

Handling Toxic Emotions: New Challenges for Leaders and their Organization

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“Lift is Pain, Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.” Dread Pirate Roberts, *The Princess Bride*

Chief executive officer (CEO) Harry Smith (real name changed to protect his identity) recalls walking into a quarterly outlook meeting of his staff and seeing people with their heads in their hands. The company was going to miss its targets by as much as 20 percent, and they could find no way to bridge the gap. “The numbers simply aren’t there,” they said. These were tough, competent senior managers who were feeling angry, frustrated and somewhat helpless because the performance levels being demanded of them by corporate headquarters were relentlessly unrealistic.

Harry was the country manager of a multi-million dollar consumer package goods company with a U.S. head office. The company had been through two mergers in two years. Corporate leadership had turned over unexpectedly, leaving the national management team uncertain of its direction. After the most recent merger, the information technology (IT) system was seriously flawed. Periodic reports from senior financial managers involving hundreds of thousands of dollars and thousands of products were being done by hand on computer spreadsheets. Externally, a decline in customer activity in a weakening economy exacerbated the

problem. Harry worked hard to buffer his people from the worst of the pressures and to keep their spirits up. However, with no let-up in demands and no apparent understanding by head office managers of their emotional impact on people in the company, the intellectual and emotional resilience of the staff—as well as Harry—began to drain. Key people started looking elsewhere for employment, and the company’s performance continued its downward spiral. Eventually, Harry himself left the company.

The experience of Harry and his team is not uncommon in today’s competitive world. Pain is a normal part of organizational life. Companies will merge and in doing so disrupt routines and expectations; familiar leadership can change; crucial systems do break down and create havoc for staff, sometimes at the worst possible time. Employees often face unrealistic demands from their bosses. The painful emotions that accompany events such as these aren’t in themselves toxic. They become toxic when people like Harry and his team feel stripped of their confidence, hope or self-esteem through the harshness or disrespect in the messages they get from others (in this case, corporate level management). Or the situation is poisoned by the insensitivity or indifference people feel in others’ response to their pain. Employees infer that their feelings don’t matter, that they are not in control of their work lives, that their contributions don’t or won’t make a difference.

Then, people tend to disconnect from their work and its demands and they begin to focus, even to obsess, on the pain they feel and its perceived sources. They are not able, or choose not to put their emotional and intellectual energy into work issues. They withdraw their commitment and their loyalty to their company, and everybody loses out.

Emotional toxicity is a byproduct of organizational life, and it is noxious. It drains vitality from individuals and from the whole organization. Unless it is identified and handled in healthy and constructive ways, it is a serious and often overlooked cause of organizational dysfunction and poor performance.

Several studies support the kinds of toxic effects found in the Harry Smith story. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that organizational change at any level can lead to a loss of 75 percent in productive work time. Often the trigger is insensitive change methods. Job stress resulting from inadequate management and inhumane company practices shows up in the organizational costs . . . "Job stress is estimated to cost U.S. industry \$300 billion annually, as assessed by absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover, direct medical, legal and insurance fees, and workplace violence," according to Joel H. Neuman of the State University of New York at New Paltz.

The organizational costs of toxic workplaces become particularly clear when we consider their impact on customer service. Hurt staff doesn't spend much time or effort making customers feel satisfied and happy. As J.W. Marriott, CEO of Marriott International, astutely observed: "You can build the best hotel in the best location with the best rooms and the best lobby, but if the service stinks and the employees don't care, customers won't come back!"

SOURCES OF TOXICITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

Key sources of toxicity in organizations stem from seven deadly "In's" that occur in and

around organizations. These forms of toxicity are:

- *INtention
- *INcompetence
- *INfidelity
- *INsensitivity
- *INtrusion
- *INstitutional forces
- *INEvitability

Intention: The Role of Malice

Some managers assume that their command of situations and their ability to get results stems from creating pain in their staff. Fear engendered in others is one of their key weapons of control. Their actions are designed to humiliate others and to keep them off balance, undermining people's confidence or self-esteem so that there are no significant challenges to their authority. Or, the manager may believe that this is the best way to motivate others. An abusive CEO, described by a reliable informant, regularly sought out staff members for personal attack, degrading employees in front of their colleagues. His intention, apparently, was to fire up his people to do their best so as to avoid criticism. People on the receiving end of such behavior are frequently left bruised, contused, angry and frustrated. They shut off their intellectual and emotional creativity or deflect it into non-work activities. The CEO's staff learned that the best way to survive was to play everything safe and to keep their heads down and their mouths shut, hoping he would not pick on them too often. The best people left. At least one valuable staff member became ill, in part from the punishing experience of working under this manager.

While the effects of malice may seem to us to be toxic and counterproductive, it frequently goes unnoticed and undisciplined. It may even be enabled in particularly toxic organizations. The abusive CEO mentioned above kept his position for three years before he was summarily fired.

Incompetence: Managers with Weak or Inadequate People Skills

Many managers move up through the ranks of their organizations based on their technical skills, such as finance, information technology or marketing. They tend not to be evaluated for their “people-handling” abilities. Or, if their people skills are weak or underdeveloped, this lack of competence is overlooked or downplayed by senior management in favor of the other “harder” skill sets they may have. Having a strong background in financial matters may well be a key competency for managing a department or even a company. But so is the ability to manage staff effectively. When such managers don’t handle their people well, the toxicity they generate can be highly debilitating for their staff.

