



THE TOXIC HANDLER

ORGANIZATIONAL HERO - AND CASUALTY

When companies cause emotional pain through nasty bosses, layoffs, and change, a certain breed of “healing” manager steps in to keep the gears moving. They are toxic handlers – unsung corporate heroes who save the day, but often pay a high price.

BY PETER FROST AND SANDRA ROBINSON

AS A SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER at a public utility company, Michael had thrived in his job for nearly a decade. His team of 24 engineers worked quickly and effectively together and was often the source of creative ideas that helped the rest of the organization. All that changed, however, when the utility's board brought in a hard-charging CEO and made Michael one of his direct reports. “He walked all over people,” Michael recalls. “He made fun of them; he intimidated them. He criticized work for no reason, and he changed his plans daily. Another project manager was hospitalized with ulcers and took early retirement. People throughout the organization felt scared and

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betrayed. Everyone was running around and whispering, and the copy machine was going nonstop with résumés. No one was working. People could barely function."

Rather than watch the organization come to a standstill, Michael stepped between the new CEO and his colleagues. He allowed people to vent their frustrations to him behind closed doors and even cry or shout. At meetings, when the CEO picked on coworkers, Michael stood up for them—and often ended up taking verbal beatings. He also played the role of the CEO's front man, translating his seemingly irrational directives so that people could put them into action. "He's not such a bad guy," was Michael's common refrain. "Underneath it all, he wants the best for the company."

Michael kept at it for three years, until the board fired the CEO. By then, however, Michael was considering leaving not just the company but his profession. "I didn't know if I could take the heat in a large organization anymore," he says. "In the end, I stayed with the company, but I took a year off from being a manager and just worked with the team. I had to recharge."

Take the heat—that's how Michael describes his role of absorbing and softening the emotional pain of his organization. It was a critical role, too. After the bad-tempered CEO was gone, members of Michael's team told the board that they had kept at their work largely because of Michael's soothing words, compassionate listening, and protection.

Toxic handlers voluntarily shoulder the sadness and the anger that are endemic to organizational life.

Michael is what we call a *toxic handler*, a manager who voluntarily shoulders the sadness, frustration, bitterness, and anger that are endemic to organizational life. Although toxic handlers may be found at every level in organizations, many work near the top—they run the marketing or new-product development department, for instance, or oversee several cross-functional teams. Virtually all of them carry a full load of "regular" work, and do so very well. In fact, it is often their superior performance that affords them the job security to play the role of toxic handler in the first place.

Toxic handlers are not new. They are probably as old as organizations, for organizations have always generated distress, just as they have always gener-

ated feelings of joy and fulfillment. Strong emotions are part of life; they are part of business. And yet there has never been a systematic study of the role toxic handlers play in business organizations. For the past two years, they have been at the center of our research: we have interviewed and observed about 70 executives who are either toxic handlers themselves or have managed people in the role. Our goal has been to understand what toxic handlers do, why they do it, and how organizations can support them.

Research on topics such as organizational pain is sometimes derided for being soft or unrealistic or even for being "politically correct." "Those people," the criticism goes, "don't understand how real organizations work. Companies can't be bothered with making everyone feel warm and fuzzy. There's a bottom line to worry about." But our study did not start with an assumption that organizations, per se, are responsible for their employees' personal happiness. Rather, we were motivated to study toxic handlers because of their strategic importance in today's business environment.

In our current market-based and knowledge-driven world, success is a function of great ideas, which, of course, spring from intelligent, energized, and emotionally involved people. But great ideas dry up when people are hurting or when they are focused on organizational dysfunction. It is toxic handlers who frequently step in and absorb others' pain so that high-quality work continues to get done. For that reason alone, understanding toxic handlers is essential: to miss their contribution, or to underestimate it, is to neglect a powerful source of organizational effectiveness.

