

# Managing Toxic Emotions at Work: HR's Unique Role as the "Organizational Shock Absorber"

Teresa A. Daniel

Layoffs, harassment, discrimination, mergers and acquisitions, personality conflicts, or an abusive boss are just a few of the workplace situations that can (and usually do) generate intense emotional pain for employees—feelings like anger, frustration, stress, disappointment, and even fear. Unfortunately, these types of events are predictable and somewhat inevitable, but it is the way organizations handle them that can create a serious problem for employees.

If these situations are managed poorly, the chronic anger or prolonged stress they create can result in an undesirable by-product known as *organizational toxicity*.<sup>1</sup> Over time, the buildup of these negative emotions will create a workplace culture where employees feel devalued, demoralized, and often hopeless or litigious. Under those circumstances, employees "will become disconnected from what is going on at work, become obsessive about their pain, the source of it, and how others are responding"<sup>2</sup> (or not) to it—conditions ensuring they are no longer productive or actively engaged.

Peter Frost first identified the phenomenon and coined the term for a special role that some employees take on in an effort to alleviate this toxicity for their employees. He called them *toxin handlers*—people within an organization who "voluntarily shoulder the sadness, frustration, bitterness, and the anger that are endemic to organizational life."<sup>3</sup>

Employees routinely bring emotionally charged problems to HR, with the expectation that they will receive help to resolve those issues or at least see someone who will listen to them.<sup>4</sup> This article examines those brave HR practitioners who voluntarily step up and serve their organizations as toxin handlers.

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## WHO THE TOXIN HANDLERS ARE

Toxin handlers are typically compassionate people who recognize that "when people's hearts are broken, their heads don't work."<sup>5</sup> They take time to actively listen to and work with employees to help them resolve their problems. Their overarching goal is to hit the "sweet spot" of caring for and helping employees to reduce their emotional pain, while maintaining a sharp awareness of the need to keep the organization functioning and profitable—which means trying to resolve issues quickly so that the employees can return to work.<sup>6</sup> The achievement of both objectives is a delicate balance for HR practitioners, to be sure, and it requires both business acumen and a high degree of emotional intelligence.

In a study that included more than 400 HR managers, participants reported that “almost 25 percent of their time, on average, is spent on emotionally charged problems.”<sup>7</sup> That HR practitioners voluntarily assume this role is not unexpected, given that “caring about people” and dealing with “soft” organizational problems have historically been hallmark contributions of the HR profession.<sup>8</sup> In fact, although toxin handlers can be found in most organizations, they seem to be disproportionately represented among HR professionals.<sup>9</sup> Employees regularly seek their assistance and counsel because HR professionals are frequently perceived as trustworthy, empathetic, and nonjudgmental, and because employees have confidence that the HR professional will help them resolve their problems.<sup>10</sup>

## What They Do

Toxin handlers help to neutralize, dissipate, and disperse the organizational toxicity that builds up over time in stressful workplace situations.<sup>11</sup> They possess a wide repertoire of skills and competencies; they actively listen, hold space for healing, buffer the pain, extricate people from difficult situations, and help transform the pain felt by employees into situations they can better manage.<sup>12</sup> By working with employees to successfully resolve their problems, the toxin handlers also help contain the negativity of these issues so that other employees are not affected by them.

By taking the time out of their day to help others, though, the toxin handlers’ own, regular responsibilities can be negatively affected—most often in the form of missed deadlines or reduced productivity. In addition, HR practitioners sometimes report

feelings of guilt, sensing that this work is somehow not “real work,” that it is a “bootlegged” add-on to their official responsibilities and not typically a formalized part of their job duties.<sup>13</sup>

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## HOW TOXIN HANDLERS REDUCE THE ORGANIZATIONAL PAIN

The five core actions taken by toxin handlers to reduce the organizational pain and toxicity experienced by employees include<sup>14</sup>:

1. *Empathetic listening.* Toxin handlers take the time to actively listen to someone else’s pain and provide an important moment of human connection. Making sure that the person feels “heard” and understood can help validate that person’s feelings and give the individual a greater sense of being valued and respected by the organization. Frost explains it this way: “Listening is fundamental to what they do. Then they create a space for the stressed person to breathe again.”<sup>15</sup>
2. *Suggesting solutions.* The toxin handler looks for ways to resolve, reduce, or manage the emotions being experienced by the employee in pain. This may take the form of brainstorming possible solutions, role-playing difficult conversations, or simply talking about the problem in greater depth. The toxin handler may even attempt to resolve the problem by publicly advocating for the employee, despite the fact that it may put

the handler in an unfavorable position with senior leaders.

