

Toxic Bosses Survey

Wave 2 • May 2026 • The Harris Poll Thought Leadership Practice





Methodology

This survey was conducted online within the U.S. by The Harris Poll from April 16th to 18th, 2026, among a nationally representative sample of 1,334 employed U.S. adults.

This research comprises 229 Gen Z (ages 18-29), 568 Millennials (ages 30-45), 408 Gen X (ages 46-61), and 129 Boomers (ages 62 and older).

A “**toxic boss**” refers to a boss or supervisor who exhibits harmful workplace behaviors, including unfair preferential treatment, lack of recognition, blame-shifting, unnecessary micromanagement, unreasonable expectations, being unapproachable, taking credit for others’ ideas, acting unprofessionally, or discriminating against employees based on personal characteristics.





Top Highlights

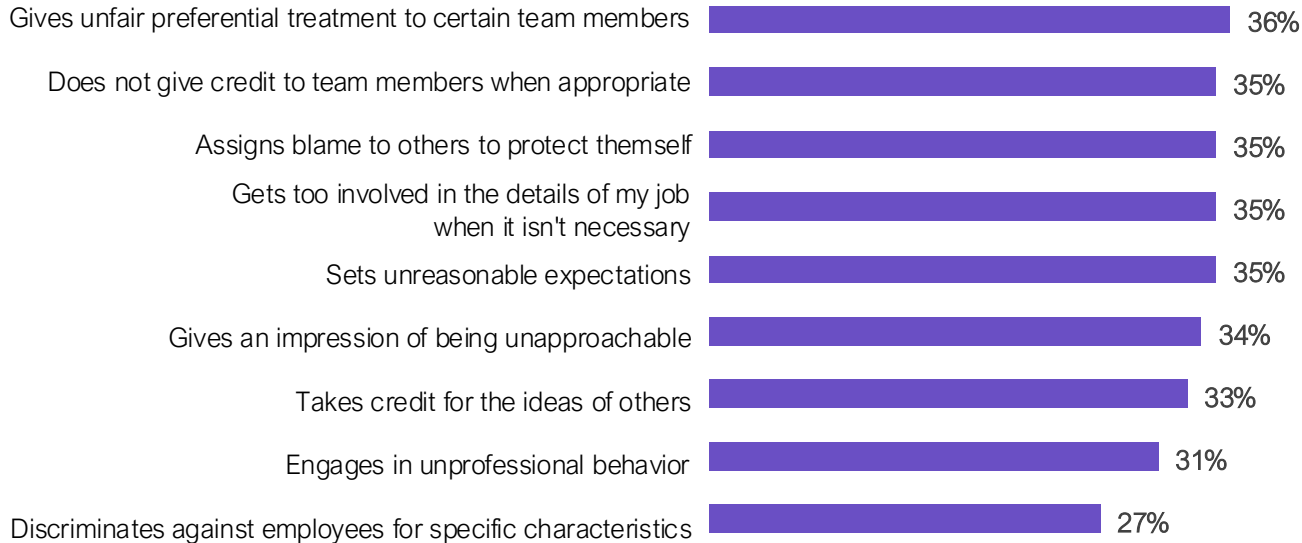
- **The toxic boss problem is widespread:** Six in 10 American workers currently have a boss who exhibits toxic behaviors, with unfair preferential treatment, lack of credit, blame-shifting, and unreasonable expectations among the most common behaviors.
- **The fallout is personal, financial, and career-limiting:** Nearly half of workers say they have experienced increased stress, burnout, or a decline in mental health due to a toxic boss, while roughly one-third say they have lost a financial reward or seen their promotion chances reduced.
- **The toxic boss effect is hitting workers far beyond the office:** Workers with toxic bosses report switching jobs, working during weekends or days off, and attending therapy to discuss the toxicity of a current or previous boss.
- **Workers are not just frustrated, they are self-protecting:** Many workers with toxic bosses say they avoid reporting toxic behavior or limit their visibility at work to avoid conflict, while more than half of American workers have taken at least one action to counter toxic behavior.
- **Gen Z is leading the pushback:** Gen Z workers are especially likely to take action against toxic bosses, including escalating issues to HR, filing formal complaints, collecting corroboration, and seeking legal advice.
- **Bad bosses may be made, not born:** Workers point to poor manager training, lack of accountability, excessive workloads, and weak support systems as key drivers of toxic leadership.
- **Workers see better leadership training as the antidote:** Nearly two-thirds of American workers say better leadership training would significantly reduce toxic behaviors in their workplace, while people managers want practical support like coaching, training budgets, and clear career pathways.

