

# Learning From the Toxic Trenches

## The Winding Road to Healthier Organizations—and to Healthy Everyday Leaders

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This article offers an insider's look at the power and consequences of high levels of workplace emotion in order to deepen understanding of the workplace relationships and practices needed for individual and organizational success. It begins with a definition of terms, illustrating the linkages among toxic emotions, organizational effectiveness, leading, and change. It explores insights and strategies for managing the dynamics and proposes five steps for sustaining healthy leaders in an increasingly pressurized work world. The article advocates new models for education and training, as well as renewed attention to the development of theories and structures that promote individual and organizational health.

**Keywords:** *leadership; resilience; toxic emotions; change management; workplace emotions; organizational health*

This article begins with a caution. Handling strong emotions in the workplace—dealing over time with others' frustration, anger, and disappointment resulting from organizational life in a competitive world of scarce resources and nonstop change—can be hazardous to body and soul. It exaggerates feelings of managerial overload, diminishes creativity, and makes it harder to resolve everyday dilemmas. It can lull those exposed to the workplace affect into a complacency that keeps people and organizations locked in patterns that are productive for neither—and that block the development of structures and strategies for a healthy workplace. It can test and tax leaders—even those who feel forewarned and who readily accept the challenge of the work. I speak from experience—and research confirms that I am not alone (Frost, 2003, 2005; Frost & Robinson, 1999; Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Offermann, 2004; Stark, 2003). I share my learning from life in the toxic trenches so that others can better prepare to forge the workplace relationships and practices needed for individual and organizational success.

This reflection is shaped by my work as a university administrator and by the experiences of others who have labored in the toxic trenches in universities and elsewhere. It offers an insider's look at the power and consequences of high levels of workplace emotion and at the speed with which they develop in response to everyday business decisions. The purpose is to deepen understanding

of the phenomenon and its impact and to encourage the development of practices that support organizational health. Equally important, this reflection explores strategies that support and sustain the health of everyday leaders—individuals at all levels of the organization who formally or informally choose to respond to the leadership challenge. I am supported in this reflection by language and theory that enable me to name and probe my experiences. Abraham Maslow (1968) reminded us that naming—bringing our tacit and subjective experiences into the world for public exploration and testing—is a critical step in understanding human behavior and in developing healthy social structures. Shared personal reflections promote public exploration. Both are essential for the creation of positive organizations and of the processes that enable individuals to lead and to learn in them.

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pressurized work world. The article ends by advocating new models for education and training as well as renewed attention to the development of theories and structures that promote individual and organizational health.

### **Handling Organizational Toxins: Setting the Stage, Defining the Issues**

This article is an outgrowth of two projects: a study of healthy organizations and reflection on work as dean during a particularly challenging chapter in a campus history. My dean experiences differed markedly from my experience in other administrative roles, and I wanted to understand that—and my own leadership—better. Experiences that “grab our attention” are clues to something fundamental we need to know (Dotlich, Noel, & Walker, 2008).

In the course of the two projects, I happened upon the concept of toxic emotions in the workplace (Frost, 2003, 2005; Frost & Robinson, 1999; Stark, 2003). I identified experientially and spiritually with what I read and knew I had found “something fundamental.” Under the best of situations, handling the emotional undercurrents that accompany organizational change and growth takes time, skill, and care. Conditions of fast-paced change or unrealistic expectations—self or other imposed—test and consume. As an informed student of organizations with a few successful administrative runs under my belt, I had approached the deanship with confidence and appreciation for the complexity of the situation. I knew the school and its history. I respected the human side of enterprise, knew the human resource literature at the core of the organizational theory base, appreciated the links between loss and change, and understood the emotional nature of organizational decision making (e.g., Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Daus, 2002; Fineman, 2000; Huy, 2002; Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004).

All that helped, but did not fully prepare me for things that I found: What it is like, for example, to *live*—not just understand—the systemic struggles in leading from the organizational middle (Gallos, 2002; Oshry, 1995; Sales, 2006), the power and the durability of strong emotion once rooted into an organization’s culture, and the non-rational temptation to ignore the buildup of systemic affect and the personal toll in working with and in it for the sake of moving an organizational agenda. In fact, theory and past successes may have made me slow to recognize the full meaning of what was happening around me and too quick to assume that strategies and

skills which had worked in the past would work well again (Watkins, 2008). Bennis (2003) reminded us that context matters—and in today’s fast-paced, competitive world of nonstop change, context matters more than ever.

The daily pressures of work life in a sea of disappointments, frustration, and complaints, for example, encourage an implicit model of leadership as firefighting. They make it harder to keep the whole herd moving roughly west and focused on the larger mission. They also make it tough to see or to embrace opportunities for shaping a supportive work culture—using, for example, the leverage of position to facilitate open communications, conflict resolution, and understanding among diverse individuals and groups. Those who see the possibilities can assist their units in developing compassionate cultures and collaborative efforts that benefit multiple stakeholders. Leaders who miss that end of being—or needing— an organizational toxin handler.

The concept of *organizational toxin handler* may seem specialized and exotic; however, those who do the work are quick to understand the everyday nature of the role and its function. Organizations as social systems are populated by individuals who respond with a range of emotions to the challenges, disruptions, and demands experienced every day at work. Implicit in the organizational work contract is the expectation that individuals will absorb and manage their own reactions. In most situations, they do. They may process pressures and disappointments by talking with friends, going to the gym, grumping through a bad day at the office, or employing spiritual practices like meditation or prayer (Delbecq, 2008). Organizational productivity depends on this informal microprocessing—and is helped when periods of frustration and employee negativity are brief, low in intensity, or staggered in occurrence among the workforce.

