

TOXIC EMOTIONS AT WORK

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Peter J. Frost

Frost's (2003) book explores sources of toxicity, and how leaders can effectively manage what is essentially emotional pain. Many leaders are by default handlers of toxicity, so in addition to impacting the health of the

THIS BOOK...EXAMINES THE COMPASSIONATE ACTIONS OF MANAGERS AND LEADERS WHO STRIVE TO DEAL EFFECTIVELY AND HUMANELY WITH TOXICITY. HOWEVER, IT IS CRITICAL TO RECOGNIZE THAT TOXICITY, OR EMOTIONAL PAIN, IS A **NORMAL BY-PRODUCT** OF ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE.

(FROST, 2003, P. 8)

organization, they are themselves exposed to toxicity they may not be otherwise. Frost discusses healthy and unhealthy ways to handle toxins, which are essentially inevitable. He also encourages leaders to look for ways to reduce toxicity, knowing it can never be fully avoided.

Not all pain must become toxicity, and here Frost refers to Daniel Goleman (1995), who discusses a neural hijacking, where the amygdala triggers an emotional response before the rational brain has had opportunity to make sense of the information. So, it is important for leaders to model the kind of emotional savvy that allows the rational brain to reassert control after an emotional hijacking, lest the pain become toxic.

But a leader cannot change another person's emotional response, so we must be prepared for the inevitability that there will be some toxicity as a result. So, how do leaders handle toxins in a healthy way, without burning ourselves out? How ought we to work with other resources in the workplace to ensure the healthiest possible outcomes? Frost answers these questions and more.

SOURCES OF TOXICITY

The Seven Deadly "INs"

There are many possible sources of toxicity, from an angry CEO to a social media account that undermines

the company. Of course, external sources are also possible—unreasonable clients (or even reasonable

RYAN'S FISH

Ryan was a senior manager who kept two fishbowls in the office. In one were goldfish; in the other, a piranha. Ryan asked each of his staff to pick out the goldfish that was most like themselves (the spotted one, the one with a deeper color, and so forth). Then, when Ryan was displeased with someone, he would ask the person to take his or her goldfish out of the bowl and feed it to the piranha.

ones!), a death in someone's family, or a messy divorce. Whatever the source, Frost organizes them into categories, the seven deadly "INs" (p. 36):

- INtention
- INcompetence
- INfidelity
- INsensitivity
- INtrusion
- INstitutional forces
- INevitability

Intention is like Ryan and his fish, in the box above. He is a source of toxicity on purpose, and has gone out of his way to ensure his employees feel belittled and foolish when they have done something unacceptable. It is Ryan's intention to spread toxicity (whether or not he would articulate it that way himself.)

Incompetence comes from a variety of sources. Many technology companies find that it is difficult to find competent individuals for programming, because competent employees are promoted to management positions—and managers do not have time to work with computer code. Therefore, managers and competent employees are subjected to working with substandard labourers, leading to a great deal of unrest.

Infidelity is disloyalty to the company, to colleagues, to subordinates. It is important for leaders to cultivate a loyal workforce to ensure infidelity is not a source of toxicity.

Insensitivity is similar to Ryan and his fish, but is less intentional. This type of toxicity is found where leaders are not emotionally attuned to their staff.

Intrusion refers to a leader who demands too much from his or her subordinates, making work an intrusion on an employee's personal life. Hard work is not the

issue—it is the expectation that an employee is as invested or more invested than the leadership in the project.

Institutional Forces refer to company policies that are toxic by nature. For example, a popular Saskatoon restaurant used to be managed in such a way that all female employees were required to wear revealing clothes and high-heeled shoes, where male employees were permitted to wear comfortable clothing and shoes. An individual shift manager likely has very little "pull" in the situation to impact the dress code, so this is an institutional force.

Inevitability. Clients will demand more than is possible. Family members will pass away. Beloved colleagues will move on. These sources of toxicity cannot be avoided.

THE ROOTS OF TOXICITY
"TOXICITY IS PRODUCED WHEN AN
INDIVIDUAL'S ATTITUDES OR AN
ORGANIZATION'S POLICIES, OR
BOTH, FAIL TO TAKE INTO
ACCOUNT THE EMOTIONAL
ATTACHMENT PEOPLE HAVE TO
THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO WORK.
THEY DISCOUNT THE HUMAN
QUALITIES OF PEOPLE AT THE
RECEIVING END OF AN INITIATIVE,
INTERVENTION, OR RETORT."
(FROST, 2003, P. 56)

If toxicity is inevitable...

