

Toxic Emotions at Workplace and its Impact - How to Create Humane Workplaces

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In June 2019, a 25-year old MBA graduate, committed suicide due to harassment by his colleagues and bosses at the workplace. They have been booked for abetting his suicide by taunting him as 'gay' for not having a girlfriend and mocking him for being vegetarian and a teetotaler (*Mid-Day, July 24th, 2019*). In another shocking incident, a promising young doctor committed suicide for the same reason – harassment and mental torture at work by her seniors.

These are but the tip of the iceberg. There are many such stories – some shared and some hidden – of people whose professional careers are far from the rosy picture they had imagined. The haloed corridors of the corporate world are believed to be the spaces where emotions - albeit unacknowledged – run high. These may take the form of harassment, bullying, making fun, putting down etc. Harassment may be defined as teasing, slurs or unwelcome advances. Workplace bullying may be defined as a pattern of “destructive and deliberate demeaning of co-workers or subordinates” (*Vega & Comer, 2005*).

The crucial question is: why does this phenomenon occur? Our hypothesis is because of ‘toxic emotions’ generated at the work place. Toxic emotions (*as cited in Segen's Medical Dictionary © 2012 Farlex, Inc.*) is a general term for negative emotions, such as stress and anger, which have an adverse effect on a person’s mental and possibly physical health.

That Sun Tzu’s Art of War is now a prescribed text book in some business schools. It is an articulate commentary on today’s business world. It is a battlefield out there, with only one motto, “May the fittest survive”. And in war, there are casualties, aren’t there? However, in the business environment these injuries are not to the body but to the mind. People bleed, in terms of getting depressions and mood swings and broken homes and lives.

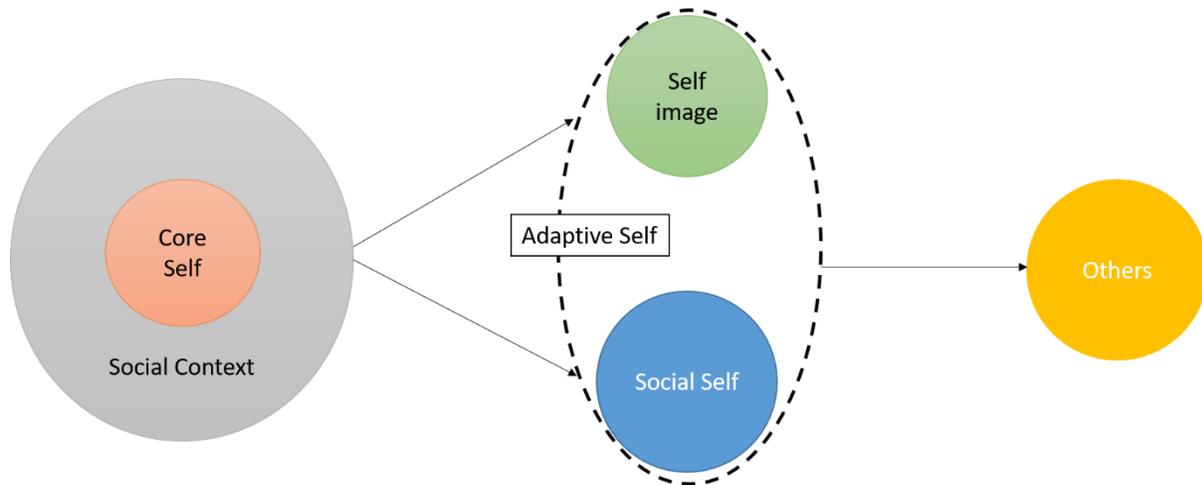
Anyone who has worked as a part of a team that is working on a project knows that in any large company, projects are managed with the precision of war exercise. War rooms are manned, there are charts and milestones marked with coloured pins. Precise and clear responsibilities are allocated. The group feeling is very strong, enhanced by late night work and group pub visits. Doesn't it sound like an American war movie, with brotherhood of man whilst each of them dies one by one? Well, that's not exactly how it is. It is true that many in the team are truly achievement oriented, but there are always some who are driven by fear and the possibility of being shamed. 'Perform or Perish' – is the new mantra for corporate success. Such people are on the edge all the time, often hyper active, going to the gym at midnight and getting into binge drinking sessions, bringing all that stress to the body and not resting enough. This may also lead to some kind of health problems or broken relationships or things worse.