There are, however, times when the emotional cards are dealt too quickly, widely, or often. Situations like nonstop change, massive turnover, reorganization, budget crunches, downsizing, rigid and unfair policies, or abusive bosses can raise the emotional ante beyond the ability of individuals to self-manage and absorb. In those circumstances, emotions accumulate and can impair the informal system’s capacities for managing the pain. The result is unhelpful for all: emotional overload, disrupted productivity, and a toxic work environment.

A look into the toxicity, however, often reveals certain individuals taking it upon themselves to ease the overload and to keep people focused on their work. Frost (2003) labeled these people as organizational toxin handlers. We recognize them by their work:

- The coworker who patiently listens to complaints and who offers solace, good advice, and hope;
- The administrative assistant who informally counsels people on how and when to pitch new ideas to a hard-driving or idiosyncratic boss;
- The boss who shields subordinates from the shifting demands, unfair critiques, and changing priorities of a volatile senior executive;
- The supervisor who quietly assumes work duties for employees in need of extra time and care because of family or health concerns;
- The inner-city school teacher who recognizes that hungry children do not learn well and brings food to class.

Naming the phenomenon, as one toxin handler told me, casts these deeds in a larger light. They are more than personal acts of kindness or compassion. They are everyday leadership-in-action: tacit organizational productivity mechanisms. This kind of informal organizational leadership is important—and often more pervasive than recognized.

It is important, however, to distinguish toxin handling from toxic leadership. Toxic leaders (Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Whicker, 1996) are destructive individuals who abuse their power, role, and followers for immoral or narcissistic purposes. Toxin handlers are exemplary workers. They are distinguished by their empathy and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), and they foster productivity by ministering to others in need. As our university, for example, was reeling from “transformational change” at breakneck speed—and from the loss of campus leaders discouraged by the direction and heavy-handedness of the process—a number of individuals across the campus and throughout the hierarchy stepped in to support, coach, and advise others about how to stay focused and keep the university going. Toxin handling can be episodic, like defending a coworker from public criticism or representing group concerns to an unreasonable boss. It may be recurring. In organizations with chronic dysfunction—those characterized by imposed and unrealistic performance goals or cultures of blame, unhealthy competition, dishonesty, or irresponsibility (Frost & Robinson, 1999)—handling high levels of emotions can be daily work. Toxin handlers, I can confirm, quickly learn to accept the high levels as a given, a kind of background noise to the work that must be done. More important, they become hardened to the dangers and often toil away oblivious to the increasing personal and professional toll.

The word *toxic* is strong and evocative, and it is tempting to limit applicability to dramatic events like massive layoffs or death of a coworker. Although these kinds of situations raise intense affect, the power of the concept is in its pervasiveness. Everyday decisions, policies, mistakes, and pressures inevitably trigger some employee pain—and institutional structures, reward systems, and norms of rationality encourage people and organizations to push on despite it (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Ignoring the pain, however, does not eliminate it. As dean, I found myself and my peers acting as if it would, focusing on the quick wins and lists of accomplishments that influential change models (e.g., Kotter, 2006) tell us compensate for the evoked loss and fear. They don't: Anguish just goes underground and can erupt at unexpected times and in unanticipated places—a toxic shock to all when it does. Leadership training rarely emphasizes the central role of counseling-related skills and sensibilities. In reality, they are invaluable.

### **Toxic Shock in the Workplace: Multiple Paths to Overload**

It is important for leaders to appreciate both the speed and the variety of social processes that contribute to toxic overload. The leadership literature largely ignores this important set of issues. Toxic diffusion, for example, can be deliberate efforts by pained individuals to seek what they see as justifiable recourse or revenge—repeated public venting of strong emotions or stories about the circumstances that evoked them, false accusations, attacks on colleagues or processes, filing of unfounded grievances or lawsuits, or more insidious strategies like scapegoating, anonymous letters or postings, gossip, isolating targeted individuals, or vandalism. The affective impact is fueled by conflicts between those who sympathize with and those who oppose the toxic acts and by widespread feelings of powerlessness in knowing how to resolve the mounting tensions.

Less deliberate but equally powerful is the day-to-day sharing of gripes and complaints from individuals seeking support or a shoulder to cry on. Toxicity spreads without clear systemic recognition of its source. Research documents the unconscious contagion of negative emotions (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Joiner, 1994; Restak, 2003) and a rapid rise of systemic affect from empathetic identification with peers who suffer. Maitlis and Ozelik (2004) found this true even when others see the cause as fair and justified. It is common, for example,

for many to feel job insecurity when a coworker is fired, even when everyone has known for a long time that the discharged employee was performing badly.

Outside interventions can also fuel organizational toxicity, especially when they contain implied critiques from powerful others, distorted information, or data beyond the system's coping capacity (Argyris, 1985). Nonroutine external evaluations, externally driven fact-finders, and actions that focus undue public attention on emotion-laden issues raise the stakes and the emotions that surround all complex decision making. Although data and an "objective" perspective might seem like a plausible route to organizational rationality, they can be anything but. System stress and anguish escalate—as does the workload—with external impression management now added to the plate. External interventions divert system attention from ongoing challenges—and may surface data or ask for responses beyond the system's current capacities and resources. They can also decontextualize and exaggerate isolated events and actions, and thereby magnify the time, attention, and emotional investment given to blips in the flow of events and common bumps on the organizational road.

