



## Toxic Leadership Behaviour in Companies Is a System, Not a Person (Part1): Sarah's Story

**By Christian Rook**

### **Sarah's Journey: From Trigger to Transformation**

Sarah Martinez had always been a high performer. Her colleagues respected her attention to detail, her willingness to stay late when projects demanded it, and her collaborative spirit. But eighteen months under Sal Mandolino's management had slowly eroded her confidence and fundamentally changed how she showed up at work.

It started subtly. A dismissive comment about her presentation style here, an eye roll when she asked clarifying questions there. But Sal's behavior escalated over time. Public criticism in team meetings became routine. Her ideas were either ignored or, worse, shot down with barely concealed contempt. When she achieved excellent results on a challenging project, he found ways to minimize her contribution or highlight minor flaws rather than acknowledge her success.

Sarah found herself walking on eggshells, second-guessing every email before sending it, rehearsing simple questions multiple times before speaking in meetings. She began arriving early and staying late, not out of dedication but from anxiety, constantly trying to anticipate and prevent his next criticism. Sleep became elusive as she replayed daily interactions, analyzing what she might have done wrong.



*Sarah Martinez*

### **The Breaking Point and First Steps**

The breaking point came during a client presentation. Sarah had prepared meticulously, but when she stumbled slightly over a technical detail, Sal interrupted her mid-sentence, correcting her in front of the client with obvious annoyance. After the meeting, he berated her privately, questioning her competence and suggesting she wasn't "cut out for this level of responsibility."

That evening, Sarah called her sister Maria, fighting back tears as she described the incident. "This isn't you," Maria said gently. "The Sarah I know doesn't let anyone treat her this way. What's really going on here?"

That question haunted Sarah for days. She had always considered herself strong, confident, capable of standing up for herself. So why did she feel so powerless in this situation? Why did Sal's criticism cut so deep, while feedback from other supervisors had always been something she could process constructively?

## **Discovering the Deeper Patterns**

With Maria's encouragement, Sarah reached out to Anna, a coach who specialized in helping people navigate difficult personal dynamics. In their first session, Anna asked Sarah to describe not just what Sam Mandolino did, but how she felt in those moments.

"I feel small," Sarah admitted. "Like I'm seven years old again and nothing I do is good enough."

Anna leaned forward. "Tell me about being seven and nothing being good enough."

The memory surfaced slowly, then all at once. Sarah's father, a successful businessman who demanded perfection from everyone around him. The way his face would change when she brought home a test with 95% instead of 100%. The coldness that would settle over the dinner table when she spilled something or spoke too loudly. The crushing weight of trying to anticipate his moods, to be smaller, quieter, more perfect.

"I thought I had dealt with all that," Sarah whispered.

"You survived it," Anna corrected gently. "But your boss is potentially activating those same neural pathways, the ones that learned to associate criticism with danger, that developed hypervigilance as a survival mechanism. Your body is responding to him as if he were your father."

## **Learning to Set Boundaries**

Over the following weeks, Anna, using the Integrative Systemic Coaching Method helped Sarah understand that her responses to Sal weren't weaknesses, they were survival mechanisms that had once protected her but were no longer serving her. The work wasn't about becoming "stronger" but about recognizing that she now had choices she didn't have as a child.

"Boundaries aren't walls," Anna explained. "They're information systems. They help you understand what you will and won't accept, and they help others understand how to interact with you respectfully."

Sarah began practicing small boundary-setting exercises. When Sal Mandolino interrupted her in meetings, she started to pause, take a breath, and say, "I'd like to finish my thought, please." When he criticized her work publicly, she began responding with, "I'd prefer to discuss feedback privately, so I can give it my full attention."

The first few times she tried this, her heart raced and her voice shook. Her boss looked surprised, then annoyed. But something unexpected happened: other team members began speaking up too, supporting her contributions and calling attention to her successes.

## **The Transformation Process**

As Sarah continued working with Anna, she discovered that boundary-setting was just the beginning. The real transformation came through developing what Anna called "emotional maturity", the ability to remain centered in her own truth regardless of external pressure.

Sarah did the recommended exercises, met frequently with Anna to talk about her progress and began keeping a daily journal, noting three things she was grateful for in her professional life.

Initially, the entries were forced: "I'm grateful for my paycheck," "I'm grateful to have a

job." But gradually, they evolved: "I'm grateful for the strength I showed in today's meeting when I didn't let his interruption derail my presentation," "I'm grateful for recognizing my trigger before it overwhelmed me."

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Most importantly, Sarah began to see Sal's behavior as information about him, not about her. His need to control and diminish others revealed his own insecurities and lack of emotional intelligence. This realization didn't excuse his behavior, but it freed her from taking it personally.

## The Outcome

Six months after beginning her work with Anna, Sarah had a crucial conversation with Mr. Mandolino. When he began his familiar pattern of harsh criticism after a team meeting, she looked at him calmly and said, "I can see you have concerns about my work. I'm committed to excellence, and I'd like to schedule time for us to discuss specific, actionable feedback privately. Going forward, I need our interactions to be professional and constructive."

Sal was taken aback. For the first time in months, he seemed to actually see her rather than simply react to her presence. Their relationship didn't become warm, but it became workable. More importantly, Sarah had reclaimed her professional confidence and learned to trust her own judgment again.

In Part 2 of this article, we will see how Sal Mandolino's boss, David Chen, learned about the issues in Sal's team, and what he did as a manager to change this situation.

For more information on Integrative Systemic coaching go to: **[www.iscmentoring.eu](http://www.iscmentoring.eu)**



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