



Toxic Emotions at Work: How Compassionate Managers Handle Pain and Conflict

Peter J. Frost

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Human interaction is never flawless. Even the best relationships produce tension and at times, unpleasant emotions. Since organizations are comprised of people, all organizations generate emotional pain as part of the process of doing business: producing new products on tight deadlines, setting benchmarks for performance, creating budgets, crafting company policies, and so on. Getting the job done is rarely painless. But when emotional pain goes unmanaged or is poorly handled, it can negatively affect both employees and the bottom line - in essence, it becomes toxic. In "Toxic Emotions at Work and What to Do About Them", Peter J. Frost argues that the way an organization responds to pain determines whether it remains toxic or becomes generative, whether it endures as a debilitating poison or is transformed into a force for healthy organizations. According to Frost, when ignored, toxic emotions betray employees' hopes, bruise their egos, reduce their enthusiasm for work, and diminish their sense of connectedness to their company's community and goals. Compassionate responses to pain, on the other hand, encourage those who are suffering to effect constructive changes in their work lives. Despite their powerful role in employee performance, toxic emotions are rarely addressed by organizations. Instead, most companies respond to pain informally and unconsciously through self-selected individuals whom Frost calls "toxin handlers." Typically a senior manager or someone with a high emotional intelligence capacity, toxin handlers soften the blow of emotional pain for others, but over the course of time, absorb much of the pain they handle to their own detriment. They are often unrecognized, unrewarded, and poorly supported by their organizations. And, while they often provide a temporary relief from the symptoms of toxic organizational pain, toxin handlers alone are unable to eradicate toxic emotions for the long-term. "Toxic Emotions at Work and What to Do About Them" suggests that handling toxic emotions effectively is an important, though unrecognized set of competencies that must be understood and embraced - not only by toxin handlers, but by leaders, managers, and the organization as a whole. Through rich examples of how individuals and organizations have managed emotional pain successfully, Frost describes the key skills necessary to cope with emotional pain and to manage it effectively, and offers concrete courses of action for organizations to institutionalize compassion in the face of emotional pain.

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