Organizations also foster toxic diffusion through distorted acculturation practices that socialize new members—and remind old-timers—to accept or perpetuate toxin spreading. Cultures teach whatever cultures are. An unhealthy, emotion-saturated culture reinforces its own pathologies and promotes its version of "acceptable ways" of viewing the workplace or behaving in it. Organizational socialization can aim at controlling or promoting role-specific workplace emotions (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989)—and in the process teach distorted affective responses, coping strategies, and communication patterns as the *right stuff* for professional success. Tacit expectations of differential behaviors and acceptable levels of emotion for faculty and administrators in universities are a classic example (e.g., Bedeian, 2002; Gallos, 2002).

Finally, it is important to recognize the snowball effect. Rarely do these processes exist alone, and the combinations and interactions magnify the impact. Diffusion processes feed on each other, setting off emotional chain reactions. Individuals and the collective system weaken under the cumulative buildup. Both can lose critical responsive and defensive capacities: Under stress, everyone regresses to a lower form of functioning. Optimism is harder to muster—and so is the creativity needed to generate options for stemming the toxic spread. Survival and hope rest in periodic moves from the dance floor to the balcony (Heifetz, 1994) for a new perspective on the situation and for respite from the din.

## Travel Through the Toxic Trenches: In Search of Grounded Understanding

A snippet of organizational life illustrates the short path from everyday business decisions to toxic maelstrom. For a grounded feel of this, imagine yourself as dean of a professional school in a large, public university. For those outside the academy, deans are classic middle managers. Like their business counterparts, they have limited authority and resources yet face demands and pressures from multiple constituents and from up and down in the hierarchy. The workload is diverse and heavy. Vaill (1996) noted the large number of problems and projects delegated to deans—in many cases because no one knows what else to do.

As dean, you are expected to increase enrollments, strengthen academic programs, and enhance community outreach in ways consistent with the campus strategic plan. You undertake the work in a context of leadership instability. You are the fifth dean in 7 years. In your 1st year on the job, you have already worked with two chancellors and two chief academic officers. Your school faces lingering questions about its quality; you share some of the same concerns. Faculty and staff are cordial, yet reticent—maybe depressed. Maccoby (2004) might diagnose fear of attachment. These individuals bristle from what they see as a history of unfair attacks, and they hope you will bring recognition for their efforts. Some fear taking on new responsibilities and are uncertain what that might entail. Others wonder if their skills are sufficient to meet new opportunities. Unit and campus efforts to link rewards with quality have made even strong performers nervous. Gripping in the hallways has already begun.

As if the system were not stretched enough, add major state funding cuts. The university proposes an early retirement program and will reach its revenue goals only if a high number of senior employees leave. Deans will be allowed to refill some lost positions, but there are no promises about how this will be done, nor will there be options to hire senior people for any new openings. Talented individuals with options quickly accept the package and interview for other jobs, fueling peer jealousy. Others agree to simply retire. Programs are unequally hit: All scramble to regroup in light of anticipated changes. Feelings of loss and confusion are palpable. Campus goals for enhancement of services, offerings, and quality are still there, as are lingering critiques of the unit. Do more with less is the campus mandate: Demonstrated unit progress is a criterion for release of all future funds.

Faculty and staff stream through your office—venting, mourning, celebrating, raging, complaining, advocating, negotiating, begging. Many want answers and

resources you don't have. Although no one directly tells you, many blame you for the current mess—you are, after all, in charge and responsible for the school. Some who chose retirement experience buyer's remorse. At least one contacts a lawyer, works unsuccessfully to void the signed contract, and feels betrayed by an unyielding university. Others negotiate part-time roles as transition. Uncertainty abounds: All the holding on and letting go complicates planning. Faculty and staff pressure you to begin hiring immediately. You'd like to, but can't. Saying that fuels more angst. Everyone (including you) sees pressures to advance strategic goals as unfair; however, none of the deans have been unable to secure any slack, and pushing back with your boss risks losing credibility and future resources for the school. The chancellor advises everyone to hunker down and focus on making quality improvements.

There is nothing particularly extraordinary in this scenario. Details may change, but the expectations and problems are not unusual for middle managers—nor is the widespread affect they trigger. You have been asked to take a unit forward during times of financial retrenchment and are accountable for strategic progress. Addressing financial realities while advancing the organization necessitates major change—and change brings loss and a deluge of human emotion. Those retiring, for example, face disruption in everything from where and how to spend their days to how they will express important values and needs (Gallos, 2007; Marris, 1986). People staying on the job have lost colleagues and friends, as well as established work patterns and norms. Tacit knowledge for a host of jobs is gone, as are personal files, informal information networks, and institutional memory that has facilitated work. Stress, bigger workloads, and insecurity characterize life for those left behind—as do potential health concerns. Research from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (“Job Cuts,” 2004), for example, found that workers age 19 to 62 who survived massive staff downsizing were five times more likely to die from heart disease or stroke in the 3 to 5 years after the cuts than employees from stable workplaces. Maitlis and Ozcelik (2004) attributed this to the toxic nature of survivor's guilt. Brockner, Grover, Reed, & Lee Dewitt (1992) noted the potential for fear and projection—*there but for the grace of God go I*. With system stress, worry, and uncertainty so high, the scene is ripe for toxic overload. The dean stands in the middle of it all.