The Toxic Boss Effect



Most American workers report signs of toxic leadership, as six in 10 Americans currently have a boss that exhibits toxic behaviors

Has your current boss exhibited any of the following toxic behaviors?
 (“Yes” Summary)



60%
 American Workers

Currently have a boss that exhibits toxic behaviors.

74% Gen Z



The fallout from toxic bosses extends beyond frustration, with workers reporting burnout, lost pay, and stalled careers

Top consequences of having a toxic boss
 (“Myself” Summary)



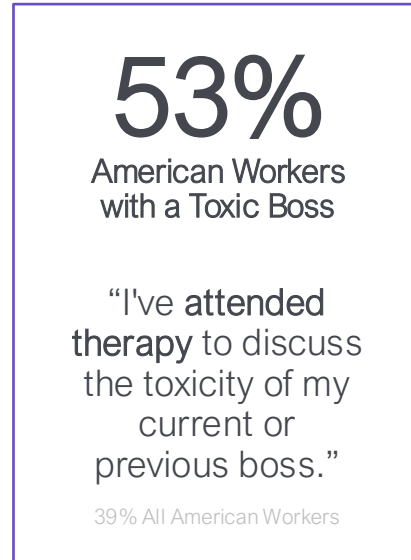
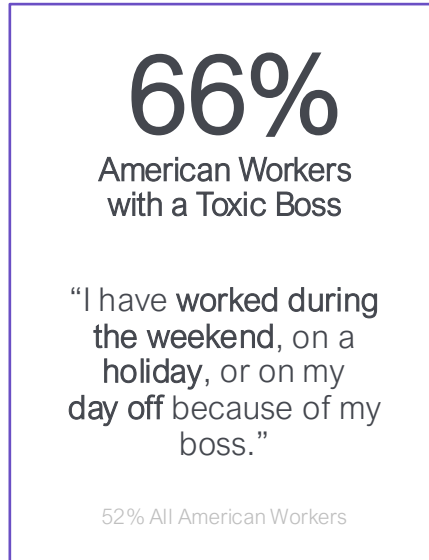
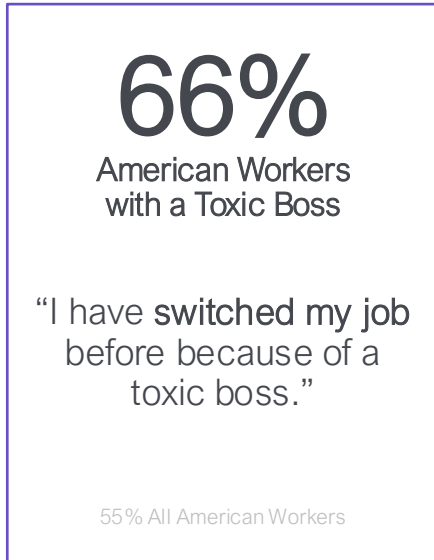
70%
 American Workers

Have had **at least one toxic boss** during their career.