Why does this all happen? What is it about these spaces which brings this negativity out in us and pushes us to spread it around on others? Is it our own sense of smallness, which generates anxieties and insecurities in us, which we wish to project on to others around us? Or is it the aphorism “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (*Lord Acton, 1887*)

Since culture permeates top down, can we safely assume that it is toxic leadership that inculcates a toxic culture in organizations? A toxic leader can be described as someone who is “motivated by self-interest, has an apparent lack of concern, and negatively affects organizational climate” (*Seeger et al., (2005) as cited by Applebaum & Roy-Girard, 2007*). The description matches that of the Dark Triad of socially undesirable personality traits of Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy (*Robbins, Judge & Vohra, 2017*). These are desirable traits when seen in the context of organizational success, especially in the short term, considering the cut-throat competition of the business world. In fact, “Good leadership by its very nature engenders pain” (*Frost, 2004*).

However, this ‘dark side’ can be “potentially destructive for organizations and that may create strain for subordinates” (*Mathisen, Einarsen & Mykletun, 2011*).

Based on the discussion above, the following model emerges:



We are born with a core self that continues to be shaped through various life experiences till the age of 18 to 20. By the age of 18, we start asking the questions like Who am I? What do I want in life? We start setting goals for ourselves. (*Ref. Erik Erikson’s Theory of Psychological Development*). Whatever the path one chooses, the social context starts assuming greater importance and we start developing an adaptive self. This helps us relate with others, fit in and be accepted. Therefore, when one meets a leader and/or work environment that is toxic in nature one starts responding with either anger or fear leading to stress, depression and in extreme cases even suicide. The converse may also be true, the organizational culture may force a person to become a demanding, irrational, angry, critical and unappreciative leader. In rare cases, the core self remains unaffected by the social context. However, such a person finds it difficult to relate with others and experiences loneliness which can generate a plethora of unexpressed emotions leading to undesirable consequences.

But before we go any further, let us stop and discuss what we understand from the word toxic in context of emotions. To us, it means any emotional process that can potentially cause physiological or psychological hurt to an individual. And if we look at the much discussed mind-body linkage literature, one leads to another. Apart from that, toxic emotions lead to a frame of mind that leads to dysfunctional decision making and misery.

Emotions are an integral part of day to day living. We get worried when we see a full suburban train, or flooding on the roads. We feel joy when we meet friends and so on. So, when does a feeling turn toxic? Those of us who have been working in field of Applied Behavioral Science and more specifically in T-Groups, have experientially learnt that this happens when people deny a feeling or bury it so deep inside them that though they forget about it the feeling operates through their behavior constantly. It is not just the experience of negative emotions, but additionally the continual *suppression* of these negative emotions that can be poisonous (*Glaso & Lokke Vie, 2009*). Research also indicates that “suppression of negative emotions contributes to immediate negative physiological effects on the cardiovascular systems” (*Mauss & Gross 2004; Gross & Levenson 1997 as cited by Glaso & Lokke Vie*).

From all this we can postulate, that toxic emotions are those which a person:

- a) Does not acknowledge
- b) Denies
- c) Suppresses

He (*or she!* The paper uses the generic pronoun *he* for purpose of keeping the narrative simple) makes no attempt to deal with these toxic emotions and they become acid drops lodged inside his

heart (sometimes literally) eating him away and often manifesting themselves in broken homes, burnouts or maladaptive personalities.

Toxicity was initially spoken about in Frost's (2003) book, "*Toxic emotions at work: How compassionate managers handle pain and conflict*". As quoted by Glaso and Lokke Vie, Frost provided a framework for understanding toxic events as a source of destructive emotions in organizations. He found organizational toxic events could be divided into seven categories:

1. Intention (e.g. malice, bullying)
2. Incompetence (e.g. weakness, poor interpersonal skills)
3. Infidelity (e.g. betrayal, lack of loyalty)
4. Insensitivity (e.g. lack of empathy and emotional intelligence)
5. Intrusiveness (e.g. charismatic control, extra workload)
6. Institutional (e.g. policies, lack of justice) and
7. Inevitability (leadership, organizational change).

