

The toxic mission organisation: Fiction or Fact?

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Introduction

The likelihood is great that almost everyone, at some point during the span of a thirty or forty year career, will work in an organisation dominated by a toxic leader and also will work in a toxic organisation. Neither the organisation nor the leader will wear a warning label but most people instinctively know they have been in an unhealthy organisation because they felt inhibited, constrained and unable to thrive even if they survived. In this new area of scholarship: toxicity of organisations, we see a complex interplay of factors and an array of symptoms of toxicity but the toxic organisation in very simple terms is one where healthy functioning, normal growth and the ability of an individual to thrive and flourish are all inhibited.

As Michael Herman¹ says "*The notion of toxic organisations isn't new, everyone has a story about one.*"

Does it exist?

It is worthwhile looking at a diversity of organisations to explore whether and where toxicity has been identified. Many areas have been studied by this new scholarship and it is by no means just restricted to the business world.

Many organisations are saying that no one stays very long. Whether it is the corporate world that has resigned itself to a continuous round of recruitment, two years of work and then departure to a competitor, the numerous books on church leavers, or the mission agencies who can no longer find their career missionary candidates, many are observing that people leave more quickly. Some of those have drawn the conclusion from this that loyalty is dead. McGraw Hill² say that the organisations that draw that conclusion are toxic organisations. Their research indicates that not all companies suffer from this high turnover and they say that where there is high turnover the companies destroyed the loyalty themselves by sending the message that employer-employee relationships are based on contracts rather than trust and viewing their employees as expenses rather than assets.

Bacal, the originator of the term 'toxic organisation' describes them thus:

We can think of organisations as falling on a continuum. One end is anchored by organisations that function well. In the middle we find the average organisation that is effective but could be better. Finally, we have the toxic organisation, an organisation that is largely ineffective, but is also destructive to its employees and leaders³.

It is that combination, of a largely ineffective organisation and one that is destructive to its workers, that this summary of toxic organisations will focus on because MacGregor Burns⁴ work showed that the middle group, what he called transitional or what Bacal calls 'average', has many of the characteristics of the toxic group but without the malevolence.

Corporate

As in most fields of study the greatest volume and quality of work is in the well funded business world.

According to Jeffrey Pfeffer⁵, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Stanford and the author of *The Human Equation: Building Profits by Putting People First*, when it comes to

the link between people and profits, companies get exactly what they deserve. Companies that treat their people well get enormous dividends: high rates of productivity, low rates of turnover. Companies that treat their people poorly experience the opposite and end up complaining about the death of loyalty and the dearth of talent. These are "toxic workplaces". "Loyalty isn't dead", he insists, "but toxic companies are driving people away. There isn't a scarcity of talent, but there is a growing unwillingness to work for toxic organisations."

What seems evident from current work is that there is a strong correlation between the health of an organisation and its effectiveness. Effectiveness is usually seen in the commercial world by the effect on the bottom line: profit. A report by Towers Perrin⁶ concludes "...the study tracked a statistically significant correlation between positive emotions and companies' five-year shareholder return. The more positive workers' emotions, the higher company profits."

Community situations

Schools

Talking about the prevailing culture of a school Deal and Peterson⁷ say "In positive cultures, one finds an underlying set of norms and values, history and stories, hopes and dreams that are productive, encouraging, and optimistic. Positive relationships abound around a strong sense of connection to the core mission."

Like others in corporate organisations, Peterson has shown in his research on effective schools that "if it [the school] doesn't have a positive, collegial, professional community and strong culture, productivity is just going to flounder." Talking of the unhealthy schools he's visited he says

I've had the opportunity – kind of a sad opportunity to visit schools with truly toxic cultures. These are cultures where productivity is damaged by a negative approach to teaching, learning and relationships. If you don't have a positive, professional culture, you are not going to have a productive school.

In such an environment individual characteristics of toxicity are worn like badges of honour. He gave the example of professional development saying "...in some schools it is sort of like 'I haven't been to a workshop in 15 years, and I don't plan to start now'."

In toxic cultures, they blame the victim. In schools they believe that it is the students' fault for not learning. In toxic cultures, also, you find little celebration of success.

Church & faith communities

Toxic faith is a broad area but Arterburn and Felton in their book Toxic Faith, describe an unhealthy faith as being rule based and see the following ten rules⁸:

1. The leader must be in control of every aspect at all times.
2. When problems arise, find a guilty party to blame immediately
3. Don't make mistakes
4. Never point out the reality of the situation.
5. Never express your feelings unless they are positive.
6. Don't ask questions, especially if they are tough ones.
7. Don't do anything outside of your role.
8. Don't trust anyone.
9. Nothing is more important than giving money to the organisation.
10. At all costs, keep up the image of the organisation or family.

Clearly a number of these characteristics are purely faith related but we will see that a significant number are characteristics of toxic organisations too.

Families

Cleese and Skynner in their groundbreaking books *Families and How to Survive Them*⁹ and *Life and How to Survive It*¹⁰ discuss 'healthy' and 'unhealthy families'. The following characteristics are drawn from these:

Healthy families are positive in their attitude to life and other people. In general they give the impression of enjoying themselves, enjoying each other, and especially of reaching out and being friendly to the people around them. (p5) They see the world as it is, without distorting it to suit their own imaginations, and members of healthy families are very realistic. (p7) In unhealthy families, the whole family turns out to have a very high level of negative emotions, both towards each other and outsiders. (p8) Love in healthy families is different. In unhealthy families love is often just about closeness, indeed sometimes to the point of what Skynner calls "*clinging dependence*". Healthy families' love involves both closeness and distance. They are capable of great intimacy and affection; but they also feel self-sufficient, confident and free, so they do not need each other desperately. (p10)

These are some of the healthy characteristics that Cleese and Skynner summarise with the phrase "the ability to be yourself and be able to express your innermost feelings".

