Unlearning Toxic Behaviors in a Code Review Culture

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What is a Code Review?
Common Peer Code Review Categories

Key Details of Common Types of Code Reviews

- Group Walkthrough
- Paired Programming
- Pull Request
Code Reviews Are Invaluable

Knowledge Sharing
Mentorship
Fostering Debate
Informed Decision Making
Quality
Code reviews can sometimes create toxic, unsupportive environments

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Helpful: Back up your claims with documentation, references to a style guide, references.

If you have an opinion about styles, don’t make it your review seeker’s problem.

Unhelpful: Passing off opinion as fact.
Unhelpful: Overwhelming with an avalanche of comments

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Looks like you checked in some trailing spaces on several lines of your change set. Our style guide specifies no trailing whitespace. Can you take a look at this?
Unhelpful: Asking devs to fix problems they did not cause

Unhelpful: “I’ve always hated how this function is structured. Can you fix it, since you’re modifying it anyway?”

Helpful: “Looks good to me. Will create a separate ticket to clean this file up.”
Unhelpful: “Why didn’t you just do ___?”

Helpful: “You can also do ___, which has the benefit of ___”
Unhelpful: “Did you even test this code before you checked it in?”

Helpful: “Your code breaks during “x, y, and z” edge cases, can you please address those cases?”
Unhelpful:
Using emojis instead of statements to point out issues
Unhelpful:
Not replying to all comments
High performance is no excuse

One strong developer is not worth sacrificing an entire team’s morale

(Joseph Gefroh, Toxic developers considered harmful, 2016)
Understand that you might be part of the issue
Effects of toxic behaviors on the team
Creating a more supportive environment
Helpful: Use questions or recommendations to drive dialog

Unhelpful:

“Pull all of these translations into a constants file.”

Instead, ask a question.

Helpful:

“What would you think about pulling these translations into a constants file? There are a lot and a separate file might make sense.”

(@rodoabad on github, Code Review Culture, 2017)
Helpful:
Be a resource.
Don’t micro manage or backseat drive.

Don’t back-seat drive (Recurse Center, User Manual, 2017)
Ask questions.
Debate.
Point to resources.

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Helpful: Respect & respond to every comment

Respond to every comment, even if you don’t plan to apply feedback
Helpful:
Know when to take a discussion offline and in-person

In-person meeting >
Unending Comment Thread

(Tidy Java, How to be a better code reviewee, 2017)
Developer A: Your changeset violates the style guide in several places. Do you have a linter installed to catch these issues before you check them in?

Developer B: No, I haven’t heard of a linter before. What is that?

(Unhelpful) Developer A: What is what? Oh… you’re asking what a linter is?!

(Helpful) Developer A: Linters are tools that detect issues like syntax and style errors. Let me send you some helpful resources over slack.

Adapted from Recurse Center social rule “Don’t Feign Surprise”
Helpful:
Automate what can be with git hooks & tests that run when build triggered
Helpful:
Use opportunities to teach.
Don’t show off.

Is your comment helping the other developer learn or are you nitpicking to participate?

Adapted from Recurse Center social rule “No well-actually’s”
Helpful: Refuse to normalize unhelpful behavior

Don’t excuse unhelpful behaviors as “the way things are”
Helpful: Speak OUT

Let people know if they are being unhelpful

Uncomfortable… but people need to know!
Helpful:
Managers: hire carefully, listen to your team, and enforce

- Don’t hire toxic developers
- Listen to your team’s concerns
- Be clear about what is unacceptable
- Enforce

(Joseph Gefroh, Toxic developers considered harmful, 2016)
Helpful: Try to set the standard as your team is small and growing

If your team is small, you are setting the standard, so you don’t have to unlearn unhelpful behaviors later!
Disclaimer

Your mileage may vary

Be *mindful* that experiences and environments differ.
I am not policing content of feedback, just asking people to be mindful of tone
Thank you.
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