Some such managers are “control freaks” who micromanage their staff, and in the process rob them of their initiative and their enthusiasm for performing creatively. Often, the problem lies in the inability of managers to recognize the boundary between their strategic role and the operational roles of their subordinates. They fail also to register the investment of feelings and of effort that others need and want to make to get a job done well. Staff feels out of control, which inevitably raises their stress levels. Frustrated subordinates complain: “We can’t breathe!” “She’s all over us, constantly looking over our shoulders.” Or: “Nothing gets done around here without his fingerprints being all over the job. And then he wonders why people are feeling down, unexcited about ‘using their initiative.’”

Infidelity: the Act of Betrayal

Managers who betray their subordinates spread toxins into the system. They destroy trust, which is very painful. Fred was a gregarious new CEO with an open manner, who encouraged his managers to bring him their concerns. Some of his managers took this invitation at face value and they gave

Fred their views on two of the vice presidents (VPs) who, while technically competent, were causing unrest in their staffs. Fred shared these views with the VPs, including specific details reported to him by these managers and named his informants. He took no action to address the complaints and the VPs retained their positions. They found ways to punish the managers who had talked with their CEO. The managers never shared their insights with Fred again.

Employees feel betrayed by their managers when promised promotions or raises do not materialize; when their boss takes their best ideas and presents them to her peers or to senior management as her own. When word of such actions gets out, as it eventually will, employees begin to pull back their enthusiasm and their commitment to the organization. Betrayal triggers intense emotional responses from those who are its victims. Bitterness, mistrust and fear can infuse a team and a workplace, and it is difficult to re-establish confidence and trust in the organization.

Insensitivity: People Who are Emotionally Unintelligent

Managers with a high level of emotional intelligence tend to be good “readers” of the way staff members are feeling, particularly when they display symptoms of emotional distress. They typically also are able to gauge how their own actions impact on others. When managers do not or cannot pick up these emotional cues in others it can harm their staff and the organization.

Vivien, an office worker in a branch of a national financial institution, recalls approaching her boss for permission to attend the funeral of a young nephew killed in an accident. The manager, preoccupied with company deadlines, initially refused Vivien’s request to attend the funeral on the following Monday afternoon. He needed her to attend a meeting at that time, and he urged Vivien to try to get the family to change the funeral to another day or time. Vivien, who had been very fond of the

young boy, was devastated by this response. Eventually, her boss reluctantly relented, but the hurt and the anger she felt toward him lingered long after the incident.

The pressure that many managers feel often numbs them to a staff member's distress. Or else they assume that everyone's emotions (including their own) should be "checked at the office door." As a result, they don't pick up on a colleague's call for understanding—and lose the willingness of that person to go the extra mile for the manager or the organization.

Intrusion

Charismatic leaders seduce their followers into striving for high accomplishment. However, these same magnetic personalities can draw their followers into such intensive work routines that an unhealthy balance is created between followers' work and personal lives. The leader's agenda comes to dominate their lives and they carry unsustainable workloads. When the charismatic leader stumbles, fails or leaves, those left behind are often burned out and regretful of their over-commitment to someone else's vision. Or they have learned too well a work addiction that keeps them permanently unbalanced.

Institutional Forces: Contemporary Corporate Agendas

Toxins flow from company practices that create pain in those who must carry them out. The equation that generates the policy or practice frequently is inherently toxic. Organizations, of necessity, abstract issues and opportunities to try to see the "big picture" they face. In doing so, they tend to reduce everything to numbers and to things. Unfortunately as they create their aims and their formulae for action, they tend to forget to invite back into the equation the human beings involved. What follows tends to be unnecessarily painful for those in the line of fire.

At Enquiry B.C., a toll-free information service in British Columbia, female telephone operators must wear skirts or dresses; they're forbidden to wear even dress pants. The operators, however, are never seen in public, as they provide information by telephone about the provincial government. Staff says that this and other such rules being enforced are "bizarre." Morale is down, and turnover is up. Some employees give out wrong phone numbers to customers as they no longer bother to check them. Ten people out of a total staff of about 25 had recently quit. Despite this the owner of the firm says the dress code will remain in force.

While the toxicity that stems from organizational activities may often be unintentional, its negative effects are real. Companies that say they value teamwork and then reward only individual efforts generate toxins. Unethical behavior that is systemic in organizations is also unhealthy. Impossible stretch goals and constant cuts to budgets and to staff and endless changes in direction all contribute to the toxicity in many organizations.

Inevitability

We cannot avoid some kinds of emotional pain, even if our organizational and management practices are well calibrated to the needs of their membership. They occur inevitably, for reasons such as the following:

The Impact of Trauma

When a coworker or a manager falls seriously ill, dies or is injured, others at work feel the pain in some way. Unexpected downsizings or takeovers are also painful, especially for those who have worked together for a long time. Trauma also can arise from an external source such as an earthquake, a fire or even, as the people of the United States learned on September 11, 2001, a terrorist attack.

We cannot predict events of this nature, and we cannot hold a particular manager or company policy responsible for them.

The pain of trauma becomes toxic when it damages people's sense of hope and confidence.