75% LGBTQIA+

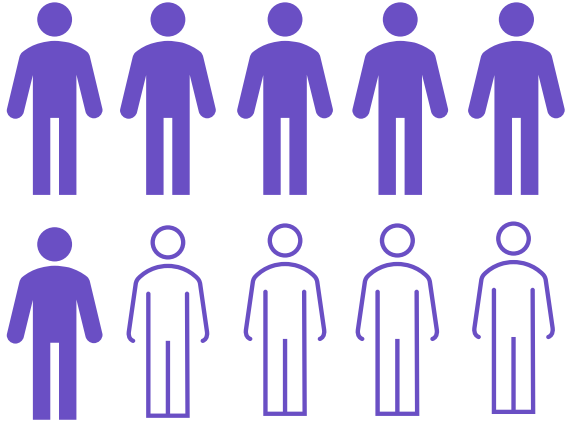


The toll of toxic leadership is showing up in job exits, lost time off, and therapy





Toxic bosses are creating a culture of self-censorship, with workers holding back from speaking up or standing out



63% 55% Gen Z
American Workers
with a Toxic Boss

“I have not reported toxic behavior from my boss for fear of being labeled as ‘too sensitive’ or ‘not a team player’.”

49% All American Workers

61% 54% Gen Z
American Workers
with a Toxic Boss

“I limit my visibility at work to avoid toxic behaviors from my boss.”

47% All American Workers



Toxic bosses often show up through everyday sarcasm, dismissiveness, and put-downs

How often if at all, do you hear the following phrases or sentiments from your current boss?
(Always + Often + Sometimes)

■ American Workers ■ Workers with a Toxic Boss

Abrupt communication style

“That’s all.”

48% · 66%

Sarcasm instead of feedback

“By all means move at a glacial pace. You know how that thrills me.”

41% · 57%

Showing impatience or dismissiveness when asked for clarity

“Please bore someone else with your questions.”

39% · 56%

Belittling mistakes or overlooking good work

“Details of your incompetence do not interest me.”

39% · 56%

Expressing frustration over delays in an exaggerated or dismissive way

“Is there some reason that my coffee isn’t here? Has she died or something?”

38% · 53%

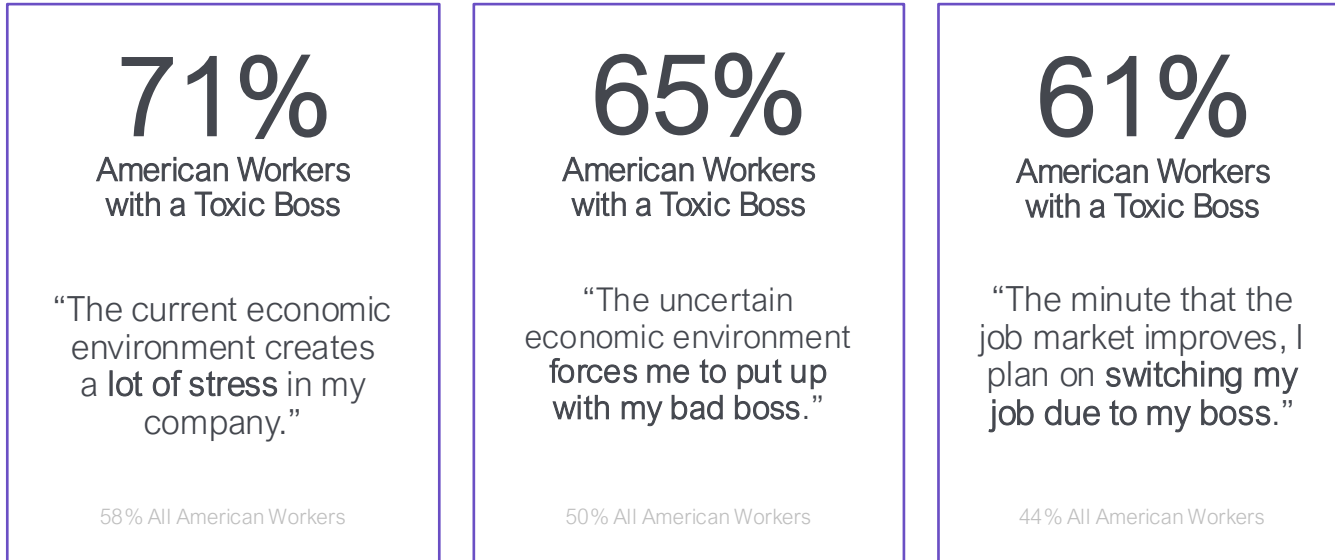
Criticizing personal choices or confidence rather than performance