Remember too the school's unique history that exacerbates its current state: Accumulated pain from revolving-door leadership and external critiques magnify the affect. Although every new leader hopes for a clean slate and unlimited opportunities, reality is less kind. Every

leader inherits an organizational history, often with long-buried, toxic land mines. Pent-up frustration may fade from organizational consciousness and records, but it still resides in the social system—as do memories of ineffective containment strategies employed by past leaders. New pain rekindles unresolved past emotions. The toxic beat goes on.

The result is a toxic version of a Cohen and March (1974) institutional “garbage can.” The social system begins to act as if hardwired for collective angst: Emotions are stronger, quicker to trigger, more random, more disruptive. Anger, frustration, and a host of other feelings randomly circulate around and through the organizations. They attach unselectively to available issues, persons, or projects, undermining decision making and authority structures while raising the emotional ante for all. Toxic garbage cans may seem functional to those involved. This may be the way many have related to the organization for a long time. Well-meaning leaders may encourage the venting: Dumping pain is one way to release frustration and shared powerlessness. On the other hand, toxic dumping contaminates a broad range of organizational processes and outcomes, impacts innocent bystanders, and weakens collective capacities to break the escalating spiral. People feel caught in a whirlwind rather than positioned to heal systemic rawness.

Under such conditions, it is easier to embrace a task, rather than a process, focus. In the case at hand, attacks on the school and the catch-22 requirement for progress before resources kept the focus on rational planning. Setting measurable goals is tangible—and psychologically safe. Acknowledging the massive amount of individual and systemic healing needed feels daunting; devising strategies for handling the Pandora's box of long-term, pent-up pain and denial equally so. Kubler-Ross (1969, 1975) reminded that loss involves grieving—and grief resembles clinical descriptions of mental illness. It takes months, even years, to work through deep cycles of grief. It takes longer to do that and to simultaneously enhance programs and performance. Avoidance begins to feel like a rational response and, I attest, is easy to sustain.

### **Handling Organizational Toxins: Leader as Toxin Magnet**

Certain roles are strategically positioned to attract workplace affect. Although anyone can assume a toxin handler role, leaders are natural toxin magnets. As dean in the scenario, you remain in the center of the fray. There are better and worse ways of handling it; however, escape is not an option. Organizational hierarchies make

leaders designated links to power structures that solve (and cause) problems, organizational symbols of hope and progress, and convenient outlets for frustration when things go wrong. Maccoby (2004) and Kets de Vries (2003) reminded us of the ease with which we all transfer early-life disappointments, ambivalence about power, and disdain for dependency onto leaders. Part of the unstated contract between leader and followers is the leader's willingness to accept followers' current and past emotion-laden projections—and more.

Followers, after all, give leaders their authority in exchange for the leader's willingness to hold their fears and needs. This is especially true under conditions of confusion, complexity, or overload.

In times of distress, we turn to authority. To the breaking point, we place our hopes and frustrations upon those whose presumed knowledge, wisdom, and skill show the promise of fulfillment. Authorities serve as repositories for our worries and aspirations, holding them, if they can, in exchange for the powers we give them. (Heifetz, 1994, p. 69)

By creating holding environments, leaders serve as buffers whose job includes institutional stress management and deep understandings of followers' needs.

In his study of caregivers, William Kahn (2005) identified a paradox in compassionate service that is relevant to leading. Caring professionals who serve individuals in need require simultaneous openness to and distance from those they seek to aid. They need clear boundaries to sustain objectivity, protect themselves from the stress of the work, and nurture essential autonomy in others. At the same time, good caregivers, like good leaders, need to understand others at a deep level to respond in appropriate ways to the unique realities of their situation over time. This only happens when caregivers “take in” those in need—fully grasp others' fears, capabilities, limitations, and needs. Learned skills in “detached concern” enable clinicians to bound this process; however, they still risk “the strain of absorption”—accumulated stress from close relationships with those in need, recognition of others' pain, and the “constant waves of emotion” that wash up against them in the course of their everyday work (Kahn, 2005). Over time, “compassion fatigue” (Figley, 1993, 1995, 2003) takes a toll. It is easy for caregivers—and even easier for leaders—to ignore this. Leaders face internal and external pressures to produce and dynamics that keep them focused largely on follower needs. Gardner (1990) acknowledged a universal ambivalence toward leaders that predispose them to be

other-centered. People want leaders who are powerful and capable of results. At the same time, they hate dependence and giving power to others—or in others taking it even at their insistence. The ambivalence can push followers to blindly up-the-dependence-ante and then punish leaders who don't—or can't—deliver quickly enough. The stage is set for an escalating cycle of pressure and angst for all.

Shared conceptions of heroic leadership—the solitary superhero whose brilliance and strength save the day—support a leader's stoic acceptance of the added pressures. So does the reality that all leaders serve at the will of their followers. Rising expectations bring the potential for rising disappointment. Leaders, after all, are only human. And mounting frustrations can lead followers across a dangerous line where disappointment morphs into ill-will. Research (Dossey 1993, 1997) points to the physiological consequences of negative wishes directed toward another. Plain and simple, toxic projections can harm, and leaders face a multiplier effect. People in emotional pain can unconsciously blame toxin handlers for their inability to provide them relief and, therefore, wish them ill. They may also hold leaders responsible for their suffering and project harm toward them. When toxin handling and leading overlap, the leader becomes the focus of collective double negativity.