The Exercise of Leadership

Leaders create pain. It goes with the job. They cannot carry out initiatives, or redirect the resources and initiatives of the organization without bending and sometimes breaking rules, without pushing their staff beyond their comfort zones or changing the expectations of their followers in search of outcomes that are not fully predictable for the leader or to those who do the work. The really good leaders know this and take steps to cushion the effects of the pain they create or they address it once it has been created. Those who don't attend to the pain they cause typically contribute toxic effects among their followers.

The Nature of Organized Life

There always will be unexpected and unintended consequences of organizational policies and practices, even when they are administered with care and compassion. A performance management system may fail to capture the creativity of some employees. Recruiting drives may stock the company with skills that are suddenly rendered unnecessary by shifts in technology or the market and loyal and competent employees must be let go.

There are other sources of toxicity in organizations: employees, customers, board members and shareholders, for example. They are not highlighted here. We turn to mechanisms for dealing with toxicity in organizations, starting with a key contribution, the toxin handler.

THE ROLE OF THE TOXIN HANDLER

Given that there is so much emotional pain generated in organizations, it is perhaps surprising that good work gets done at all. One of the reasons that it does occur stems

from the often discreet but skillful interventions of the toxin handlers in organizations. These people, managers or staff members, have the empathetic capacity to notice when and how painful situations turn toxic. They step into situations at work to dissipate or to buffer the toxins so that those who are "in harms way" are rescued or protected and can get on with doing their organizational work.

The motivation for playing this role at work stems from a genuine concern for the well-being of others in the organization and the ability to know when others are suffering. In fact, this aspect of toxin handling is crucial to the authenticity of the work these people do. However, the other key prompt for handlers (particularly those from management or supervisory ranks) is a clear recognition that "when people's hearts are broken, their heads don't work." The toxin handling interventions are designed to address this disconnect and to help their team members recover their equilibrium, refocus their energies and get back to work.

Such handlers may be human resource (HR) specialists, but often they are line managers, project managers or team members who know the value of a healthy workplace and act constructively when they see toxic situations. They are not only caregivers who help heal people who hurt, they are also leaders who work with pain in ways that are designed to sustain or enhance performance in the workplace. Handlers focus on the emotional needs of individuals and on the emotional linkages and relationships within organizations.

Toxin handlers respond to pain in many ways, small and large. But their work tends to reflect five major themes.

Listening

They listen with attention and compassion to someone else's pain providing a moment of human connection. Michael was a project manager who worked for a highly toxic CEO—staff members regularly visited his office, fired up with anger and frustration. Michael's response was to offer them a chair

while he closed the door. There, he would let them vent without interruption. "I didn't say much," Michael recalls. "But I would look them in the eye and do a lot of nodding." Being emotionally present in this way for someone in pain can help them feel that they've been heard and their feelings validated. It can also give the handler valuable insights for dealing with the issues raised.

Holding Space for Healing

Handlers recognize that someone is in pain, then find ways to create and hold a space that will give the person "breathing room." It might be to provide a private office or time off or a reduced workload. Ongoing pressure to perform at high levels and to stay committed to deadlines and assignments often desensitizes the corporate response to people who may be hurting—whatever its cause. Rather, the company expects (though may not get) "normal" behavior from these employees at all times even when they are suffering.

Serious emotional pain requires a time-out—a space to allow people the opportunity to grieve and regroup. Toxin handlers grasp this reality. They register the hurt of those around them, empathize with them, and have a sense of how the distress will likely affect their state of mind. They then look for ways to create and hold a space that will provide respite—"breathing room"—in the workplace. The space can be both physical (such as a private office where problems can be discussed) and emotional (the toxin handler's own listening ear and compassion). Hurt people can use such opportunities to recover their balance and begin to tap their capacity to make good decisions and function effectively.

When a relatively young supervisor died suddenly over a weekend, the branch manager stepped in to help the office staff cope with this unexpected event. On the following Monday morning when the store opened for business the manager briefed the staff, gave them some time to digest the sad news and took steps to minimize their need to deal

directly with customers that day. He took on temporarily a great deal of the load in the branch, including handling all of the deceased employee's appointments. On the day of the funeral, the manager supervised temporary replacements from other branches while his staff attended the ceremony. He organized but did not attend a lunch that the staff arranged to celebrate the life of the deceased supervisor. (He stayed behind to clean out the dead man's office.) As a result, when the doors opened to staff and customers the next day everyone could start afresh. "It made getting on with our normal business so much easier," one employee told me. "I also found out later that the 'day off work' was not normal company policy. Our manager had fought hard with his bosses so that the entire staff could staff end the funeral and gain some closure."

Buffering Pain

Toxin handlers will take the pain in a harsh message from the top or from other managers and hold it so none of the toxins get through. A message that the employees are incompetent and lazy can be rephrased to appeal to their pride in getting the planned work done.

Toxin handlers often are the official message bearers for the organization or may informally intercept and amend the messages meant for staff to decrease the emotional pain they might cause. When handlers reframe, they are focusing on the emotional and technical aspects of a message in order to deflect or prevent pain from reaching its intended audience. They read the message. They hear and feel the toxin in it—the anger, fear, or demoralization that the original statement would trigger if delivered without a filter—and then they act to dissipate the toxin before it can reach its intended targets.

Savannah was a project manager for a team in a transportation company that was implementing a new promotion program based on performance rather than seniority. Many in the organization were strongly against the change, but it had support from

a few key managers. Once implementation began, Savannah's team members were frequently attacked verbally. "It was a case of 'kill the messenger,'" Savannah says. "All the anger and bitterness that people felt for top management was directed at us."