“You have no style or sense of fashion.”

35% · 51%



Economic uncertainty is keeping workers with toxic bosses stuck, but many are ready to leave when the market improves

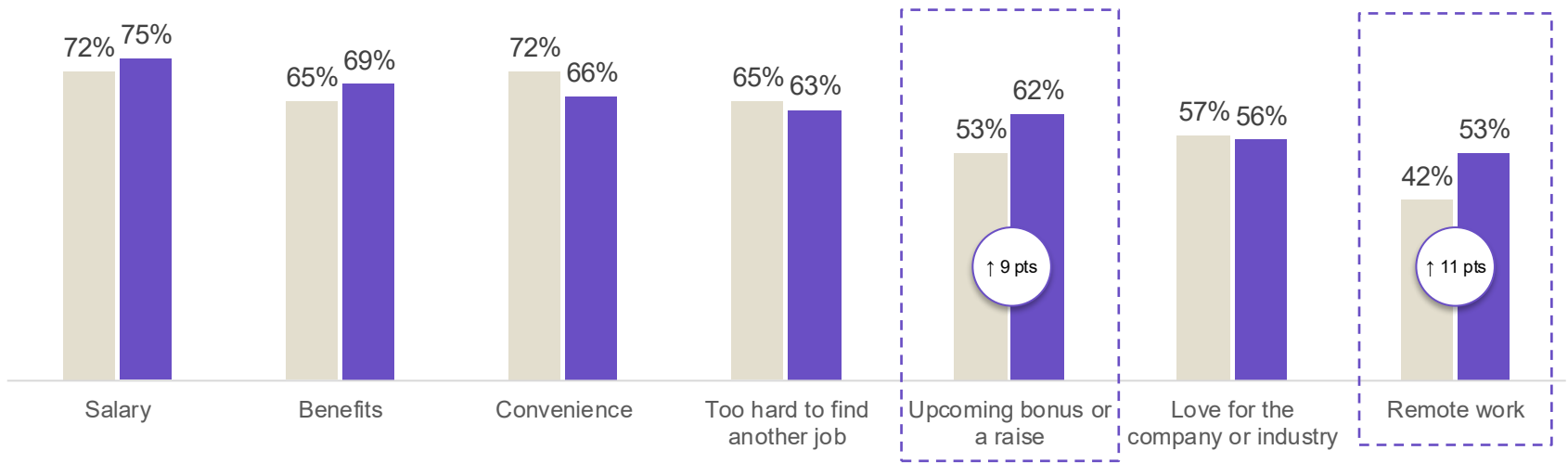




Salary is still the #1 reason workers stay with toxic bosses, but remote work and upcoming raises are gaining new pull

Which of the following would make you inclined to stay with a toxic boss?
 (“Yes” Summary)

■ 2023 ■ 2026



The Rise Against Toxic Bosses



Gen Z is leading the pushback against toxic bosses, from escalating to HR to documenting requests in writing

Top actions taken to protect from toxic bosses:



Millennial Workers are also notably setting firm work-hour boundaries (29%), taking medical leave (24%), and asking for feedback in writing (23%).

55% of Americans Workers have taken at least one action to counter toxic behavior, rising to **73% Gen Z Workers**.