The contribution of toxic handlers merits attention for another critical reason. Organizations must recognize the toxic handlers in their midst so that their important work can be supported before a crisis strikes. Because although toxic handlers save organizations from self-destructing, they often pay a steep price—professionally, psychologically, and sometimes physically. Some toxic handlers experience burnout; others suffer from far worse, such as ulcers and heart attacks.

What Toxic Handlers Do

To illustrate the varied tasks toxic handlers take on, consider Alexandra, a vice president at a large financial institution in New York. Technically speaking, Alexandra was responsible for commercial and small-business accounts, but in reality she

spent at least half of her time counseling coworkers. For instance, she frequently played peacemaker between the bank's large administrative staff and its constant stream of new M.B.A.'s.

"They always came in acting like they owned the world. Let's just say they tended to be pretty arrogant and heavy-handed with the secretaries and clerical workers," Alexandra recalls. "They offended them so much that they couldn't concentrate on their work. So first I had to explain to the staff that these young professionals were really good people inside, just seriously lacking in interpersonal skills. Then I had to pull the new M.B.A.'s into my office and help them understand that being a boss didn't mean bossing people around. And I had to do that without getting their backs up, otherwise they would have panicked, and that would have killed productivity. It was incredibly delicate stuff.

"I also spent hours on end talking other managers through their fears and insecurities around our possible merger with another bank," Alexandra says. "It was in the newspaper regularly, and people would come running to my office. Everyone was terrified they were going to get fired. One by one, I would calm everybody down so they could get back to their real jobs."

In general, then, toxic handlers alleviate organizational pain in five ways:

They listen empathetically. When staff members burst into his office on fire with anger and frustration, Michael, the project manager in our first example, almost always pointed them toward a chair while he closed the door. At that point, he would let them cool down without interruption. "I didn't say much," Michael recalls. "But I would look them in the eye and do a lot of nodding." Toxic handlers are experts at such nonjudgmental, compassionate listening.

They suggest solutions. Toxic handlers don't just listen, however, they also solve problems. Alexandra actively counseled staff members on how to speak with M.B.A.'s to avoid confrontations, and she similarly schooled M.B.A.'s in office etiquette. She often advised secretaries, for instance, to meet with the M.B.A.'s early in their tenures to lay out explicit ground rules for communication.

They work behind the scenes to prevent pain. When toxic handlers see a surefire case of organizational pain on the horizon, they typically leap into action to douse it. Consider the case of a talented employee who had lost her self-confidence working for a difficult boss and was bound to be transferred,

against her wishes, to another department. Working without the knowledge of the unhappy employee, a toxic handler in the organization negotiated for weeks to move the woman to a department known for its upbeat boss and interesting work. The toxic handler commented later, "The whole thing had to

Success is a function of great ideas. But great ideas dry up when people are hurting or focused on organizational dysfunction.

be done very tactfully and with political sensitivity, including getting buy-in from the HR department, or the woman would have been labeled a whiner and a loser, and I would have been accused by her boss of meddling. In the end, everyone won." The woman, interestingly, never learned the story behind her transfer.

They carry the confidences of others. Toxic handlers can be like priests. In hearing and keeping secrets well, they allow their coworkers to walk away less troubled. Alexandra let her colleagues off-load their fears about the bank's merger onto her, and they returned to their jobs renewed. Similarly, Alan, a human resources manager at an insurance company, frequently listened to anguished colleagues who were preparing to fire someone. On one occasion, the CEO confided to him that a major layoff was in the works. Later, Alan found out he was the only one in the organization who knew beforehand. The CEO told him, "I had to proceed with the layoff decision, regardless of how much I might have felt for those let go. Sharing the news with you gave me some comfort."

They reframe difficult messages. Like Michael, who occasionally served as the abusive CEO's front man, toxic handlers act as diplomats and organizational translators. Alexandra heard staff members screaming about obnoxious new M.B.A.'s, but she delivered the message in language they could accept. "A company is like a small town," she often began, "where a bad reputation is hard to lose."