### **Handling Toxins: Organizational Supports and Strategies**

Organizations benefit from those who willingly tend to the needs of others at work. They help advance institutional goals, retain employees, solve problems, and facilitate a better quality of work life. Over time, however, organizations risk losing these helpful employees: They burn out. When toxin handling intersects with race and gender, organizations also jeopardize their capacities to attract and retain a diverse workforce. Lingering gender stereotypes support tacit societal expectations for women to assume emotional caretaker roles at work. Many do, and research suggests they may face higher levels of burnout from it (Taylor et al., 2000).

Organizations can alleviate wear and tear on toxin handlers—and leaders—through policies, programs, structures, and cultures that promote attention to the human side of organizations. The payoff is twofold: (a) support and compassion for loyal employees (Kanov et al., 2004) and (b) increased productivity for all (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999). Organizational options might include things like

- education to raise awareness of toxic emotions and teach stress management;
- structural audits to identify jobs and positions most susceptible to toxic overload;
- recovery breaks and “safe zones”—nonpressurized work areas for short-term stints in a different work environment (Frost, 2003);
- assessment and reward systems that promote a balance between long- and short-term goals (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999), financial results and organizational development, and personal and professional needs;
- organizational rituals, ceremonies, and “arenas” for legitimizing, addressing, and safely processing workplace emotions (Bolman & Deal, 2003);
- “surrogate handlers”—short-term employees or consultants during periods of institutional stress or change (Frost & Robinson, 1999);
- on-site exercise facilities and midday programs like yoga, tai chi, meditation, book groups, walking groups—or even a company choir—to break the stress cycle and impart healthy work-life management skills.

These and other strategies imply the importance of a people-centered organizational culture and of institutional commitments to strong human resource management practices and policies.

### **The Handler’s Journey: Five Steps to Healthy Leadership**

As a recovering toxin handler, I am struck by three things: (a) the openness and willingness with which I took on the work, (b) the power and durability of the experience, and (c) the fact that leadership always looks simpler from the outside. Knowledge of the dynamics explored in this reflection while in the midst of them would have offered welcomed alternatives for managing self and situation—and a measure of sustenance during those dark nights of the soul. May this article provide that for others. Individuals can also take active steps to support themselves. Healthy toxin handling—healthy leading—rests in attention to five key areas: boundaries, biology, balance, beauty, and bounce.

#### **Boundaries**

It is awfully important to know what is and what is not your business.

Gertrude Stein

An important set of skills and understandings relates to boundary management. Paraphrasing Gertrude Stein, toxin handlers need to distinguish between their own business and the baggage and work of others. Managing boundaries occurs at a number of critical interfaces: self–other, professional–personal, self–work role, leader–follower. Monitoring and managing each interface is ongoing. Repeated exposure to workplace pain makes that easy to forget. It also predisposes leaders to remain blind to boundary breaches and their consequences.

Managing the self–other interface requires the capacity to feel and express empathy for others without absorbing their pain. Although this may seem like an academic distinction, it is not. Leaders burn out when they act like “psychic sponges” (Borysenko, 1988), soaking up the emotions of those around them whether they realize it or not. Counselors and caregivers are trained in clinical detachment to limit their psychic engagement. They also learn to recognize when they have crossed the line, accumulated too much exposure to others’ pain, or inadequately cleared themselves of the unavoidable “affective residue” of their work (Kahn, 2005). Toxin handlers may have empathy, organizational commitment, and a willingness to charge into the affective fray. Few, however, have the clinical skills to protect themselves from the toxicity or to recognize when it begins to extract a personal toll.

Goleman (1995) asserted the human predisposition to absorb the feelings of others. People vary in their empathic capacity; however, cognitive scientists have identified hard-wiring in the brain that makes certain people more attuned to others (Restak, 2003). Caring leaders may fall into this category. In her research, Maureen O’Sullivan (“Researcher Finds Fibbers,” 2004) found individuals so interpersonally sensitive they can detect liars by noting extremely subtle emotions that flick across a fibber’s face. These “wizards,” as O’Sullivan called them, pick up clues that a majority of others never notice, employing a natural rapid cognition (Gladwell, 2005) that surpasses the skills of trained professionals. For such emotionally open and sensitive individuals, toxin handling without clinical training can be dangerous.

Before his death, Peter Frost (2003) shared his story to illustrate the creeping dangers of toxic contamination. As associate dean, he repeatedly interacted with frustrated faculty, the majority of those who come to a dean’s office. Frost remained unaware of the ways that those repeated exposures weakened his defenses, despite his experience as a private sector manager, professor, and organizational scholar. Only in hindsight did he notice a change in himself over his years in administration. Frost

reported taking in more, rather than less, of others' pain and feeling it more deeply and longer. He increasingly replayed emotion-laden exchanges in his mind, searching for better ways to handle and respond to problems and complaints. The clinical psychology literature provides explanations for these phenomena. I can appreciate the consequences: a growing sensitivity that increases the probability of burnout. Frost described sleeplessness yet feeling devoid of energy at the end of each day. Data from more than 70 toxin handlers add depression, heart palpitations, ulcers, pneumonia, and heart disease, as well as other manifestations of stress and weakened immune systems (Frost & Robinson, 1999). Toxin handlers whom I have interviewed also spoke of anxiety, distorted judgments, back and joint pain, loss of appetite, increased alcohol use, a "hardened" feeling, and quickness to anger. As one young handler explained, "I had a complete meltdown and couldn't understand what was happening. I ended up taking some time off to put myself back together. I guess I had what they used to call a nervous breakdown."

