

Toxic Emotions at Work

How Compassionate Managers Handle Pain and Conflict



by *Peter J. Frost*

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Every now and then an article is published whose subject matter captures scholars' and practitioners' interest and contributes a new concept or frame to the field. In 1999 in the *Harvard Business Review*, Peter Frost coined the term "toxic handler" to refer to those who carry the emotional pain of others in organisations. That term caught on and now some years later Frost has developed his notion in a book. The Prologue sets the context. Frost describes the emergence of melanoma cancer in his own body and its successful removal. He reports how he reflected on whether his tenure as associate dean in his university had been the cause of his cancer. From reading and attending seminars he began to see how emotional pain in organisations causes stress and that there are some people in organisations who assume the pain of others for the sake of the whole system and there are those who cause the pain and who themselves become vulnerable to the same pain. As he began to explore this in seminars with executives and managers he found himself inundated with stories and experiences that confirmed his hypothesis. He coined the term "toxic handlers" to describe those who handle the pain of others. Toxicity suggests poison, spreading, seeping often undetected in a system. It can be eliminated if detected and a cure is known.

The nine chapters of the book develop and explore this basic notion of emotional pain as toxicity in organisations and the role of toxic handlers in dealing with this pain. Each page provides numerous and rich examples. Chapter 1 develops the book's theme and discusses how organisations and their leaders produce emotional pain, how that pain can be considered toxic and its effects on individuals. Frost constantly makes the point that emotions are part of the human condition and inherent in any work situation and that managers driving for success may overlook or dismiss the impact of emotions. Toxic handlers are those managers and professionals who deal with this pain, usually in an unobtrusive and unrecognised manner.

Chapter 2 explores the sources of toxicity in organisations. Sources from managers neatly fit into seven "Ins" – intention, incompetence, infidelity, intrusion, insensitivity, institutional factors and inevitability. Examples of sources from employees and customers include bullies, those who are rude, spread gossip and engage in emotional outbursts. Frost notes that as toxicity is insidious, those who get

to the top of organisations tend to behave in a manner that others further down the hierarchy then imitate. Chapter 3 focuses on the work of toxic handlers. They listen, buffer pain, provide a holding space for healing, extricate others from painful situations and transform pain by framing it constructively and providing empathy.

One of Frost's central points is that being a toxic handler takes its toll. It is not in the job description and is not considered to be real work. For toxic handlers the stakes may be high; they are not trained for this. They may internalise the pain of others and so become stressed and burned out themselves. Frost's own experience in his tenure as associate dean of listening to colleagues who were hurt and angry, sometimes in situations where he himself was the instigator of their pain bears this out. Therefore, toxic handlers need to protect themselves in order to keep themselves emotionally healthy by strengthening their own physical, emotional, mental and spiritual capacities.

Frost examines what both organisations and toxic handlers need to do to work in tandem. Organisations need to acknowledge the dynamic of toxicity, offer support, model healthy handling and create a support climate for the handling of emotional pain, while handlers need to create understanding and respect for the work of toxic handlers by naming the experience and managing the message of what it is about. Overall he is arguing that organisational leaders need better people skills and that organisations need prevention, intervention and restoration and recovery strategies.

This is a challenging book on several levels. For managers, executives and HR specialists it challenges assumptions about people management by naming a hidden dimension of stress management and how colleagues and immediate superiors handle stress and pain informally. It poses important questions about who cares for the carers and about the emotional health and long-term well-being of organisations. Ultimately this is a book about compassion in organisations and compassion is rarely on the agenda. This is also a challenging book for the academic community, particularly researchers in the fields of organisation behaviour and organisational psychology. What do we know about the underworld of Irish organisations? Do we know how organisations create stress and emotional pain? Do we know how compassionate colleagues and superiors try to help their friends and subordinates cope with the demands of organisational life? This book offers rich suggestions for research. Finally, the topic of toxicity in organisations needs to be part of courses in organisation behaviour and executive education so that the real world of organisations is not neglected and managers are taught to be aware of what their organisations do to them and to their fellow employees. Abstracting from any of the above reasons for working with this book, it is a good read in itself.

REFERENCE

- Frost, Peter J. and Robinson, Sandra L. (1996) "The Toxic Handler: Organizational Hero and Casualty", *Harvard Business Review*, July–August, pp. 96–106.

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