The following case is an example of how toxic organizational culture can impact employees and employee morale:

Chandra, was bright young man, who had just finished his business studies and had an exciting job offer from a large company in the financial services sector. In his last days at college he had been much 'feted' for having landed this job. He had overheard his father talking about the achievements of his son proudly to his friends. So, with a clean heart and high energies he joined the company. The first few days passed in a whirl of activities with the top management of the company closely interacting with the new group of management trainees. Chandra's self-esteem

reached an all-time high when the CEO of the company in a tea meeting told him to call him by name. To Chandra, it seemed that, he was on a flying carpet, and very soon would have achieved the wealth and fame which he so richly deserved. The induction training was peaceful, with no stress factors in it. Since he was a bright and dashing youngster, he picked up fast and was soon being talked about as a potential 'high flyer'. Of course, as happens, such things reached Chandra and this added a certain load on to him, because he could feel the weight of expectations on his shoulders. He would go home, and describe his pride at his achievements to his parents, who glowed at their son's success. This gratified Chandra, and he mentally made a resolution, to never do anything which would hurt them. After induction, it was decided that the best and brightest would be sent to the department that the company was focussing on, at the time, namely retail marketing. He reported dutifully to his manager in the sales office next morning. To his surprise, he found that the environment here was entirely different piece of his? business. The department crackled with nervous energy, and no one had time for him. Eventually, the HOD, met him after he had been sitting around collecting dust for quite a while. After mouthing some platitudes, the HOD with some relief handed him over to a sectional Manager, admonishing the sectional manager to send the young man to '*where the fighting was the worst*' so that he could prove his mettle. And that was when young Chandra first heard abusive language. He had come from a cultured family, where raising one's voice was frowned upon, abusive language being unthinkable. However, to live up to the macho image of the department, and to blend in, he soon began to speak the same language. Very soon, though he tried very hard to fit in, he realised this was not where he wanted to be. He spoke to his father, who reminded him of his large salary, how tough life was, and how important it was for him to continue on this career path. Though externally he presented a pleasant competent exterior, forever present in the back ground was a scared little person, fearful of the violence in the environment and the fact that these abuses could

be turned against him any day. In his mind he told himself if he spoke about his fears to anyone he would be judged as weak and hence learnt to push them in the background until they became just a blur in his mind. As happens in life, all this came true in his second appraisal meeting where the Manager not only abused him, but held him responsible for the sad state of the department as his people had not performed as expected. When he came out of the Managers' office his ears were burning, but his colleagues joked about and told him not to worry about such things and they were quite common in the corporate world. This further frightened him and he withdrew into himself. His performance began to get affected and he got into that terrible loop of harsh feedback leading to despondency leading to bad performance. Within the year he was a wreck, cutting off his social relationships, to the extent of breaking up with his college love, and living a life in which alcohol figured prominently. Within the year, he had resigned, sat at home for a few months and, not so surprisingly, appeared for interviews which he failed to crack.

Now, let us look at what toxic emotions did to Chandra and his organization.

Chandra, an intelligent and enthusiastic person, has lost his vitality. He constantly struggles with thoughts about the futility of it all. A person, who managed such a good campus placement, is now not able to secure a job, as he is not able to handle interviews. Lately, he has been complaining of breathlessness and sore throat. He is no longer the bundle of joyful energy, but has become a dark brooding person.

The above case more than elaborates how toxicity is created and it's the impact that is created at various levels of a system. Let us briefly look at the three obvious levels;

1. Intra-personal
2. Inter-personal

3. Systemic



In our experience, individuals/leaders cause toxicity when they operate from their adaptive self. Deborah Ancona, a professor at MIT, Sloan observes in her study that people who exhibit one particular set of personality traits, known as the “dark triad,” often tend to be toxic leaders or employees.

All three dark triad traits are conceptually distinct although empirical evidence shows them to be overlapping. They are associated with a callous-manipulative interpersonal style.

- Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity, pride, egotism, and a lack of empathy.
- Machiavellianism is characterized by manipulation and exploitation of others, an absence of morality, and a higher level of self-interest.
- Psychopathy is characterized by continuous antisocial behavior, impulsivity, selfishness, callous and unemotional traits and remorselessness.

We believe that people with dark triad, are often operating from extreme ends of the polarities i.e., either the angry, aggressive, demanding type or the fearful, timid and submitting type.

At an inter-personal level, we have observed that people stop communicating with each other. There is an air caution, people don't smile, don't joke and don't reinforce one another. Often the interactions are formal and task-focused. There is no joy at work and it spills over at home when people come home feeling exhausted. The free-flow and ease of engaging with each other, spontaneously laughing with each other or instinctively comforting each other starts becoming a rarity. Everyone knows that something is not right, but everyone steers clear of any open conversation about the same. The result,

- Moodiness, anger, unhappiness become the norm;
- People begin to avoid each other more and more;
- Other work and relationships outside the toxic relationship start to suffer.

Systemically speaking, we have often observed in our work with organizations that every individual feels a sense of helplessness and inadequacy to change the ongoing culture of the organization.



The impact on the organization with a toxic environment can be seen in these areas:

- Organizational Performance:** People who are suppressing toxic emotions, obviously cannot give their best to their organization, (*as seen in Chandra's and other examples cited in this paper*). They suffer greatly from fear of failure, and tend to push decision making upwards. They are cautious about accepting targets, and since they fear making mistakes, they push responsibility every which way. So, goal setting meetings, instead of being places where employees look to challenge themselves, become negotiations where everyone seeks to find the safest way out. Even conversations after such meetings reflect this attitude, with many a '*phew, got saved today*', being heard.
- Organizational Learning:** Employees are not willing to take risks, and prefer to tread on the time-tested paths which have proved to be effective. As a result, there is no experimentation and creativity suffers. Many Indian organizations, suffer from their inability to develop new

products and look to their foreign partners for this purpose. For example, the Indian insurance sector struggles in the product development area, and one of the first requests to be put forward to a foreign partner is for new products. The people in the field who are best aware of the customer needs, stick to the time-tested products, without really experimenting with new ones.

- iii. **Resistance to Change:** Where fear exists, change does not happen. Where fear exists, change does not happen. For example, some of the best ERP implementation programs have been defeated by employee attitudes. The author's share their experience with a textile unit which was equipped with the latest technology. The owner who was before his times, tried repeatedly to introduce ERP in the factory, only to be defeated by employee apathy.
- iv. **Upward Communication and the Feedback Loop:** Directly related to point number ii is the cessation of upward communication and lack of feedback to key strategy makers. Since they do not have the requisite market intelligence, they tend to remain conservative which leads to point number iii.
- v. **Dyadic Dialogues:** This also follows from point number ii. One direct fall out is the performance appraisal system becomes a mere formality instead of being performance and developmental tool.

The Way Forward:

Peter J Frost said in an interview to Mallory Stark at Harvard Business School, "There is a lot of suffering in the workplace and it shows little sign of letting up." It is alarming to hear of the increasing number of reports of very early burnout of young, talented and enthusiastic managers. One does not even need to refer to any studies to know that, more people end up in hospitals these days to get treated for complex ailments while just in their late 20s or early 30s. We look

around our own circles and societies to discover that more couples are getting divorced or separating within first few years of being married or being in love. More families are broken than together as compared to a few decades ago. Doctors and Counsellors attribute this to toxic emotions caused by the lifestyle needs and work pressures of today. To manage such toxicity, the emotions that have been suppressed and pushed into the shadow need to be brought to the surface and acknowledged.

However, this is easier said than done. Intentional and specific work needs to happen across many spaces and levels, to create a culture where toxic emotions are dealt with in a functional way. Let us look at them, one by one:

a. Self-Level

The primary arena for managing toxicity lies within the self. History, holds out many examples, where people with capability to manage toxicity at a self-level, have done so. Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King being some of the few such people. Hinduism and Buddhism, both teach meditation practices through which ill effects of such emotions can be neutralised. The Bhagvad Gita, speaks of ‘Niskam Karma’, whilst Buddhism lays its trust in mindfulness practices.