None of this is surprising to those who have labored in the toxic trenches. Repeated exposure to strong emotions and negativity results in brain changes that make individuals more vulnerable to emotional pain—and their bodies quicker to trigger unhealthy responses with each repeated experience (Goleman, 1995; Restak, 2003). A *Journal of Advancement in Medicine* study (Rein, McCraty, & Atkinson, 1995) confirmed that simply remembering strong emotions creates physiological changes that can compromise the immune system. Discussing stressful events with friends may even be counterproductive (Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007).

An equally important boundary to manage is the distinction between self and work role. Toxin magnets need to remember that others' reactions to them are largely responses to their role and actions taken in it, or they may be transferences, projections, and other psychic assaults from distressed others (Kahn, 2005). This does not exempt people from reflecting on better and worse ways to lead. Rather, it cautions them not to be blinded by what can seem like personal attacks, act precipitously because of them, internalize system-level conflicts, or assume too much responsibility for solving organizational concerns. Managing this boundary goes to the heart of professional effectiveness.

Heifetz (1994) underscored the developmental nature of leading: growing a group's adaptive capacities for tackling complex challenges. His advice is simple and prudent: Create adequate supports and then give the work back to the people. In the words of Gertrude Stein, know what is and what is not your business! Without a developmental focus, leaders are left holding the system's

toxic baggage longer than necessary or healthy. By blurring boundaries between leader–follower work, I underchallenged others in solving their problems and too willingly carried the weight of projects on my shoulders. Too many toxin handlers do the same.

## Biology

To keep the body in good health is a duty . . . otherwise we shall not be able to keep our mind strong and clear.

Gautama Siddharta

Remaining vigilant to boundary management takes concentration and stamina. Both come from conscious attention to self-care and good health. Common-sense strategies like exercising, eating sensibly, staying hydrated, limiting caffeine and alcohol, maintaining blood sugar levels with well-paced meals and healthy snacks, and developing regular sleep patterns are essential for managing the demands of the work. So is early attention to mild, stress-related symptoms, like sleeplessness or back pain—possible warning signs of a toxic boundary breach.

Borysenko (1988) reminded how easy it is under stress—physical or emotional, personal or professional, real or imagined—to settle into a primitive fight–flight stance while ignoring healthier routes to strength and stamina. Humans are well adapted for imminent danger through complex physiological responses involving hormones and inflammatory chemicals that ready the body for rapid defense. They are largely unprepared for life's steady stream of low-level annoyances that evoke the same biochemistry. Fight–flight reactions continuously bathe mind and body in the stress hormone cortisol, raising blood sugar to levels perfect for emergency action (Stoppler, 2007). Adrenal glands ramp up heart, breathing, muscle tension, and blood pressure—just right for limbs that need extra energy for battle or escape. Chronic activation of this physiological stress response, however, wears a body down. One toxin handler joked to me that his gray hair—dark before he assumed the role of shoring up an abusive boss and protecting others from her quick temper—was a battle scar. He may be right. Toxin handlers, take heed. Siegel (1993) warned that wounded healers cannot minister well or muster the care and empathy necessary to attend to others.

## Balance

There is a proper dignity and proportion to be observed in the performance of every act of life.

Marcus Aurelius

Strong boundaries and health require balance—retaining one’s equilibrium and perspective in the face of challenge. Balance flows from grounded appreciation of life’s richness and from willingness to attend to the diverse needs of mind, body, and soul. Theorists have differed on the path to balance. Freud (1975) proposed love and work. Terr (1999) added play. Rohrlich (1980) saw a resolution of tensions among work, family, and leisure. Lawrence and Nohria (2002) identified four innate human drives—to acquire, bond, learn, and defend. The path, however defined, shapes choices and becomes a measure of satisfaction, meaning, and joy.

Toxin handlers fair best when they identify their life priorities and take specific steps to keep in balance. Two options include deliberately counterbalance stress with relaxation and neutralize toxic affect with positive emotions. Toxin handlers may not be able to stop the waves, but they can learn to surf (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). A relaxation response is a learned state of mental calm where heart, breathing, muscle tension, and blood pressure rates drop (Benson & Klipper, 1976). Soothing, simple repetitive activities, like deep breathing, yoga, tai chi, repeated prayers, practicing a musical instrument, or even knitting can elicit the physiological benefits. The Mayo Clinic (2007) offers opportunity for a midwork respite with a short, online meditation video. New Age guru Ram Dass suggests crocheting (Lipstein, 1992).

Leaders can also balance a toxic maelstrom with conscious focus on positive sentiments, such as appreciation, love, care, forgiveness, and compassion. Researchers at Institute of HeartMath (<http://www.heartmath.org/>) have reported immediate benefits: positive changes in heart rhythms as well as neural, hormonal, and biochemical reactions that drop blood pressure, muscle tension, and stress hormones. Scientists at UCLA found that optimism and hope strengthened immune functioning (Benson, Corliss, & Cowley, 2004). Forgiveness—letting go of resentment for a perceived offense—decreases blood pressure, cortisol, and other negative hormones associated with heart disease, immunity disorders, and more (A Campaign for Forgiveness Research, n.d.; Lewis & Adler, 2004).