Most workers who file a formal complaint report a positive outcome, yet Americans are split on opinions about speaking out

Results of filing a formal complaint or grievance:



51%
 American Workers
 “I worry speaking up about my boss **won't lead to real action.**”
 65% Workers with a Toxic Boss

Nearly four in 10 workers experience retaliation, such as a negative review, exclusion, demotion, etc.

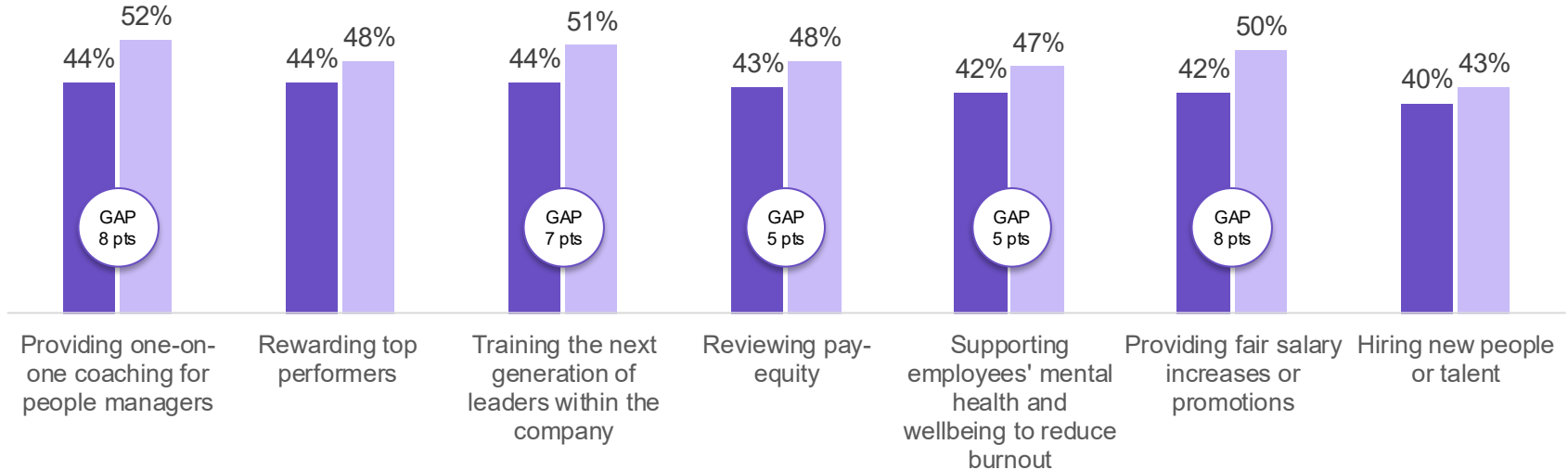
Bad Bosses Are Made, Not Born



As companies race to invest in AI, workers see people investments falling behind, with Gen Z most likely to feel the gap

“My company invests more in AI than _____.”