Another toxic handler was told by his boss, "Tell those idiots out there to get their act together and finish the job by Friday or else they're all doomed." The manager pulled his staff together and put the directive as such: "The boss needs us to complete this task by Friday, so let's put our heads together and see what we need to do to meet this deadline."

By taking the sting out, the toxic handler allowed his staff to focus on the challenge of the directive without seeing it as an attack on their capabilities. The pain was managed, and the job got done.

Filling a Need

Toxic handlers are not new, but our research strongly suggests that two trends in recent years have intensified the need for them. Foremost among them is the growing prevalence of change initiatives. Pursuing the mantra that nonstop change is not just good, it's downright essential, many executives have spent the past decade reengineering, restructuring, and reinventing their organizations. In many cases, such transformations have created enormous shareholder value. Invariably, they have also caused confusion, fear, and anguish among employees.

Downsizing is the other trend that has increased the need for toxic handlers. Whenever a company lays off employees, the people left behind feel a backwash of guilt and fear. As the question "Who will be next?" swirls around the organization, toxic handlers step in to soothe nerves and redirect people's energies back to work.

Although change and downsizing have increased in recent years, some types of organizational pain have always been—and will always be—with us. For instance, every organization experiences bursts of incidental distress: a beloved manager dies in a plane crash, a major division faces an unexpected broadside from an upstart competitor, or senior managers simply do something unwise. Take the case of Rick, a human resources manager who was asked to implement a new policy of promotions based on performance rather than seniority. At first, the policy was strongly supported by the CEO and his team, but once it went into action, old colleagues lobbied them hard, and they quickly backed down. Younger employees who supported the new policy felt betrayed, and they clamored for the CEO and his team to stand firm. Rick was caught in the middle of this managerial muddle and, for several weeks, he heard fervent outpourings from both sides. His toxic-handling role ended two months later when the CEO announced that he would abandon the revamped policy. Not everyone was happy, but as the confusion dissipated, so, too, did the worst of the organizational pain.

By contrast, some organizational pain is chronic: the organizations themselves are toxic, systematically generating distress through policies and practices. The most common of these are unreasonable stretch goals or performance targets, but toxicity is also created by unrelenting internal competition—

toxic organizations love "horse races." Moreover, organizations that are chronically toxic are usually characterized by cultures of blame and dishonesty. No one takes responsibility for mistakes. In fact, people work assiduously to cover them up.

The final reason that toxic handlers exist is because the business world has toxic bosses. People like the CEO in our first story create organizational pain through insensitivity or vindictive behavior. Other toxic bosses cause pain because they are unwilling to take on the responsibilities of leadership, leaving subordinates hanging, confused, or paralyzed—or all three. Still others are toxic because of their extraordinarily high need for control, looking over the shoulders of people who have a job to do. Finally, some toxic bosses are unethical, creating conditions that compromise their colleagues and subordinates.

Toxic bosses very often work in tandem with a toxic handler. That's not surprising, since toxic bosses without handlers can be found out and then may face censure or even be fired. (It is worth noting that many toxic bosses are highly adept at managing their own bosses.) In one case we studied, a toxic boss had brought his chief lieutenant—his toxic handler—with him from one job to another for 15 years. The toxic handler routinely filtered the toxic boss's anger and prevented chaos. After meetings filled with belligerent tirades, for instance, the toxic handler would walk from office to office, explaining the boss's "real" opinions and assuring people he was not as angry as he seemed. And so the organizations they worked for continued to function. (To understand why toxic handlers do it, see the insert "More Than a Job.")

The Toll of Toxic Handling

Managing organizational pain is vital to the health of the enterprise—but at great cost to the health of the toxic handlers themselves. The negative repercussions of toxic handling are particularly high when the role is played for too long or when there is no letup in the stream of emotional problems to which they are exposed, as is the case in companies with chronic toxicity.

