Organizational Toxicity

Definition

Organizational toxicity is the widespread, intense, energy-sapping negative emotion that disconnects people from their jobs, co-workers, and organizations. Painful emotions that are inevitably part of organizational life become “toxic” when others respond to them in harmful and destructive ways. Organizational toxicity has pervasive negative effects, undermining individuals’ confidence, hope, and self-esteem, and damaging their morale and performance, both at work and outside.

Conceptual Overview

Painful emotions, arising from events such as unexpected and disruptive changes, and difficult interactions with bosses, colleagues and customers, are ever-present in organizations. As Frost noted in 2003 and 2004, such pain is not in itself toxic, but becomes so in the face of others’ harsh, insensitive, or indifferent responses to it. As a result of these responses, hurting individuals may infer that their feelings do not matter to those around them and begin to disconnect from their work and workplaces. Focusing on the pain they are feeling and its perceived sources, their energy becomes channeled away from work issues, affecting their commitment and loyalty to the organization. Over time, the vitality drains away from these individuals, and, as those around them are affected, from the organization at large.

Frost in 2003 and 2004 identified several sources of toxicity in organizations, in particular, noting “the seven deadly “ins”” that are associated with some “toxic bosses”. Intention describes the role of malice in generating toxicity, seen in managers who intentionally create pain in others, seeking to degrade or undermine them. Incompetence
in dealing with people is a second source of toxicity. Managers who are indecisive or unpredictable, or those with a very high need for control who micromanage their employees, are likely to create toxicity in those who work for them. Third is infidelity. The manager who betrays others by breaking confidences or promises is a significant source of toxicity in organizations. Other managers suffer from insensitivity, lacking empathy for others’ feelings and awareness of how their own emotions affect other people. A fifth source of toxicity is intrusion, when the constant demands and high expectations of a charismatic boss whom employees wish to please intrude far into employees’ non-work lives. Sixth, toxicity can be generated by institutional forces: every day company policies that are at odds with every day practice, or organizational practices that are dishonest or misleading. Frost calls his seventh source “inevitability”, referring to unavoidable organization events that cause emotional pain. These include the basic work of leaders as they carry out the necessary requirements of their role, generating toxicity by failing to attend to the pain inevitably created by their actions.

Toxicity in an organization may be rooted in several of these sources at once, generated not by a single incident or relationship, but through the recursive interplay of certain actions and negative emotions. An example of this is described by Maitlis and Ozcelik in 2004, in a study of toxicity-generating decision processes. Here, managers’ incompetence in the face of certain institutional forces, displayed through their hesitation to enact a painful performance management policy, combined with their insensitivity towards the affected employees, generated widespread and intensely felt pain, in the form of feelings of anxiety, apprehension, anger, indignation, fear, pity, and embarrassment. Although in this case and many of those discussed by Frost, toxicity stems largely from
the attitudes and behavior of management, pain can also turn toxic through the actions and inactions of a variety of stakeholders, including customers, board members and employees at different levels in the organization.

Organizational toxicity does not typically disappear of its own accord. Many organizations contain individuals – described as “toxin handlers” by Frost in 2003 and 2004 – who take on the role of managing others’ pain. These people are often not the most senior executives or human resource professionals, but rather line managers, project managers or team members who have a concern for the welfare of organizational members and an ability to recognize and handle toxic situations that are causing them harm. They do this through a variety of acts, including listening with compassion to people’s pain, acting as a buffer between vulnerable organizational members and toxic managers, and using political skills to extricate individuals from painful situations. However, as described by Frost and Robinson in 1999, and Frost in 2003 and 2004, toxin handlers are themselves at risk of becoming toxic, overwhelmed by others’ pain, and numb to their own and other people’s feelings. As a result, their mental and physical health suffers, as does the effectiveness of the work they are doing. Frost identifies several ways that this can be prevented, including self-help strategies such as creating support networks for themselves, and developing organizational practices and cultures that acknowledge and support the work of toxin handlers.

**Critical Commentary and Future Directions**

Organizational toxicity is a new concept which offers many opportunities for further research. To date, work in this area has largely relied on interviews conducted with individuals who see themselves as toxin handlers. Two measures of toxicity-related
constructs have been developed: a self-report measure of “toxin handler behavior”, by Martens, Gagne and Brown in 2003 and a scale of “toxic emotions” by Kiefer, Barclay and Frost in 2005. Each offers a valuable step towards the empirical examination of these concepts, but they require further validation, as well as testing on cultural groups outside North America. Broader studies of organizational toxicity, which use multiple methods with a variety of organizational stakeholders to systematically examine its nature, causes, and effects, are rare. Maitlis and Ozcelik in 2004 identified key characteristics of toxicity-generating decision processes in their intensive case studies of three organizations, but the generalizability of these findings to different organizational contexts and decision domains has yet to be tested. Further research that enables the rigorous and contextually-sensitive examination of toxicity would be a valuable addition to the field.

One of the criticisms that has been levelled at writing in this area concerns the America-centric perspective of organizational toxicity. Not only, it is argued by those such as Fineman, in a forthcoming review of Frost’s 2003 book, has work in the area focused almost exclusively on North American individuals and organizations, but the very notions of pain and healing on which the concept of organizational toxicity rests have been treated in ways that are culturally-specific to western, and in particular, North American, society. As a result, the relevance of this and related concepts may be limited to a fairly narrow set of organizations. A more fundamental concern also exists. Writing on organizational toxicity is inherently critical of contemporary corporations, highlighting the problems they cause for those working within them. It does not, however, confront the inevitability of such problems, given the societal structures and
pressures that prevail; nor does it offer solutions that take into account the different ways of organizing that would be required to create less toxic organizational contexts in the longer term. Studies that address the broader structures in which toxicity is generated would begin to tackle this important and under-researched area.

Sally Maitlis

See also Conflict, Emotion, Emotional Intelligence, Leadership - Transformational, Organizational Behavior

Further Readings and References