■ American Workers ■ Gen Z Workers



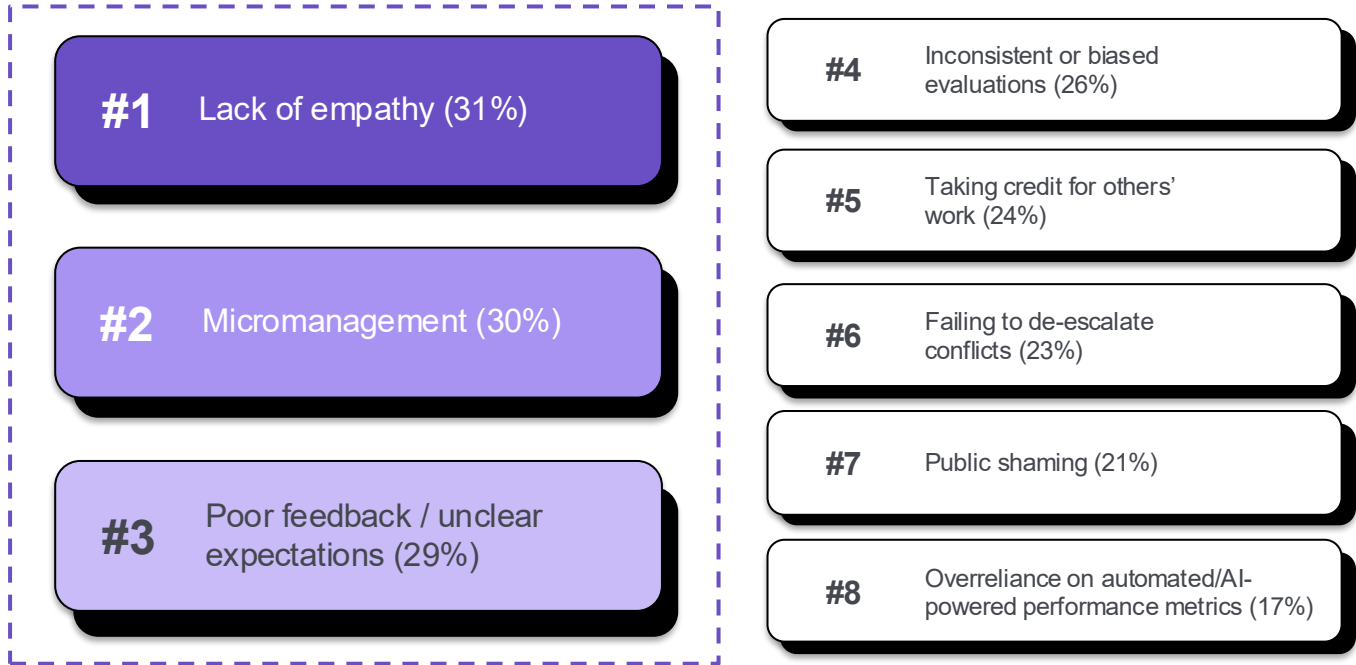


Poor manager training is showing up in toxic workplace behavior, with seven in 10 workers witnessing the fallout

Top toxic boss behaviors caused by poor manager training:

70%
 American Workers
 Have witnessed toxic behaviors caused or worsened by **poor manager training**.

79% Gen Z,
 76% LGBTQIA+,
 75% Asian





People managers with toxic bosses point to a broader leadership system problem, with workload, deadlines, accountability, and support all cited as drivers

Top reasons driving toxic behaviors from leadership:



Workers see better leadership training as the antidote to toxic workplace behavior

64%

of American Workers say,










“I believe better leadership training would **significantly reduce toxic behaviors in my workplace.**”

74% People Managers with a Toxic Boss,
73% American Workers with a Toxic Boss,
70% Black



People managers are asking for practical leadership support, from coaching and training budgets to clearer career paths

Resources people managers wish their company offered

| | People Managers |
|--|-----------------|
|  One-on-one coaching (either internally or externally) | 42% |
|  Provided dedicated budget for leadership training or development | 41% |
|  Clear career growth pathways for leaders | 40% |
|  Enrollment into leadership programs, courses, or certifications | 40% |
|  A formal mentoring or peer support program | 38% |
|  Paid work time to attend leadership training or development activities | 38% |
|  AI-based coaching or support | 34% |

Over four in 10 (46%) people managers who report having a toxic boss year for their company to offer enrollment into leadership programs, courses, or certifications and a clear career growth path.

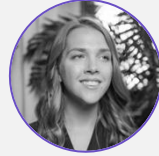
To learn more about this research, please reach out to...



Tim Osiecki

Director

tim.osiecki@harrispoll.com



Libby Rodney

Chief Strategy Officer

lrodney@harrispoll.com



Abbey Lunney

Managing Director

abbey.lunney@harrispoll.com

Special thanks for contributing to the research development:



Esther Kwon

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