The most common toll of toxic handling—whatever its cause—is burnout, both psychological and professional. Remember that Michael, the project manager described at the opening of this article, took a year off from project management to recover. But toxic handling can also take a physical toll. Most professional pain managers—be they counselors or psychiatrists—have been trained to recognize the physical warning signs of too much stress, such as

More Than a Job

The seemingly thankless task of fronting for a toxic boss begs the question, Why do toxic handlers do it? That is, why do some people take on the emotional pain of their organizations? After all, few are openly rewarded for it. As a former senior vice president in the banking industry who was a toxic handler tells us, "You have to get your reward for doing this kind of work within yourself because you rarely get recognition from the corporation."

In some cases, toxic handlers emerge as a result of their position in the organization, usually as a manager in the human resources department. But more often, toxic handlers are pulled into the role—bit by bit—by their colleagues, who turn to them because they are trustworthy, calm, kind, and nonjudgmental.

Of course, it is possible to say "I'm sorry, I don't have the time" to needy coworkers. But the people who become toxic handlers are predisposed to say yes. Many have done so their entire lives—playing toxic handler at home and in school. These individuals often have a high tolerance for pain themselves, plus a surplus of empathy. Moreover, they read every situation for its emotionality—that is, they quickly notice when people are in pain and feel compelled to make the situ-

ation right. Indeed, if some toxic handlers had not gone into business, they would probably have become counselors or therapists.

A skeptic might suppose that toxic handlers must be emotionally unbalanced themselves, suffering from the "savior complex" that afflicts some social workers or from an unhealthy desire to be needed. Some might accuse them of being bleeding hearts, who feel sorry for everyone they meet. And still others might see in toxic handlers—in particular, those who work with toxic bosses—a tendency toward enabling or codependent behavior. As anyone who has studied alcoholism or drug addiction knows, both types of relationships are very unhealthy.

But in our research, we did not encounter toxic handlers of the ilk described above. Instead, we found professional managers who happened to be highly attuned to the human aspects of their organizations. And as one manager who has observed toxic handlers in his organization notes: "These people are usually relentless in their drive to accomplish organizational targets and rarely lose focus on business issues. Managing emotional pain is one of their means." We would suggest it is also a calling.

stiff necks, nausea, and headaches. But toxic handlers are amateurs. Unlike workers at a real radioactive site, they do not have clothing, equipment, or procedures to protect them. They toil in danger zones completely exposed.

Dave Marsing is a case in point. In 1990, Marsing was assigned to turn around one of Intel's micro-processor fabrication plants near Albuquerque, New Mexico. The situation he inherited was dire: the plant's yield rates were bad and getting worse. The company's senior managers were pressing very hard for a quick solution to the problem. Employees were in pain, too, saying unrealistic pressure from above had them anxious and frustrated. "I was trying to be a human bridge between all the parts of the company and cope with all the emotions," Marsing recalls. "On the outside, I was soothing everybody, and work was getting back on track. But on the inside, I was in turmoil. I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat." Two months after Marsing arrived on the job, he suffered a near-fatal heart attack. He was 36 years old. (Currently the vice president of Intel's technology and manufacturing group and general manager of assembly and test manufacturing,

Marsing says, "The heart attack was the result of a hereditary condition that got pushed over the edge from the stress.")

Savannah is another toxic handler who became physically ill after playing the role for several months. Like Rick in our earlier example, Savannah led a team assigned to implement a new program that based promotion on performance rather than seniority. Resistance was enormous, but in this case, the program went through. In the process, however, Savannah's team was brutalized by many members of the organization. "It was a case of 'kill the messenger,'" Savannah says. "All the anger and bitterness that people felt for top management were directed at us."

As a toxic handler, Savannah worked hard to protect her team from the worst of the attacks. A senior manager who opposed the new policy, for instance, sent a scathing and personally insulting letter to one team member. Savannah intercepted it and sent back a memo that instructed him to send all future correspondence directly to her. Another senior manager who was opposed to the policy tried to punish Savannah's team by moving it to smaller, less attrac-

tive office space. Savannah deflected the move, and her team stayed put, but, she recalls, "I was as stressed as I ever have been in my life. At work, I would be strong for my team, but at home, I cried a lot. I slept away from my husband, although I didn't actually sleep very much, and often felt terribly depressed. The worst, though, were the panic attacks, which would come on so suddenly. My heart would pound, and I would lose my breath."