Savannah, as a toxin handler, worked hard to protect her team from the worst pain of the attacks. When a senior manager who opposed the new policy, for instance, sent a personally insulting letter to one team member, Savannah caught it before it reached the employee and sent back a memo that instructed the manager to send all future correspondence directly to her. Using political IOU's with influential supporters, she also deflected a concerted move by some managers to relocate her staff in less appealing and effective office space.

Extricating Others from Painful Situations

Handlers may use their political skills to get a promising employee transferred to a more receptive department. Greg was a senior manager in a Canadian national bank who was concerned about a young, promising clerical staff member who'd been moved several months earlier into a new department. The department's manager hadn't wanted the new employee, and she was not doing well. Greg heard that the manager was bad-mouthing the clerk. "I was told she was a rising star," said the manager, "and all I see is errors and lack of initiative."

Greg was sure that the employee had potential. He also knew that this manager would have done little to develop his subordinates unless they behaved just like he did. Greg worked behind the scenes with the HR manager. He had the clerk moved to another area where the manager was a good mentor. The transfer had to be handled with tact and political sensitivity. Otherwise the woman would have been tagged as a whiner and a loser. Greg would have been accused of meddling. The clerk recovered quickly, and in later years became a senior manager herself.

Sometimes the only way to help people caught in a toxic situation is to spring them free. Someone in such a predicament might himself leave the situation, and many do. But other people lose the confidence or the courage to act on their own behalf, or are not in a position to help themselves. It is the toxin handlers who can play a rescuing role by identifying sites where valuable employees may be floundering and then taking effective action.

Transforming Pain

Many potentially toxic situations in organizations cannot be changed in the short run and therefore require the constructive "translation" that toxin handlers can offer. For example, difficult chief executive officers or senior managers will rarely change their styles even if they understand that they are hurting people. Much of the toxin handler's work to transform situations then occurs through changing the view of painful experiences.

David Crisp, former senior vice president of human resources at the Hudson Bay Company in Canada (one of the country's leading retail chains) helped his staff to deal positively with enduring stressful situations by working with them to create a plan of action that could carry them through stressful times at work and give them a realistic appraisal of the situation they all faced. "I'd tell them that this is a tough period, and workwise we have to get through it," said Crisp. "We have to put things in the right priority so we get our butts kicked as little as possible and we can feel proud that the right things got done." He also encouraged staff to see the importance of making time for themselves and their families.

HEALING THE HANDLERS

When their work is done successfully, toxin handlers can feel extreme joy and satisfaction in the work as they observe the people whom they have helped to heal. But there can also be considerable costs and risks in store for

people who do the difficult work of toxin handling. One of the biggest dangers is of becoming toxic themselves. Too often, handlers become so immersed in the work of healing others that they are unable or unwilling to recognize the toll being taken on their own mental and physical health. The result is that toxin handlers, over time, experience a number of negative effects that if untreated, begin to dull their sensitivities as handlers, the effectiveness of their work and the health and quality of their own lives. They become overwhelmed by all the pain they are trying to cope with and heal; it numbs them to their own and other people's feelings. And because handlers usually work alone, keeping to themselves the pain they're managing, they become isolated and trapped in the role. The confidential, behind-the-scenes work they do rarely allows them opportunities to unburden themselves to others or to otherwise dissipate the toxicity.

One handler in a high-tech company put it this way: "I can help others, but I can't seem to help myself. I keep seeing people suffering from the cruelty and indifference of their bosses, from stupid rules and decisions. I'm tired of being the one people turn to when the 'shit hits the fan.' Whom do I turn to?" Too often the answer is: "no one in this organization cares or even realizes that this is a problem—for the handler and ultimately for the organization itself."

Handlers Helping Themselves

Dadi Janki, is a woman in her eighties from India. In 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro she was named as one often "wisdom keepers." In a San Francisco University study of the brainwaves of yogis who had reputations for their positive influence on others, hers were the calmest brainwaves of all her peers. The media describe her as "the most peaceful woman on earth." She was asked the secret of her state of joy and happiness in the face of the suffering of others. "I do not identify with the pain of the other person. she said, I don't take it on!" This is valuable advice for all toxin handlers.

For the handler, taking steps to protect oneself from the contagion of other people's emotions cannot be left to chance. It requires that handlers recognize clearly that this is hazardous though important work and make a conscious commitment to not get overly involved emotionally with others in pain. Handlers need a regularly used game plan that helps them to develop a personal vision of why they are helping someone else, and that includes practical tools and skills to protect and to strengthen their resilience in the face of emotionally toxic situations. The challenge they face is to remain attuned and responsive to others in pain, without taking on the toxicity they encounter and starting the slide toward burnout.

A game plan for self-protection is most powerful when it is created within a strategic framework that gives people options for action. Handlers need access to a set of attitudes and routines that keep them emotionally healthy, even as they deal with emotionally difficult situations. As authors Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz have cogently observed, based on their research on high performing athletes, the key to sustained health and performance requires that people establish habits and rituals that allow them periodic rest or breaks in the action to allow time for recovery. It is the absence of an oscillation between effort and rest that often is at the root of debilitating effects of performance, whether it is in athletic contests, the drive to complete a series of projects and assignments, or working intensively with other people's pain.