We suggest the following methodology for making a person aware of his shadow world and then seeing how it impacts his psyche. These are:

- i. **Sensitivity Training**: Doing such kind of labs can add immense value to individuals in making their ‘arena’ bigger and reducing their ‘blind’ area. Not only this, such labs are also very useful for organizational leaders in understanding the fact that a human being is

a bundle of emotions and emotional disturbances also need to be addressed for their teams to function effectively.

- ii. Developing an ability to hold the polarities in balance: In the introduction to the book *Polarity Management - Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*, Dr. Barry Johnson says that the bad news about life is that we all face a large number of unsolvable problems. However, the good news is that, in many cases, we can stop trying to solve these problems and begin to manage them by addressing these problems as Polarities. Individuals, whether in leadership roles or sub-ordinate roles need to identify the polarities, remain alert as to when do they tend to lean heavily on one pole and take corrective measures to quickly come to a balance.

b. Interpersonal Level:

- i. Creating and Equipping Toxin Handlers in the organization: Though this is a term used by Frost, but we know from experience every organization has people who are willing to offer their shoulders to emotionally traumatised people. This however places an emotional burden on the Toxin handlers themselves. As a result, in organizations with toxic cultures they begin to insulate themselves from negative emotions and their capabilities are pushed into the shadow. Process training can lead to such people becoming mindful and also enhance their capability to give support and care in face of toxicity.
- ii. Creating safe spaces in the organization for experience sharing: Groups can be created within the organization, facilitated by a process work professional, where employees can come and share their experiences of toxicity and receive support and understanding.

c. Organizational Level

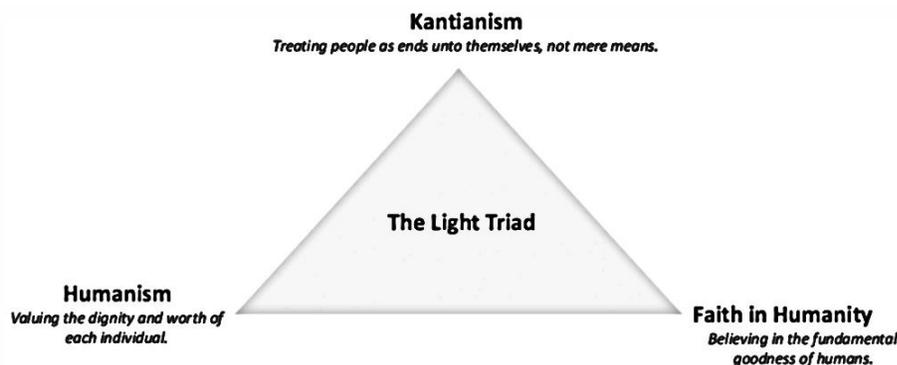
An enabling culture, this is the end goal of any OD effort. A culture which accepts that modern business environment creates emotional stress and trauma and yet deals with it empathetically and with understanding, is the desired state of affairs. Doing this is no rocket science. A listening environment needs to be created, where people realise that listening is perhaps as important as goal setting or any other financial activity in the organization. This then takes us back to the self and hence completes the loop. Encouraging a culture where value judgements on people's personalities are discouraged, and work-related issues are highlighted, prevents much pain. Only such organizations, with a culture of mindful listening, then are able to achieve their potential and fly high in today's intensely competitive business world.

In conclusion:

“I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.” – Anne Frank

“What’s one less person on the face of the earth, anyway?” – Ted Bundy

As you can see in the two quotes above, there are two ways to look at things. It is a choice that one needs to make. We believe that it is only when the individuals and organizations make an



intentional effort to remain happy and emotionally as well as physically healthy that we can hope to be free of (or at least reduce) toxic emotions that will

otherwise kill us, slowly and surely! The key to creating Humane Workplaces is in becoming

intentionally empathic and operating from compassion for self and others. It is only when people let their own light shine through that they will touch others with their positivity. It is time to embrace the light within, love spontaneously, stop being strategic all the time, and believe in the inherent goodness and humanity of each person!

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