Dave Marsing and Savannah are not unusual. Many managers in our research told us of bouts of depression, severe heart palpitations, chronic sleeplessness, and cases of pneumonia.

These anecdotal cases are consistent with scientific evidence of a strong link between stress and illness. That link was first documented in the 1950s by Dr. Hans Selye, the renowned Canadian medical researcher who found that overwhelming stress leads to a breakdown of the protective mechanisms in the body—in other words, that stress compromises the body's immune system. In 1993, Bruce McEwen and Eliot Stellar reviewed two decades of research on the connection between stress and disease. Their analysis, published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, concluded that stress can compromise the immune system so severely that it raises blood pressure, weakens resistance to viral infections, increases the risk of heart attacks, and hastens the spread of cancer. Incidentally, the report says, stress puts intense pressure on the biological areas most susceptible to attack. Thus, if Harry's cardiovascular system is prone to weakness, his response to stress might be a heart attack. If Carmen's intestinal system is her weak spot, then stress for her may show up in chronic stomach ailments.

A study published in the *Journal of Advancement in Medicine* in 1995 demonstrated just how long the effects of stress can last. Researchers asked groups of healthy volunteers to focus on two emotions: either anger or compassion. Measures were then taken of a key immune system antibody, secretory immunoglobulin A—called IgA—which helps the body resist invading bacteria and viruses.

The researchers found that when the volunteers spent just five minutes remembering an experience that made them feel angry or frustrated, their IgA levels increased briefly then dropped substantially and stayed low for five hours. When volunteers focused on feelings of care and compassion, IgA levels rose and remained at a high level for six hours. What this study suggests is that simply remembering an emotion can have a strong impact on a person's health. Consider the implications for toxic handlers. When they go home and remember the

events of their day, they certainly experience a drop in their IgA levels that lasts for hours, since the act of remembering surely lasts longer than five minutes at a time.

In addition to having an effect on the toxic handlers' immune systems, the stress triggered by negative emotions can influence neural pathways in the brain. As people think repeatedly about what makes them angry, stronger and stronger circuits are built in their brains. That increases the level of emotional distress until a neural architecture is built that supports those feelings. They become easier pathways to activate and run. They become our hot buttons.

Thus, the situation for toxic handlers—who shoulder the stress of others in addition to their own—would seem to be all the more dangerous. "Caregivers are human, too," says Dr. Michael Myers, a psychiatrist and clinical professor at the University of British Columbia. "As a specialist in physician health, I treat many physicians each year for clinical depression. Those in administrative medicine tell me how hard it is to cope with the problems of their staff doctors and other health professionals. The administrators have lost their ability to keep their armor in place."

Handling Toxic Handlers

The toll of managing organizational pain cannot be ignored: either organizations should better support toxic handlers in their role or they should make them unnecessary in the first place through practices that systematically manage and diffuse organizational pain. Our focus here will be on support because our years of experience studying organizational behavior, in addition to the prevalence of toxic handlers in our research, suggests that toxic handlers will be with us as long as organizations give rise to strong emotions. In other words, forever.

Acknowledge the dynamic. The first step in supporting toxic handlers is for executives to acknowledge, simply, that toxic handlers exist and that they play a critical role. Of course, in reality, there is nothing simple about such a public admission. A culture of toughness infuses many organizations, and a high value is often placed on technical competence. Emotional competence is irrelevant; it doesn't show up on the bottom line, or so the thinking goes. And even if executives agree that someone has to manage pain, they still consider the job to be the corporate version of society's "women's work"—the stuff of daily life that must be done but is thankless. In most families, for instance, women answer the cries of babies in the night and care for elderly and infirm relatives. Women make Thanks-



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giving dinner, clean up afterward, and then smooth out the argument between a pair of uncles who drank too much. People rarely acknowledge these efforts. Similarly, it would be quite a departure from business life as we know it for executives to show gratitude to those who practice emotional caretaking at work.

