the system. We can't really leave it up to individuals to create these situations where they can overcome toxic positivity, unless you're talking about individuals who hold power, right? So if you're a manager or someone in a leadership position, this is where you can create those spaces for individual employees. But I think it's a lot, like, I think it's just too much to put on the shoulders of individual employees. Another way can be through the way that you present different policies. A lot of companies now have mental health days, or days that employees can kinda take off for a variety of different reasons, and I think that having that explicitly built into policy and the reason why people are taking those days off, I think also is a huge signal about the values of the company.

Simone Lima: Apart from impacting employees individually, the constant dismissal of thoughts and feelings that happens in a toxic positive work environment also impacts companies themselves. The most clear sign that the workplace has become unbearable is a higher turnover rate, with employees voluntarily leaving their jobs, much like we're seeing in the [great resignation](#). For companies, the most obvious costs are related to reduced productivity caused by the empty role, as well as the costs of hiring and training a new employee. But turnover is not the only consequence of toxic positivity for corporations.

Sonia Kang: So, even if people stay in the company, their performance is gonna be impacted, because they're gonna be spending time, energy, resources coping with these negative thoughts and feelings that they are not allowed to express, suppressing them. So you're gonna see these decreases in performance, in creativity, the risks that people are willing to take. So even if you don't see that turnover and you see employees staying within the company, that could lead, not only can lead to decreased performance, but can also lead to burnout, where people are too tired to do a good job. Then you might have absenteeism. So even if people do stick around you're going to have those impacts when you are looking into different kinds of performance metrics.

Simone Lima: So, although the incessant positivity I used to see on my day to day at work seemed to come from a place of good intention and focus on productivity, it was actually affecting my mental health *and* making me less productive. And, while employees should be free to support one another with employee support groups, mentorship programs, as well as come up with solutions for the challenges they face everyday, the experience of producing this podcast made me realize that, in such an power-imbalanced environment, it still falls on companies to intentionally design employee experience journeys that are inclusive and kind. This will look different from company to company, depending on their size, revenue, employee demographics, but can mean things like 4-day work weeks, mandatory paid parental leave for all employees, wellness days, mental health benefits and even actual systems in place to listen to and incorporate employee feedback. What really matters is that employees have psychological safety and the time to comprehend and reappraise the feelings they might be experiencing, and not just attempt to set them aside to focus on work

Toxic positive encounters changed the way I relate to work, as it happened to most of my interviewees. We also seem to be in the middle of a wider societal trend of individuals with different backgrounds rethinking their relationship to employment, the world and themselves. I am also one of those people and I'm happy and grateful that GATE allowed me to explore and make sense of this shift in a creative format, in a medium I had never tried before. Thank you!

And finally, I received so much help putting together these three episodes! I'd like to thank all my anonymous interviewees, Norman Farb and Sonia Kang. I'd also like to give big thanks for the encouragement, constant feedback and contributions of Sarah Kaplan, Maja Djikic, Vanessa Iarocci,



Yongah Kim, Lechin Lu, Li Li Lim, Zoey Erdenebileg, Bilal Habib, Ann Thomas Olasa, Alexandra Bogatinov, Salwa Iqbal, and Guilherme Costa.

Positively Exhausted is a limited podcast series from GATE audio productions. Music by Epidemic Sound.