3. *Working behind the scenes.* The work of the toxin handler nearly always happens behind the scenes. These handlers make it possible (and safe) for employees to vent their frustration or concerns in a confidential setting behind closed doors. They also protect employees in tough situations by helping to facilitate transfers or, in particularly intolerable situations, even helping the individuals find a new job outside of the company.
4. *Carrying the confidences of others.* Employees experiencing intense emotions or who find themselves in a difficult situation frequently find it comforting to talk about their problems in a confidential setting. As a result, establishing and maintaining a sense of trust is of paramount importance for toxin handlers when working with employees in such situations.
5. *Reframing difficult messages.* Toxin handlers frequently step in to personally "take the heat" from a toxic leader directly, so that the leader's employees are spared their irrational, abusive, or hostile way of communicating. The toxin handler then translates the necessary information into a calmer and more respectful message, one that conveys the leader's intent but keeps employees from feeling personally attacked.

## WHY ORGANIZATIONS NEED TOXIN HANDLERS

Organizations are constantly changing, whether it's through mergers, acquisitions, reengineering, leadership changes, downsizings, and the like. The unintended

consequence of these initiatives, though, is the creation of intense anxiety, and even a paralyzing fear among the employees. Some types of pain are one-time events, created by the sudden loss of a senior leader, a dramatic shift in profitability, or a breach of ethics. Other types of pain are more chronic, brought about by policies that systematically generate distress (e.g., unreasonable stretch goals, performance or reward systems that cause destructive internal competition, a culture of fear) or by leaders who generate a high level of distress among their employees. Without toxin handlers, the poisoned atmosphere generated by these stressful events builds, resulting in high levels of turnover, increased health costs, reduced productivity, and lowered employee engagement, as well as an overall negative impact on organizational profitability in the long term.<sup>16</sup>

## The Price They Pay

The toxin handler role can be dangerous to an individual's emotional and physical well-being because it requires that individual to handle the emotional stresses characterizing these highly intense situations, often alone and without respite.<sup>17</sup> In a study of 440 HR managers who had carried out several downsizing events on behalf of their organizations, participants reported having actively tried to minimize the pain of others and having offered care for those directly affected by the layoffs. They spent additional time with those who were especially distressed, and took extra care to protect the privacy of the employees being terminated. They also reported helping people pack up their personal belongings in their "own time," thereby allowing employees to return to their

offices to say good-bye to their colleagues. And they described how they had personally walked the terminated employees to their cars, rather than getting the security team involved. Although these HR managers engaged in positive helping behaviors, they reported experiencing significant exhaustion, sadness, and burnout as a result of being repeatedly exposed to the pain and suffering of employees affected by the downsizing.<sup>18</sup>

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Most individuals who counsel and advise people about emotional issues have had some form of professional training to give them the skills needed to do this difficult work. For HR practitioners, though, these duties are typically just an incidental part of their "real" job. The result is that they typically lack the training needed to protect their own well-being during their involvement in these difficult situations.<sup>19</sup> Even experienced professionals find it challenging to be attuned to the emotions and pain of others yet maintain their objectivity.