One other aspect of corporate life makes organizational pain a difficult, even dangerous, topic to bring to the table. Middle and senior managers are usually expected to tough it out during hard times. As one manager in our study recalls, "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." Indeed, managers at the company felt, perhaps rightly, that to talk about their feelings would have hurt their careers.

And yet, despite the strong corporate ethic not to discuss organizational pain—let alone thank toxic handlers—we think that when executives do so, the effects are likely to be immediate and positive. Take the case of a team leader at a media company who

had played the toxic-handling role during a brutal six-month merger process in which many employees lost their jobs. The team leader had managed to hit all of her financial goals during the upheaval, and she expected that would be the main focus of her performance review. It was. But if her boss had also focused on how the woman saved the emotional health of the merger's survivors, we are confident that her response would have been relief and pride, and perhaps renewed energy.

Raising consciousness about the toxic handler role requires that a forum be established in the company to talk about the topic. It needs, for instance, to get onto the agenda of management meetings or retreats, and it needs a champion to ensure that it gets sufficient time and attention in these settings. Of course, it is unrealistic to expect that toxic handling and its consequences will be discussed openly when its source is a toxic boss. The toxic boss needs to learn about the dynamic in a more neutral setting, such as a conference of senior managers from several organizations. (This could only happen in the best-case scenario, however, because toxic bosses often lack a high enough

degree of self-awareness to apply the discussion to themselves.)

Ultimately, a critical ingredient of any successful consciousness-raising about toxic handling is the recognition that effective pain management can—and does—contribute to the bottom line. No company can afford to let talented employees burn out. Nor can it afford to have a reputation as an unfriendly or unhappy place to work. Many good peo-

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ple simply won't join. It is essential, then, to make the business case for recognizing the work of toxic handlers. Otherwise, that role will stay in the closet, where most people are comfortable with it.

Arrange for toxic handlers to share their experiences. Executives can minimize the toll on toxic handlers by bringing them together or by arranging for them to meet periodically with professionals who are trained to help them decompress and rejuvenate. Of course, this presumes that toxic handlers know who they are or can be readily identified. Thus the process of raising consciousness can be a very important precondition to setting up the necessary support for toxic handlers.

It is possible for handlers themselves to take the lead in making this happen. At one company we studied, toxic handlers spontaneously formed their own support group. The company was going through a period of rapid downsizing, and the burden of assuaging widespread sadness, fear, and anger fell largely to five managers. After a month of going it alone, the group members started to meet for dinner once a week to "let off steam," as one manager puts it. Another recalls, "One of the worst parts of the downsizing was that there was no quick bang of departures, just a slow, painful bleed. We were helping individuals to leave the organization on a nonstop basis. We were the ones who helped the managers prepare for the termination discussions and supported the employees when they received the news. Needless to say, it was a heavy emotional burden. The only way we got through it was to support one another. It was like a bereavement group, to tell you the truth—the thing that helped the most was just knowing I wasn't alone."

Executives shouldn't count on support groups forming on their own, however, especially since

most toxic handlers pride themselves on a high tolerance for personal pain. As one CEO in our study notes, "These folks don't know when to ask for help; they're too busy giving it. And it would kill them to let others down by breaking down themselves." Better, then, to suggest that the organization's toxic handlers meet with one another, and even arrange such meetings. And better yet to bring in experts who can guide toxic handlers through conversations that allow them to see, understand, and appreciate the pressures of what they do. Experts can also help toxic handlers tell if they are dangerously close to burning out or presenting worrisome physical symptoms.

That's what happened to one manager in our study who had been a toxic handler for two years during a company restructuring. The manager tells us, "It took a therapist to help me to recognize that I was taking it 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."