Handlers need practices that give them time to catch their breath physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually, and to restore the vision of what they're trying to do as healers and as managers. They also need to establish healthy connections with their organization, so that they feel sustained and supported in this difficult work. It is important for handlers to keep a kind of tempered optimism for the work that they do. They also need a modicum of self-compassion in their efforts to heal themselves. If they try to find a perfect balance of activism

and protection they will experience frustration and failure. This is unrealistic in a world of constant change and intensity. However, by allowing for a more fluid experience of moving in and out of balance over time, handlers can lead healthier lives.

Handlers need to work to prevent the untenable condition of feeling overwhelmed and emotionally imbalanced, while accepting that self-recovery and emotional well-being are ongoing processes that one works through over a lifetime. Also, paying attention to the relationships and connections that sustain emotional health never ends. Handlers need to be comfortable with the experience of winning some of the time and being less successful at others. If they have a plan of action and work with it conscientiously, handlers increase the likelihood of safely helping others as well as ourselves. (Details of handler game plans can be found in Frost, 2003).

Working with the Organization

Handlers help themselves through effective use of a health-giving game plan that helps them get their breath back. However, it is often not enough to keep them fully protected as they do their work. They work in an organizational context, and they return to the battle against toxins every day. They need to know how to harness organizational resources and to educate their colleagues if they are to retain the benefits they get from working on their various capacities. They also need help from the organization.

One significant challenge handlers must overcome is to create organizational understanding of—and respect for—the work they do to handle toxins. Most handlers feel as if they work alone, with no organizationally meaningful frame of reference to give them comfort. Their work increasingly isolates them from others and neither they nor their colleagues have a way to talk about their work in ways that help them let off steam or “dissipate the toxins.” But they do need reassurance that they are doing valuable work that is appreciated. They need a lan-

guage that captures the positive contribution of their efforts and helps the organization and the handlers themselves understand that this activity has a place as “real” work that is needed to get projects done well. They can begin to make inroads to the indifference and insensitivity of organizations to their needs by: naming the experience and by managing the messages they use to communicate what they do.

Naming the Experience

Handlers have a hard time explaining to others (and to themselves) what it is they do in terms that their organization might value. Imagine the response when a handler says, “Well, I had a succession of unhappy staff come through my office to tell me their troubles and we used up a lot of Kleenex,” If, on the other hand the handler can provide a legitimate label to capture what this work entails, the listener hears it differently. For example, suppose the handler says, “I spent quite a bit of time working with the team this morning. The recent layoffs have caused a lot of pain in the group and unless I address it we won’t be able to move forward productively. I believe I made progress today, and I can see that people are beginning to pay more attention to targets again.” That is the language of performance that gets attention and respect. It portrays the constructive contribution of this work to the company’s goals, and it allows the handler to feel much better about himself, and about what he’s doing.

Managing the Message

While handlers can educate people with influence in the organization about the reality of the work handlers do; it is quite another to build widespread support for their role. To do so, handlers and their supporters need to adopt innovative tactics and use political skills to shift their organizations from indifference (or disdain) for this work to a fuller appreciation of its value. The key is to position the toxin handler’s work as a set of

competencies that are crucial to the organization's success.

Using the Language of Competence

A study of the experiences of female engineers found that their work was normally discounted in many of the ways that toxin handlers report. However, when one engineer took systematic counter measures when she became aware that her efforts to help her team were discounted by management:

Rather than simply working behind the scenes to make sure key people outside the team were doing their jobs and not feeling exploited, she started to talk of her role as "interfacing." At team meetings she reported regularly on the status of these interfacing efforts, and eventually the practice became so routine that others adopted the term, and it was put on the agenda. In this way she rescued the term from obscurity and put it on the organizational screen.

Handlers also need to go an extra step: to look for indicators of how well their intervention worked and to skillfully get across to the organization's leaders any positive outcomes of their efforts. They can also communicate to the organization the efforts of other handlers in the workplace—a helpful move, since handlers tend to be quite low keyed about what they do and often shy away instinctively from blowing their own horns. It is "promotion" work that needs to be done if handling is to gain organizational support.

Building and Maintaining Connections

A good way to counteract the isolation that toxin handlers experience is to create support networks or groups where they can talk about the work they do and how they feel about it. This can restore the handler's

confidence and sense of empowerment. They hear other people's stories, and they find connections between their own experiences, dilemmas, and difficult decisions and those of others. Support networks can provide a highly effective mechanism for dissipating the emotional toxins that handlers invariably accumulate over time.

Organizations Helping their Handlers

Enlightened companies are finding it productive to take steps to systematically manage and diffuse the emotional pun that comes with everyday organizational life. These actions include:

- Acknowledging the dynamic
- Offering support
- Modeling healthy handling
- Creating a supportive culture

Acknowledge the Dynamic

Handlers have much work to do to get their role understood and accepted. At the same time, leaders of organizations also play a part—to acknowledge the existence and importance of those who work with toxicity in the workplace. This is not a simple task. Admitting these dimensions of organizational life is often difficult where so much of the culture of a place values technical competence over everything else, and where people are expected to "suck up" their emotions, especially when times are tough. A manager in a communications company commented, "After a particularly bitter strike that churned up a lot of agony and anger, the company provided counseling for the workers. There was nothing for any managers. We were expected to suck in our emotions, stay quiet, and cope alone." Managers at this company felt, probably correctly, that to talk about their feelings would have jeopardized their careers.