### **Their Place in the Organization**

Because most of their work happens behind closed doors, and their successes are not widely communicated (and often not at all), their work is virtually invisible within the organization. As a result, their significant contributions to the smooth operation of their organizations are not often recognized or appreciated by senior leaders.<sup>20</sup>

Some researchers have suggested that changes in the HR profession may be deemphasizing the "caring" aspect of HR

and reducing the emphasis on employee well-being and advocacy.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, HR practitioners are often unable to control or help reduce the anxiety experienced at work (and sometimes officially contribute to it by implementing and maintaining the very policies or initiatives that cause such distress). Coupled with a lack of resources and the fact that they deal with one difficult situation after another, HR personnel are at serious risk for emotional exhaustion, burnout, and withdrawal from their work.<sup>22</sup>

While this sense of exhaustion and burnout can lead to decreased commitment and higher turnover, it can also take a physical toll, often in terms of stiff necks, nausea, and headaches.<sup>23</sup> At its most extreme, toxin handlers have reported experiencing heart attacks and strokes as a result of their distress.<sup>24</sup> However, it should be noted that the experience of helping others can also generate greater meaning for the toxin handler and result in a higher sense of self-efficacy, as well as an increase in feelings of positive self-worth.<sup>25</sup>

### **STRATEGIES TO MINIMIZE THE NEGATIVE IMPACT ON TOXIN HANDLERS**

Research has shown that organizations that make handling emotionally charged employee problems a formal part of HR's responsibilities tend to have toxin handlers experiencing lower levels of emotional exhaustion. In addition, the HR function is perceived as more effective, even when the handlers are engaged in high levels of toxin handling.<sup>26</sup>

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To formalize these duties, organizations should include these toxin-handling responsibilities in the HR employee's job description, set the goals to be achieved, and monitor and reward such performance during performance reviews. Formalizing this expectation can help reduce the stress associated with having an ambiguous role.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the organization needs to provide HR with the resources and support required to perform these duties.

Other recommended strategies include the organization's acknowledgment of the contributions of toxin handlers, its creation of opportunities for the handlers to build a community of support by sharing experiences with one another, and possible outsourcing of the toxin handler's role to external counselors or consultants. Training in stress management, communication skills, and conflict management may also be beneficial in reducing the organizational anxieties and stresses that exist in almost every organization.<sup>28</sup>

HR practitioners should also focus on self-care to help avoid emotional exhaustion and burnout. Recommended strategies in this regard include (1) keeping both physically and emotionally fit; (2) paying close attention to the emotions and behaviors of oneself as well as others; (3) focusing on sources of positive emotions; (4) identifying alternative ways to interpret and handle upsetting situations and discussing these possibilities with a confidante; and (5) finding constructive ways to deal with any remaining emotional stresses.<sup>29</sup> A good coach (particularly one who is also trained as a therapist) and/or an employee assistance program provider can be immensely helpful in this regard. In addition, scheduling periodic time away from the stressful work environment is also highly recommended.<sup>30</sup>

Taking affirmative steps to reduce the likelihood of exhaustion and burnout not only protects the toxin handler from personal harm but also ensures that this valuable work can be continued to the benefit of the organization.

## CONCLUSION

Organizations inevitably create pain, and stress-filled emotions are a by-product of those situations created at work—a true occupational hazard.<sup>31</sup> While the work of toxin handlers is of critical importance to the organization, their role carries significant risks to their personal well-being, making it a seemingly thankless job. As aptly described by an HR practitioner in a previous ERT article<sup>32</sup>:

HR serves as a serious buffer for other employees in the organization—between management and employees. We are the “organizational shock absorbers” ... but HR pays a heavy price for doing that.

Despite the risks, toxin handlers step up to provide this compassionate care because they know the work is essential for sustaining a humane and respectful workplace culture. They also know that not only is it the right thing to do but it is also good for business. For this important work to be sustainable, though, it is imperative that organizations make these responsibilities explicit in the relevant job descriptions and begin to recognize, support, and reward these often invisible HR heroes.

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**Teresa A. Daniel, JD, PhD**, serves as dean of the Human Resource Leadership (HRL) Program at Sullivan University based in Louisville, Kentucky. She is also chair of the HRL concentration in the university's PhD in management program. Her growing body of work on toxic leadership and workplace bullying has been actively supported by the Society for Human Resource Management through numerous interviews about her research and its implications, and the publication of two of her books. She is the co-author of *Stop Bullying at Work: Strategies and Tools for HR, Legal, & Risk Management Professionals* (2016) and was honored as an Initial Fellow of the International Academy on Workplace Bullying, Mobbing, and Abuse in 2014. She may be reached via e-mail at [tdaniel@sullivan.edu](mailto:tdaniel@sullivan.edu).

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