## Beauty

Without art, the crudeness of reality would make the world unbearable.

George Bernard Shaw

Maintaining balance also suggests identifying activities and events that feed the soul and counter exposure to life’s

dark sides. The beauty and recuperative power of the arts make them an obvious choice. Heifetz (1994) discussed the importance of sanctuary—finding respite for perspective and rejuvenation. Looking back at my dean days, the arts were my sanctuary. I relished music and devoured fiction, and I led a creative writing and theater-based project on teen health and launched a Center for the Healing Arts at our local public hospital during a postadministrative sabbatical. The arts are powerful medicine.

There is considerable evidence, for example, that music enhances health and healing. Music’s ability to alter emotions has long been known experientially (e.g., Jourdain, 2002; Storr, 1992) and documented scientifically in the music therapy literature and elsewhere (e.g., McCraty, Barrios-Choplin, Atkinson, & Tomasino, 1998). Music’s benefits are diverse: masking unpleasant sounds and feelings; slowing brain waves and equalizing neuronal firing patterns; reducing heartbeat, pulse rates, blood pressure, muscle tension, and stress-related hormones; increasing endorphin levels; stimulating digestion; boosting immunity; increasing memory and sensitivity to imagery; and more (Campbell, 1999). Oliver Sacks (1973) found that music eased symptoms in Parkinson’s patients and playing the harp improved their motor and functioning skills. Jourdain (2002) asserted that music—any kind enjoyable to the listener—guides the brain to higher than normal levels of integration of the right and left lobes. Although music cannot repair the brain—medical symptoms kept at bay by playing the harp, for example, return after several days of not playing—it reorganizes it in ways that other life experiences do not. Music’s rhythms and patterns speak in primitive ways to the brain. They sooth and “lift us from our frozen mental habits” (Jourdain, 2002, p. 303). An elevating sanctuary may be exactly what the stress doctor orders.

The health sciences have historically used literature and creative writing for caregiver renewal and education. William Carlos Williams, Anton Chekhov, W. Somerset Maugham, and John Keats were all trained as physicians. Prestigious journals like the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *Annals of Internal Medicine* regularly publish literary works by physicians. Many health care professionals are poets (e.g., Breedlove, 1998; Campo, 1994, 1996)—perhaps a suggested avocation for organizational leaders, too. Robert Coles (1989) asserts that fiction and storytelling deepen inner life for those who work on life’s emotional boundaries. They nurture skills in observation, analysis, empathy, and self-reflection—essential capacities for professional effectiveness in any environment. And good fiction is healthy escapism.

## Bounce

Never take life seriously. Nobody gets out alive anyway.

Anonymous

Healthy toxin handling requires resilience: the ability to adapt and strengthen in the face of challenge, trauma, or stress. Clinical detachment is never foolproof. And even the best trained clinicians suffer from repeated exposure to those in pain (Kahn, 2005). Managing boundaries, balance, biology, and beauty helps, but eventually all feel the impact from affect-laden work. Staying on top of the signs and taking quick action sustain health and effectiveness—so do strategies for building personal resilience. How can leaders increase their odds of quickly bouncing back in the face of toxic setbacks?

The American Psychological Association launched a public education campaign on resilience building in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center (American Psychological Association, n.d.; Murray, 2003). Resilience and bounce are learned skills: recognizing choices for how to interpret and respond to events, keeping things in perspective, trusting one's instincts, practicing new behaviors, and reflecting on the consequences. Learning to *reframe* helps—organizational struggles, for example, are gifts to support learning. So are mistakes, plenty of laughter, and a good nap! Mistakes provide needed interruptions for a pulse check on choices—and on the status of one's bounce. The benefits of a good laugh speak for themselves, and a nap is opportunity for physical rejuvenation and for psychological diagnosis (Seigel, 1998). Rest restores physical exhaustion from hard work but does nothing to relieve burnout. Asked the secret of compassionate care, the Dalai Lama answered, "Water. And sleep." (Miller, 2005). Resilience, after all, comes from learning to "wear life loosely" (Siegel, 1998).

## In Over Our Heads: Toward Healthy Leadership and Organizations

Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan (1994) made a poignant observation. Over a growing portion of our adult lives, there is a mismatch between the complexity of modern culture's "curriculum"—all that we need to know and understand to function effectively and productively—and the human capacity to grasp it. The result is increased stress and need for more sophisticated levels of human consciousness and learning to satisfy

contemporary expectations for love and work. Looking through a developmental lens, modern life is just too darn hard. Whether we realize it or not, Kegan concluded, we are literally in over our heads. Toxic emotions in the workplace is a case in point. How well have we structured organizations and trained leaders and institutional citizens to cope with this reality? Recovering toxin handlers would conclude, not well at all. May this recognition—and appreciation for the pain that accompanies the work of too many individuals in modern organizations—give us pause.