Companies need a forum to discuss the topic if they wish to raise consciousness

about the toxin handler's role. The nature and importance of this work should be on the agenda of management meetings or retreats, and it is more likely to be successfully represented if handling work has a champion to ensure that it gets sufficient time and attention in these settings. If the source of a particular organizational toxin is a toxic boss, open discussion rarely happens, and discussion of pain and toxins may require a more neutral setting, such as a conference of senior managers from several organizations.

Offering Support for Toxin Handlers

Company leaders can address the needs of toxin handlers by giving them access to support groups or to professionals who are trained to help them decompress and rejuvenate or by bringing in experts able to guide handlers through conversations that allow them to see, understand and, and appreciate the pressures of what they do. Such outside help can also help toxin handlers recognize if they are dangerously close to burnout or presenting worrisome physical symptoms. A manager who had been a toxin handler for two years during a company restructuring said: "It took a therapist to help me to recognize that I was taking [the toxicity] into my gut. I was ignoring all the signs my body was sending me. I was taking things very personally. The therapist allowed me to hear myself in denial." The point is for organizations to be proactive in supporting the people who manage the emotional pain of their coworkers.

Modeling Healthy Toxin Handling

Once handling organizational pain becomes discussable in an organization, then managers can feel free to show how to do it right. Some managers do this by consciously striving to convey a sense of calmness at work, even when the pressure is intense David Marsing, a senior manager at Intel Corp. said in an interview:

I try, to the greatest extent possible, to maintain a level of calmness in the face of frantic issues. I try to be as objective as possible in discussions, and if I'm in a face-to-face meeting with someone who has a short fuse, I'll sit right next to that person to make sure the fuse is never lit. I do that by being calm, even overly calm. When things get heated, I even change my voice. I will consciously take a deeper breath, or two deep breaths, in front of everybody to get them to calm down a little bit and talk about the specifics, about solutions.

Marsing, in effect, is setting a tone that encourages the prevention or dissipation of toxicity in his managers. They in turn carry this into their teams, spreading positive affect into their workplaces, all of which helps contain the toxin levels where they work. He is also teaching the handlers in his group (of which he is one) how to stay healthy in a highly demanding environment.

Creating a Supportive Culture

Each of these organizationally relevant interventions endure if the context and the cultures in which they are implemented are fundamentally supportive of healthy management practices. Think how different handlers' experiences could be in a supportive culture, where positive emotions and efforts to reassert them are made when things are turning toxic. This means that people are respected for skills other than purely technical and economic ones; where emotional and social competencies are valued and rewarded.

So an organization's leaders can do much to protect and heal handlers if the practices that acknowledge, support and reward effective and healthy toxin handling (such as creating routines of support, providing opportunities for handlers to share and talk about their own pressures (as handlers), modeling healthy behaviors for dealing with

emotions by leaders) are built into the “way we do things around here,” that is, into the very culture of the organization. This makes the task of working with toxins a much safer and more sustainable activity.

LEADERS AS HANDLERS OF PAIN

It was asserted earlier that all leaders create emotional pain, and that it goes with the territory of the role. Really good leaders know that they can and do generate negative emotions in others and they are also often alert to notice pain unfolding in their organization. They step in, as handlers, to mop up the pain before it becomes toxic, or they act to detoxify a situation that is the result of their own actions or those of other leaders. Sometimes this recognition that they have created pain in their followers comes in the “3 a.m. startle,” as they wake suddenly and find they are processing an encounter that happened the day before. It is often an “Uh oh, I shouldn’t have said that to Jim?” or “I missed the plea for understanding that Jane and the others were making,” sort of reaction. Going back the next day to address with care the issue with the person or the team can often scoop up any toxins before they spread.

When leaders consciously assume the work of the toxin handler, the emotional loadings shift from the few to the many, and this work is no longer relegated to a back burner nor left to an informal handler to address. Distributing the work of managing toxicity among multiple leaders accomplishes at least three things:

First, it lifts some of the relentless burden of dealing with organizational toxins from those who have stepped in simply because no one else would do so; Second, it puts the responsibility for managing the toxins with those who have power, resources, visibility and connections—enabling real and effective interventions to be used to root out

toxicity where it has taken hold; Third, an organization that expects and reinforces toxin handling in its leaders creates a force for positive experiences. It naturally engenders a healthier work environment than one that ignores or blocks this competency. Handlers see their work as supported and as part of normal work, not as an activity that is “bootlegged” into the daily agenda.

Handling skills outlined earlier are an essential part of the leader’s toolkit. Additional skills of the compassionate leader include;

Paying Attention

Being alert to the presence and signals of others around him and being open-minded, rather than prejudicial or defensive, to emotional “data” he experiences. Being open-minded enables the leader to discover workable responses to a situation. Being open-hearted encourages compassionate and caring behavior.

