



### Watch the Video

<http://www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org/toxicfriday/>

Username: toxicfriday

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## Discussion Questions

To help launch productive discussions, we've developed a series of questions tied to the live or video performance of *Toxic Friday*. We suggest that you screen the entire performance and talk-back session, then view individual scenes one at a time and invite your audience to engage with one or more of the following questions.

### Scene 1 Rachel's office

*Toxic Friday* portrays several subtle and active toxic behaviors. In real life, much bullying is covert and hard to identify, such as hostile assignment of coursework or critical peer or tenure reviews. It may even involve inaction rather than action (e.g., failure to share information or to include someone in important discussions or social events, delaying important decisions, etc.). What kinds of toxic behaviors have you experienced or heard of others experiencing?

How would you define toxic behavior in a department? In the workplace?

When does incivility rise to the level of bullying? See sample definitions, page 16.

Consider Simon's behavior, both verbal and nonverbal (body language, patterns of eye contact, use of space, etc.). Identify potentially problematic dimensions of his behavior.

Consider Rachel's responses, both verbal and nonverbal. Identify other possible responses she could make.

What could you do if a colleague refused to leave your office? Made these kinds of remarks?

What could you do if a colleague told you these things had happened to him or her?

## Scene 2 Department meeting

### As faculty gather for the meeting...

We learn that Simon has a history of sending critical email messages about individuals and copying or blind-copying others in the department. What do you think should be done about such behavior? By whom?

### As Carol confronts Simon in Rachel's office...

Intimidated, Rachel left Simon in her office when she headed for the department meeting. What other choices might she have had? What risks might she have faced if she'd taken another path?

Charles acknowledges that Simon has targeted others in the past. He also suggests Emily will eventually become a target. Do other members of the department bear responsibility or culpability if, knowing the problem exists, they fail to act?

What might explain Charles's seeming indifference to the plight of his more junior colleagues?

Consider how this situation could be handled by other faculty members within the department. By the chair? By the dean? By others?

What if these parties have taken action, but the problem has not been sufficiently addressed at higher levels within the institution?

### At the meeting...

Simon makes several highly inappropriate comments, and no one intervenes. What actions might the chair or other faculty members take to effectively prevent or intervene in such behavior?

Carol brought *Robert's Rules of Order* as a way to promote civil behavior during the meeting. What other tools could the department use to help ensure civil discussions?

If you were to craft a code of conduct for your own department, what would be included? How might it be enforced?

What is the chair's role in intervening in toxic behavior in the department? Do chairs at your university have authority to act or does your institution have a leader-among-peers model? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these models with respect to toxic behavior in departments?

If senior faculty know there is a toxic dynamic within a department, is it right to charge a junior faculty member with a leadership role (like serving as chair)?

### **After the meeting...**

Does Simon's comment that "it's a good thing you have tenure!" raise questions about Carol's responsibility to protect her junior faculty members?

Taken together, do Simon's behaviors rise to the level of bullying? Why or why not?

## **Scene 3 In the hallway**

Charles apologizes to Rachel, referring to Simon's behavior as a "hazing program." Is it appropriate to joke about what is happening?

Charles tells Rachel he supports her and offers to talk further; however, he also minimizes her distress. He tells her to "suck it up," and implies that she is overreacting. Is she?

## **Scene 4 Silent scene**

Rachel has turned to the chair for support and talks with her at great length, venting her distress and potentially exhausting the chair. What are some of the individual, departmental, and institutional costs associated with toxic behavior?

What resources should be made available to targets of toxic behavior?

## **Scene 5 Carol's office**

Carol provides additional confirmation that Simon's behavior has been going on for some time. Does this long history change the institution's responsibility to act?

What steps would you take at your institution when confronting toxic behavior? What policies, procedures, offices, or entities exist to address these situations?

Carol turned to the dean, her human resources office, and the union for support, but says that without a physical threat she could not get traction with her complaint. What does it take to get intervention or support from the proper sources at your institution?

Carol tells Emily she should talk with Dean Stone, but refuses to go with her. Nonetheless, she says, “You have my support.” Why do you think Carol is unwilling to accompany Emily?

Why do you think Emily—a second year assistant professor—is willing to risk her job, and possibly her academic career, to file a complaint against Simon?

## **Scene 6 Dean Stone’s office**

As the scene opens, it becomes clear that Simon has already gone to the dean. Adult bullies are often charming and endearing to those above them in the power structure while targeting those with equal or less power. Does Simon’s behavior fall into this category?

What should a dean or other higher official in an institution do to avoid being manipulated by a bully?

Does the dean need to create and maintain better boundaries to preserve an independent perspective?

Dean Stone says it takes two parties to be involved in a conflict. Is this always true?

Dean Stone tells two junior faculty members that she is confident the faculty within the department can work this issue out on their own. What do you think might happen if two junior faculty members initiated a conversation about this issue at the department level? How might the situation change if those junior faculty members did or did not belong to societally marginalized groups?

Dean Stone asked Carol, the chair, if there was anything else she wanted to talk about. Why do you think Carol did not use this opening to discuss the problems in her department? Should Dean Stone have raised the issue directly? Why do you think she didn’t?

## General Questions

Many other questions can be useful for deepening your exploration of these and closely related issues.

### Gender, Race, Culture

Imagine *Toxic Friday* with different faculty in the roles. What if Simon were a junior faculty member? A woman? What if Simon or Rachel were individuals of color or from another social group that suffers from prejudice or discrimination? What if Simon's primary target was male? An international faculty member (like Emily)? What different interpretations would result from casting this piece in different ways?

### Disagreements

How are disagreements and difficult dialogues typically resolved in your department? How should they be?

### Hiring and Promotion

When making decisions about who to hire in academic departments, what priority should be placed on diversity or collegiality? Should these considerations be part of promotion and tenure decisions? Who should decide?

### Academic Freedom

How should free speech, academic freedom, and the rights of faculty to function in a safe department and institution be simultaneously protected?

### Training

Do chairs and deans at your institution receive training to help them effectively intervene in toxic departmental dynamics? If so, is the training effective? If not, what more should it include?

### Seniority and Rank

In what ways does faculty seniority make a difference in these dynamics? Faculty rank? How does Simon's new position of authority on the promotion and tenure committee affect the dynamics of the situation? How do these issues play out in even wider contexts, e.g., with adjuncts, staff, undergraduate students, or graduate students in the department, other departments?

### **Nonverbal Dynamics**

Consider the nonverbal dynamics in play. How do they influence your interpretation of the issues? How might other nonverbal behaviors change the dynamics?

### **Next Steps**

What are the next steps your institution needs to take to promote a more collegial working environment?

## **Suggested Activities**

Try these first in pairs or small groups, then invite participants to share with the larger group.

- Divide into groups. Pick a scene from *Toxic Friday* and reenact it with a different outcome.
- Craft and share a scene you believe is missing from *Toxic Friday* but could easily be included. You might, for example, add a scene to the end in which faculty members file a formal complaint. How does the human resource office respond?
- Draft a brief code of conduct that could be used in the weekly faculty meetings depicted in *Toxic Friday*. Share your code of conduct with others. Consider taking these back to departments for discussion and possible use.
- Imagine someone from outside your department approaches you with a story of bullying or toxic behavior. What advice would you offer? What resources could you recommend? Can you suggest someone to talk to? Is there an anonymous hotline to which you might report the situation? What steps might you take to support your colleague?