Do we, in fact, foster approaches to leadership and organizations that promote toxic workplace dynamics and then ignore those who rise to the challenge of managing them? Place people recklessly in the line of affective fire without know-how to protect themselves? The answer in many cases is *yes*. What then are the implications for those who prepare to assume higher levels of leadership and responsibility? For those who teach current and future leaders and citizens? For scholars who study the world of work and propose the structures and models that shape modern organizations? For professional schools whose curricula overemphasize theory, rationality, and quantitative skills and fail in their mission to develop humane and ethical leaders (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005)? This reflection suggests the need for added attention in two key areas: (a) realistic understandings of the human side of enterprise and of ways to manage it, and (b) the development of capacities needed to handle the increasing complexities of modern, global life. What does each imply for quality leadership and management development?

## Understanding Humanity: Rich, Realistic, and Grounded Curricula

Preparing organizational citizens to productively deal with the emotional realities of the workplace requires learning on four levels: (a) conceptual understanding of the phenomena, its origins, and functions; (b) diagnostic capacities to recognize the situation-in-action; (c) strategies for response; and (d) skills for effective implementation. All this implies a learning program—in the classroom and in the boardroom—rich in attention to a broad range of topics on human and interpersonal relations, grounded in cases and life scenarios, and balanced between skill building and personal growth. It also points to the need for diverse teaching tools—use of fieldwork, conceptual material, discussions, personal cases, role plays, experiential activities, journaling, and other forms of active learning. On a macrolevel, it calls for a renewed commitment to reflective practice and for a reframing of effective leadership development.

Management education and leadership development are at their best when they offer opportunities to reflect on the “grand dilemmas of human existence” as they present themselves in context (March & Weil, 2005). Major issues in organizational life—understanding others and the environment, motivating and influencing, acknowledging enduring differences and managing the diversity, handling conflict, dealing with scarce resources, generating productive alternatives to complex problems, and the list goes on—are often indistinguishable from the larger issues of life. We do leaders a disservice then when we train them to rely too heavily—too exclusively—on management formulas and models. Leaders have no choice but to grapple with the paradoxes and complexities of human nature. They need opportunities to explore and develop a range of options—and strengths—for responding to them.

The topic of this reflection also suggests that learning activities need to be realistic and balanced in addressing humanity in its fullness. This includes attention to the less attractive sides of human nature and organizational life. Heifetz and Linsky (2002), for example, identified the dangers in leading, from careers derailed by unfounded public attacks to stress-related illness and assassinations—character or otherwise. Allcorn (1994) found increased workplace aggression, whereas Susskind and Field (1996) provided strategies for dealing with increasingly angry publics. Pritchard, Griffin, and O’Leary-Kelly (2004) confirmed that violence, discrimination, abuse, retaliation, and other forms of incivility are powerful influences in modern organizations. Ignoring or denying such dynamics will not make them go away, but we know that positive dynamics like care, compassion, and resilience—underlying themes in this article—can counter the negativity and are powerful processes for enhancing productivity and health (e.g., Baker & Dutton, 2007; Dutton, Lilius, & Kanov, 2007; Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Morgam Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005). (Additional research and relevant working papers on the topic are also available through the University of Michigan’s Center for the Positive Organization Sciences at <http://www.bus.umich.edu/Positive/Center-for-POS/Publications-Working-Papers.htm>)

Finally, the messy sides of human and organizational behavior raise the importance of multidisciplinary and problem- or case-centered approaches to learning. Issues like toxic emotions at work do not fit neatly into a disciplinary box—neither do solutions and strategies for handling them. Complex human phenomena require insights

from across the pluralistic base of organizational theory—understandings about structures and processes, individuals and groups, power and politics, symbols and meaning making (Bolman & Deal, 2003)—and beyond. For centuries, great literature has been the primordial source of learning about human nature and social change (Gallos, in press). Management education is rich, realistic, and grounded when it brings a full range of disciplines and understandings to bear.

### **An Essential Metacurriculum: Encouraging Developmental Growth**

The aforementioned recommendations point to an essential metacurriculum for management education: encouraging individuals to develop the increasingly sophisticated cognitive and socioemotional capacities needed to handle an increasingly complex world. Individuals at different developmental stages perceive and structure their world differently (Gallos, 1989, 1993). These different patterns of psychological organization lead to different capabilities for self-reflection, relative thinking, acceptance of personal causality, and tolerance for ambiguity. A metacurriculum to encourage developmental growth requires attention to individual difference across situations and roles. It offers leaders-in-training repeated opportunities to experience and describe the world as they see it and compare their worldview with others; to increase capacities for understanding self, other, and broad social issues; to take personal responsibility for choices and actions; to formulate personal frameworks for managing complexity; and to develop “more complicated” intellectual and ethical reasoning (Weick, 1979)—important capacities for navigating the winding path to healthy leadership and organizations. Project-based learning and structured reflections are essential for this kind of learning.

### **In Closing: A Call for Action**

This article points to the power and consequences of high levels of workplace emotion and toward strategies for healthier ways to cope. On another level, it is a call to action. It encourages scholars, practitioners, educators, and trainers to explore the complex path to healthy leadership and organizations for themselves and for those who can benefit from their discoveries. It advocates structures and strategies that promote caring cultures, individual resiliency, *and* extraordinary performance: models that support high productivity *and* high attention to human needs at work. It encourages humane organizational

design and development that result in compassionate workplaces fostering excellence *and* caring. It suggests better—and different—training for those who will implement this vision. Attention to boundaries, balance, biology, beauty, and bounce offer a starting point for creating positive and resilient workplaces. Let the experiences of organizational toxin handlers stand as reminders of the work still needed on the winding road to healthy organizations—and to the health of our everyday leaders.

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