Putting People First

Attentive leaders recognize that there is always grief somewhere in the room. There are so many ways in which pain enters the lives of people in the workforce, whether from personal or family misfortunes, from traumas that occur outside of work or from experiences in the organization, that leaders can count on the existence of suffering among their followers. Leadership includes making tough decisions that sometimes set very tight performance deadlines, make people uncomfortable, or involve letting some staff go. By thinking first about the person and his or her feelings and then assessing that person’s performance, the leader can create a culture in which compassionate responses to pain become a natural part of doing business. Handling toxins becomes more naturally one of the things that leaders, formal and informal, do for one another. Clark Elliott managed the space-planning

department at Digital Equipment Corporation International in Geneva in the 1990s. He handled a change to radical new work arrangements in a Swiss workforce already demoralized in by five years of downsizing and rightsizing. The change was a success. Elliott attributes this to the attention he gave to listening to employee concerns and to harnessing their ideas. "I talked to everyone on the staff for between 45 minutes and an hour and a half," he said. "We provide lots of feedback along the way."

Practicing Professional Intimacy

When leaders step in to defuse toxic emotions, they must strike a tricky balance between detachment from the pain of those they're helping and an excessive emotional involvement with the situation. They are most effective when they use their emotions as a guide to responding to what has transpired and its effect on others. But managers are most helpful when they can do this with "professional intimacy"—without clouding their judgment by over-identifying with the sufferer. When Richard Smith, chairman and editor-in-chief of *Newsweek*, faced the task of leading his staff through the emotional trauma of the terminal illness from leukemia of then editor Maynard Parker, his response was to communicate the facts of Parker's illness with honesty and compassion. He also encouraged and supported the efforts of the *Newsweek* staff to be helpful to Parker and his family and to maintain the high professional standards that the stricken editor had always demanded. He walked a line that acknowledged the pain of the situation and the need for continued high performance in the organization.

Pushing Back

Occasionally, leaders must take bold steps to eradicate emotional pain in their workplaces. They need to push back on the sources of the pain to eliminate their effects. The Benjamin Group, a Silicon Valley-based public rela-

tions firm, demonstrates its values by taking a stand on how employees are treated, not only by their colleagues and managers but also by their customers, suppliers and other business partners. These values are represented in a code of principles that includes the statement: "We're all in this together." One message implicit in this code of principles is that the company is prepared to cancel an account (and has done so) if a client develops a track record of being abusive to its staff. This too takes courage and reflects leaders dealing compassionately with pain.

It is also very helpful if leaders are willing to acknowledge their mistakes and to do so in ways that leave their followers feeling better about themselves. They also need to grasp the underlying reasons for the mistakes, so everyone can learn from the incidents and move on. The leader is in effect modeling good toxin handling behavior when she does this.

ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSES TO TOXICITY

The handling of emotional pain cannot be solely the responsibility of the leaders of organizations, nor should it be left in the care of the few gifted handlers who excel in highly toxic situations. The institutions themselves have a key role to play. There are indeed ways that organizations can architect responses to pain to create healthy and productive workplaces.

Biological systems produce toxins in the natural course of their functioning, and these are eliminated through their own internal mechanisms and subsystems, effectively removing viruses and other threats to their existence. When the system is overloaded with toxicity, for whatever reason, outside help may be needed. For the human system, assistance may require medical intervention (e.g., surgery) to remove the source of the pain. Or the toxins may need a regimen of antibiotics, or some other treatment to resolve the illness. During the recovery period, a phase often overlooked in some perspectives of healing, the body and its

systems need to rehabilitate. The human system then stabilizes. It is restored or otherwise reconfigured so that the gains triggered by the healing interventions endure.

Translating this process to the challenge of managing toxicity in an organizational system designed to get work done effectively, we can think in terms of stages of prevention, of intervention and of rehabilitation.

Prevention

Finding ways to keep toxins from entering the work place in the first instance. We cannot keep all of them out, any more than biological systems keep out all viruses and so forth. But we can take steps to minimize the opportunity for emotional toxins to be brought into the organization. Policies that select employees for attitude and competence, develop people and help them shine, build fair minded workplaces and create an atmosphere that allows spaces for healing all contribute to a healthy company climate. In such environments employees contribute constructive responses to workplace challenges. There are numerous cases of organizations that accomplish prevention in ways that make keep their enterprises vital. In Southwest Airlines Co., for example, hiring for a positive attitude is a consistent company practice. In one hiring decision, an experienced pilot considered a top prospect was rejected when pilots involved in the recruiting process observed his rudeness to one of the company's receptionists.

Intervention

Even in the healthiest of organizations toxins are produced as the system goes about its business. Layoffs become necessary, anticipated resources don't materialise, employees are impacted by personal or organizational events and outcomes. Toxins generated can be systematically dissipated through policies and practices that emotionally sustain, rather than destroy those most affected. Downturns can be handled by building bridges for people so they leave with hope and opportunity.

People's personal pain can be dealt with by creating policies that are systematically compassionate. Some companies do this well. Cisco Systems Inc., for example created a practice during the downsizing that accompanied the early 21st-century decline in the computer industry. They allowed laid-off workers to retain their benefits, as well as one-third of their salary, in return for donating their time and work skills to not-for-profit organizations. Such employees have a sense of purpose while laid off, and are available for recall as economic conditions improve. Siemens AG introduced a similar scheme in 2001.