Finally, a professional can help some toxic handlers learn how to say no. One manager in our research tells us, "I learned that it was possible to say 'no' with options." Until that point, the manager had had a lot of trouble turning away people who needed to vent their emotions and, as a result, he was drowning under the workload of his real job and his toxic-handling role. "I learned that 'no' doesn't mean 'I don't care,' and it doesn't mean 'not ever.' It can mean, 'No, I can't do this, but I could do this.' Or, 'No, I can't help you now, but how about tomorrow?' Or, 'No, I can't help you, but let me find someone who can.'" That insight, the manager says, made work manageable again.

Reassign the toxic handler to a safe zone. Even when other actions, such as counseling, can help toxic handlers deal with stress, it also makes sense to move them out of the stressful situation. These moves need not be long term. One company, for instance, sent a toxic handler who was showing signs of burnout to a two-week conference in Florida. The conference was work related—there were at least three hours of meetings a day—but also included heavy doses of rest and relaxation. It was, in essence, a bit of a forced vacation. There needs to be a high level of trust, openness, and cultural support in the organization for this solution to work. Otherwise, there is a distinct risk that toxic handlers will feel threatened by such an assignment and think they have done something wrong and that their career is in jeopardy.

Research conducted in 1995 confirms the healing power of taking breaks. André Delbecq of the Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University and Frank Friedlander of the Fielding Institute in Santa Barbara, California, studied the habits and routines of 166 business leaders in the computer and health care industries who were known to be happy, healthy, and well balanced. All of the participants in the study worked in companies undergoing rapid change, and inasmuch, managed considerable organizational pain. The researchers found that while the leaders' habits and routines varied widely, they frequently took short (two- to five-day) vacations, typically with their families. "The breaks allowed the leaders to step back, regain a fresh perspective on themselves and their situations," Delbecq observed, "Each time, they returned to work like new people."

In extreme cases of organizational distress, however, a short break is not enough to restore a toxic handler, and organizations should consider reassigning them to parts of the company that are less in the throes of emotional distress. Naturally, most toxic handlers will resist. They value what they do and understand its importance to the organization's well-being. Thus, it is important that the decision to relocate toxic handlers be thoroughly discussed with them. But when executives sense that a manager is overloaded by the role, they must act despite the toxic handler's objections. Later, when the spell is broken, the toxic handlers may come to see the wisdom of such an intervention and may even appreciate the spirit in which it was done.

Model "healthy" toxic handling. If managing organizational pain is an open topic, then managers can feel comfortable demonstrating how to do it right. Following his heart attack, Dave Marsing made it a point to show other managers how to stay calm at work, even under intense pressure. "I try, to the greatest extent possible, to maintain a level of calmness in the face of frantic issues," he says. "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 also encourages his staff to keep their work and personal lives in balance. "When I coach

the people who report to me, who manage very large sites around the company, I tell them how important it is to spend more time with their families, to spend more time exercising, to get some help to assist them to work through administrative things, rather than putting in extraordinarily long, tense days." Indeed, Marsing believes that teaching toxic handlers how to stay healthy in what is inherently an unhealthy role is one of his most important jobs as an executive.

Making Toxic Handlers Obsolete

Can an organization systematically manage the emotional pain that it generates—making toxic handlers entirely unnecessary? It's unlikely, but our research has found several practices that remove from individuals the burden of alleviating emotional pain. Consider the practice of public grieving. In some organizations, executives create opportunities for employees to participate in rituals that, frankly, resemble funerals. For instance, when a Canadian company was acquired and folded into a former competitor from France, managers from the acquired business invited employees to a church-like ceremony where the company was eulogized by executives and hourly workers alike. Afterward, people went outside and, one by one, threw their old business cards into a coffin-shaped hole in the ground, which was then covered by dirt as a dirge played on a bagpipe. The event may sound ridiculous, but it did serve a healing purpose. Employees said later that they had buried their old company and were ready to embrace the new one.