The role of the toxin handler is of utmost importance



the toxin handler

Roles of the Toxin Handler:

Listening with compassion

Holding space for healing

Buffering pain

Extricating others from painful situations

Transforming pain



The Toll on the Toxin Handler

Through their noble work of listening, allowing others to heal, buffering pain, helping others out of their situations, and transforming pain into something good—the toxin handler is acting as a filter in many situations, and the filter needs to be maintained.

You should always put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others with theirs.

If you have flown with a commercial airline, you have heard this warning before. Parents often scoff, knowing that if the situation arose, they would help their child first, regardless of the warning. But to do so is to ultimately put yourself *and* your child at risk. This is why parents or spouses are often escorted out of trauma rooms while doctors and nurses perform necessary procedures to save their patients. It is human to disregard our own wellbeing for the sake of those

we love. Toxin handlers must care for themselves in order to be effective in their

roles as handlers, to prevent becoming “exhausted, physically and mentally,” (Frost, 2003, p. 31) and beginning to get sick more often.

HEALING The HANDLER

The problem is not the expenditure of energy, but rather the expenditure without recovery time. All four capacities—mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual—must be cared for.

Leaders Handling Pain

The techniques for handling pain given earlier in this book are helpful for anyone who finds themselves handling toxins. However, those in leadership positions have a unique responsibility to handle toxins in a particular way.

Paying Attention

Even though it is easier, and even common, to ignore the emotions of others for the sake of “getting things done,” an adept leader will notice these emotions on purpose, responding “to that distress with empathy and without judgment” (Frost, 2003, p. 161). Paying attention is the first step to taking ownership of situations, thus avoiding the spread of the toxins.

Putting People First

Simply put, “leaders do best when they keep the feelings and well-being of staff or of other colleagues centrally in mind” (p. 165). By making the environment people-focused rather than product-focused, people become more productive—win-win.

Practicing Professional Intimacy

There are few things more alarming than the idea of becoming “intimate” in the workplace. But professional intimacy—stepping in to diffuse emotionally charged situations without clouding your own judgment—ensures that situations are handled, not ignored. The toxin does not spread.

Planting Seeds

“The ground must be prepared and the seeds of a healthy response planted” (p. 173). Before tragedy strikes, workers can be prepared by training for the situation, by practicing the healthy response—just like a fire drill.

Pushing Back

When I read this section, I thought of a former colleague of mine—a math teacher. She began teaching a group of students who had had a terrible experience the term before with an incompetent and cruel math teacher. My colleague invited her students to a bonfire outside, to burn all their notes and assignments. Yes, they may have used those in the future, but it was more important in the moment to allow the students to push back on their awful experience and move on.



What the Organization Can Do

The burden of handling toxicity ought not to fall solely on the shoulders of leaders—human resources professionals, managers, CEOs, shift supervisors, etc. Rather, organizations can overhaul or implement policies to better handle toxicity at work.

Prevention Strategies, such as hiring practices involving attitude and emotional competence, or building a professional development complement.

Intervention strategies, including transition programs for leaving employees, or developing policies that are compassionate by nature.

Restoration strategies, by ensuring that people have a space to talk through their issues, by treating people as though they are capable of coping with challenges, by restoring routines, by creating rituals and symbols for “letting go.”

Looking Through the Lens of Pain

Many intelligent people deny the concept of emotional intelligence, citing that it is not really an intelligence if you can improve it (which is, in all fairness, merely a semantical argument, and ought not to be considered valid). Or they may say that only overly emotional people discuss emotional intelligence and attempt to validate all their “feelings.” Frost’s (2003) book emphasizes how important it is to embrace emotions and face them head on in order to ensure that an organization can keep moving forward. It is ignorant and imprudent to deny the “validity of feelings,” and it is not condescending to the lowest common denominator to build policies around the feelings of people.

Frost (2003) recommends looking through the powerful lens of pain to “tease out the roots of many kinds of vexing organizational problems” (p. 216). He recounts a story about a manager who, in an attempt to make peace between two subordinates—a supervisor and an employee—discovered that both of the individuals were in a great deal of pain. This story is not unique; many parents have had this conversation with their children: *Suzie is a bully to other people, attempting to make them feel worse, to make herself feel better, because she hurts on the inside herself.*

Looking through this lens of pain can help leaders of all kinds to realize what may be going on within the organization at a given moment.



final thoughts...

As a person who has done a great deal of reading and thinking about emotional intelligence, Frost’s (2003) work is valuable, but only in the sense that it validates and provides new language for familiar concepts. However, for a person who does not have a background in EI or who is looking for a practical, case-based manual for working with the toxicity of emotional pain at work, this book is of great importance. At least a dozen specific and relatable stories grace Frost’s (2003) pages and allow the reader to apply the concepts to their own lives. This book is a must-read for an individual in a leadership role looking to make a big change in the culture

Frost, P. J. (2003). *Toxic emotions at work*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.