Restoration and Recovery

A good deal of pain accompanies the stage of recovery in a system. Ask any managers who must pick up the slack after a major layoff has taken place in their organization. They not only feel the increased load thrust upon them but also the guilt at surviving the cuts. Painful emotional adjustments follow mergers especially those that are hostile and involve winners and losers. The scars of a tragedy such as the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks in New York and in Washington D.C. heal slowly. Organizations need policies and practices that demonstrate patience and trust in the belief that time heals, that help people see positive options, and provide focus so that active routines are restored and foster rituals and symbols for "letting go." Several years ago, a Canadian insurance company that was acquired and folded into a European competitor held a "wake" at which the now-defunct company was eulogized by executives and by hourly workers. Afterward, staff threw business cards into a hole in the ground and it was covered with dirt while a bagpiper played a funeral dirge. The old company was buried and people were ready to embrace the new one.


FINAL THOUGHTS

Many people live out a large portion of their lives at work and invest a great deal of

themselves in this arena. As a result they care deeply about how they fare there. They often bring into this site the joys and burdens that occur elsewhere. For better and worse, organizations are sites where much of our emotional lives play out, and it is a folly to think or expect that people will somehow “park their feelings” at the company gate. Having this reality acknowledged, and having people’s emotions respected and compassionately “handled” by the company makes this intense and essential part of our lives immensely richer and more productive.

When toxin-handling work is done in an environment that acknowledges and supports the person and the activity, the types of positive outcomes multiply for everyone involved. These include increased loyalty, commitment and renewed effort toward

bottom-line results. When people with a gift for noticing and dealing well with others’ emotional distress are supported, encouraged and recognized by their institutions, they make a sustained contribution to helping the organization run well and to keeping its embers intellectually and emotionally resilient and productive. When managers and their organizations rise to the challenge to protect and enhance the health and well-being of their people, and when they are willing to offer compassion to those who are suffering—they are involved in a venture that is distinctly humane, enlightened and wise.

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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

A core source for this article is Peter J. Frost's book *Toxic Emotions at Work: How Compassionate Managers Handle Pain and Conflict* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003). The concepts of pain, toxicity, handling toxins and the role of leaders and organizations in supporting handlers and making their own contributions to healthy work places are elaborated in the book. A section on game plans for healthy toxin handling, not dealt with in the article, is given comprehensive treatment in chapter 5 of the book. An article (and a subsequent book) on developing and maintaining high performance in managers served as a very useful source for this chapter. Both publications were written by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, "The Making of the Corporate Athlete," *Harvard Business Review*, January 2001, 120–128, and *The Power of Full Engagement* (New York: Free Press, 2003). A key assumption of their work is that the basis of healthy and sustained performance rests on the ability of the athlete, or the manager (or the toxin handler) to create rituals and practices that promote an oscillation between effort and rest. Too often the experience of people in organizations is one of sustained effort with little or no time allowed for rest and recovery. Also pertinent to the development of healthy leadership practices is the work of Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002). They provide wise counsel about the importance of leaders developing allies and confidants to help them do the hard work of getting things accomplished (and to know the difference between these two resources). They also stress the need to separate their role (as leader) from their lives as human beings so as not to get sucked into the emotions that

play out in difficult, often political situations in organizations.

An important antidote to workplace toxicity is the creation of positive high-energy relationships between people in organizations. Jane Dutton describes several practices for accomplishing these outcomes in *Energize Your Workplace* (San Francisco: Wiley and Sons, 2003). Her work is part of a growing movement among researchers and practitioners to explore and develop a discipline that promotes appreciative and resilient organizations where extraordinary performance and respect, compassion, for those who contribute to this outcome become commonplace. A primer in this emerging work is Kim S. Cameron, Jane E. Dutton, and Robert E. Quinn's, *Positive Organizational Scholarship* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003). (See also Web sites: www.bus.umich.edu/Positive/; www.compassionlab.com; www.toxinhandler.com.)

The role of listening to others, and in particular of holding space for others (important toxin handling competencies) are also discussed by Ronald A. Heifetz in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answer* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994) and by William A. Kahn, "Holding Environments at Work," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, September 2001, 37 (3), 260–279. Heifetz talks about leaders "managing the holding environment" in a relationship. The term *holding environment* was first used in psychoanalysis to capture the relationship between a therapist and a patient. "The therapist 'holds' the patient in a process of developmental learning in a way that has some similarities to the way a mother or a father hold their newborn or maturing children" (104). In Heifetz's model of leadership, the notion of this environment

can be applied to any relationship in which “one party has the power to hold the attention of another party and facilitate adaptive work” (104–105). Holding space this way works because it “contains and regulates the stresses that work generates” (105). William Kahn discusses holding environments as a means to helping workers manage debilitating stress and anxiety.

Joyce K. Fletcher, *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power and Relational Practice at Work* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) provides a comprehensive treatment of how work such as toxin handling gets “disappeared” in organizations, and her study of female engineers provides examples of how handlers and others can make their work more recognized and accepted. Debra E. Meyerson, *Tempered Radicals* (Boston: Harvard Business

School Press, 2001) describes the characteristics and actions of people who walk a line between conformity and rebellion in an effort to facilitate effective change in organizations. Toxin handlers are often like these tempered radicals as they strive to help their colleagues or subordinates and their company to reach accommodations that benefit both.

A very useful analysis of organizations that do appear to blend good people management and outstanding performance is provided through the case studies of Southwest Airlines, Cisco Systems, The Men’s Wearhouse and other companies, in Charles, A. O’Reilly and Jeffrey Pfeffer’s book *Hidden Value: How Great Companies Achieve Extraordinary Results with Ordinary People* (Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

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