The effectiveness of public grieving perhaps explains why Stanley Harris of Lawrence Technological University in Southfield, Michigan, and Robert Sutton of Stanford University's Department of In-

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dustrial Engineering, who studied dying organizations in the United States in the 1980s, were struck by "the prevalence of parties, picnics, and other social occasions during the final phases of organizational death. People had the opportunity to express sadness, anger, grief, perhaps in some cases even relief, during these ritualized ceremonies. Often people cried."

Another way companies can systematically manage organizational pain is to outsource the task. For instance, companies often hire consultants to steer or galvanize change initiatives. Some of these change experts are—by dint of experience—capable toxic handlers. If the toxic-handling role is explicitly given to them, then it won't as easily fall to in-house managers.

The following example from our research illustrates how outside consultants can effectively play the toxic-handling role during a change program. Two consultants from Deloitte Consulting worked closely with the client for three months. One of them, Heather McKay, remembers: "We got to know many of the company's key stakeholders, and in effect became the psychiatrists for the project. Because we provided an environment of anonymity, many people opened up with us to share their fears and reservations.

"I think our role as informal toxic handlers was helpful to employees in a couple of ways. We gave a number of individuals in the organization an outlet to release the pain they were carrying around with them rather than just transferring it amongst themselves. We also were in a position to stand back from the pain and help them to identify ways to reduce it. This is easier when you are not suffering from the pain yourself."

In the final analysis, then, bringing in external consultants to act as surrogate toxic handlers may make a great deal of sense. They can often be more objective than insiders, and they can also provide more pointed feedback than managers who have to face their colleagues daily. One caveat, however: for external consultants to be effective toxic handlers, they must be trusted and credible. One Australian manager who attempted to hire external consultants to deal with a toxic situation in his company quickly found resistance because employees felt the outsiders didn't understand the painful situation well enough to help resolve it. "People in pain won't go to outsiders unless they believe the consultants really know how things are in the company," he says.


Finally, companies can systematically manage organizational pain by providing employees with stress training. Such training could decrease the demand for toxic handlers—people would be able to deal with their emotions on their own—and also help toxic handlers understand how to help themselves. Several stress-training programs exist. For example, one used by both Motorola and Hewlett-Packard during strategic change projects was developed by HeartMath in Boulder Creek, California. The program uses several techniques, such as

Freeze-Frame, which teaches employees to recognize a stressful feeling, then freeze it—that is, take a time-out and breathe more slowly and deeply. Freeze-Frame concludes with steps based on the biomedical notion of improving balance in the autonomic nervous system, brain, and heart that help employees handle stress differently from their usual reflex reaction. Instead of impulsively jumping in to take over another person's pain, for example, employees are taught to catch their breath, collect their thoughts, connect with their emotions, and then ask the other person to analyze his or her own unhappiness. Returning a problem to its sender may seem like a minor change, but for toxic handlers, it is a radical departure from standard operating procedure.

Programs like those offered by HeartMath come at a price; they can run to \$7,000 a day for up to 20 people. But they may well be worth the costs saved through greater retention and productivity.

In Good Company

When we began our research on managing emotional pain, we expected quite a bit of resistance—even denial—from senior executives. We did indeed find some of that. But much more often, we found executives who were aware that their organizations spawned anger, sadness, fear, and confusion as a matter of course. And we found scores of people who managed those feelings as toxic handlers themselves or watched with gratitude and concern as others did. In many cases, our interviews about toxic handling were highly charged. Some cried as they recalled its demands; others felt anger. A few spoke of remorse.

Mainly, our research unearthed feelings of relief. Executives and middle managers alike indicated that this was the first time they had been able to talk about organizational pain. We are sure that it is neither possible, nor even desirable, to remove all pain in organizations. Emotional pain comes not only from downsizing, bad bosses, and change. It also accompanies the commitment and passion of individuals striving for excellence. Nevertheless, managing the pain of others, whatever its source, is hard work. It needs to be given the attention and support it deserves for everyone's benefit—the health of employees is a key element in the long-term competitiveness of companies and of our society. People who have felt alone in managing organizational pain, or in caring for people who do, should know that they are in good company. 

Reprint 99406

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