How is it characterised?

Identifiable/Key Characteristics

The study of toxic organisations is still young and there is no definitive list of characteristics. These are included on the basis of widespread agreement between scholars:

1. Lack of good leadership and management
2. Lacking focus of mission, boundaries of limitation, values and history
3. Lack of satisfaction and optimism
4. Closed communication
5. Punitive in nature and not even-handed
6. Unassailable knowledge, Intolerant of Questioning
7. Authoritarianism, Legalism, Rigidity, Control
8. Emotional, physical, sexual abuse
9. Treat individuals as interchangeable/replaceable cogs
10. Delusional and dissonant
11. Lack of Work/Life Balance
12. Low self esteem
13. Lack of development and learning

Here we do not have space to explore all thirteen characteristics and will just focus on four of them. For each I will share the findings of my work and then pose some questions that I believe need addressing within the missions context and open these up for debate.

Lack of good leadership and management

In every toxic organisation you will find a toxic leader, who, by virtue of his or her own problems, creates an environment that frustrates their subordinates and colleagues. Toxic leaders, like poor parents, exhibit certain behaviour patterns that confuse and paralyse others who depend on them.

[Some toxic bosses] create organisational pain through insensitivity or vindictive behaviour. Other toxic bosses cause pain because they are unwilling to take on the responsibilities of leadership, leaving subordinates hanging, confused, or paralysed – or all three. Still others are toxic because of their extraordinarily high need for control, looking over the shoulders of people who have a job to do. Finally, some toxic bosses are unethical, creating conditions that compromise their colleagues and subordinates¹¹.

Emotionally, toxic managers appear cold and distant, or explosively excitable and emotional. Whichever it is they behave this way due to a lack of emotional maturity which would allow them to deal with others in a constructive, supportive way. He or she is also inconsistent. Saying one thing and doing another. Decisions and direction can change suddenly and without apparent rationale. Of greatest difficulty in the behaviour of the toxic manager is the sending of mixed messages so that employees never know what is expected, what will be praised and what will be punished.

The toxic manager avoids. He or she avoids emotionally charged situations such as conflict, or discipline, and reacts poorly to being challenged. They also frequently avoid making a decision until a crisis develops. In short, the toxic manager confuses subordinates, uses very subtle ways of punishment for real or imagined transgressions, creates a high degree of dependence, and is internally conflicted.

That good leadership and management is a characteristic of a healthy organisation does not seem surprising but Chandra¹² says that over 80% of people who leave jobs do so because of a toxic boss. The role of leadership and management is inherent in all of the other characteristics we will examine and to ignore that bad leadership, toxic leadership, can be a major factor spinning an organisation into decline, is to ignore reality.

Some questions for consideration:

1. Mission is full of specialists and empty of trained, skilled and experienced leaders and yet up to 80% of people who go into mission not expecting to lead end up in some kind of leadership position.
 - a. How much effort, finance etc. do we spend on leadership training? Is this proportional to its importance or should we change it?
 - b. Should we actively screen for suitability for leadership in all of our positions, given how many end up in leadership?
2. These issues are highlighted in business as a major problem – is it likely to be more or less of an issue in mission?

Lacking focus of mission, boundaries of limitation, values and history

Toxic organisations are often described as floundering and it is usually because they have lost or perverted their original sense of direction. Deal and Peterson, talking of schools contrast “*A lack of shared purpose or splintered mission based on self-interest*” rather than “*A mission focused on student and teacher learning*”.

They highlight the role that rituals and ceremonies play in reinforcing core cultural values that tell the individuals within an organisation who they are and what they are about. Toxic organisations in contrast to healthy organisations have few positive traditions or ceremonies to develop a sense of community. They do not have stories that celebrate successes and recognise heroines and heroes. Rather than hopes, dreams, and a clear vision, a sense of hopelessness, discouragement, and despair is present. In contrast healthy organisations have a rich sense of history and purpose, a strong, clearly communicated sense of history and strong, clearly expressed shared goals.

In a school context a healthy culture would have: “*a shared sense of responsibility*” rather than “*norms of radical individualism*”. It is a clear focus or mission, well defined boundaries, owned values and an understanding of where the organisation has come from, that can create that sense of shared responsibility.

Some questions for consideration:

1. Have we meaningful rituals and ceremonies for our identity?
2. Have we lost the traditional “family” identity of missions but not successfully found a replacement?
3. Is our leadership disproportionately task focused?
4. How shared are our goals? Are we a collection of individual pioneers using a common support structure or something more?

Lack of satisfaction and optimism

Satisfaction may seem highly subjective and perhaps slightly utopian but it is important. New research from ISR Surveys¹³ suggests that there is a link between employee satisfaction and a company’s financial performance. Companies, which compared with the industry in which they operate, achieve above average net profit margins and have higher levels of employee satisfaction and commitment.

Contrast that to Deal and Peterson’s description of schools devoid of optimism:

You find almost a sense of depression and frustration in the school. There’s no shared sense of purpose. The school is fragmented. There are negative norms around improvement and learning. They really don’t believe that they can improve what they do.

Optimism is closely related to satisfaction. If you are not satisfied in your work you can be optimistic that it will improve but optimism can be killed off by repeatedly bad experiences and prolonged dissatisfaction.

Some questions for consideration:

1. Is satisfaction of interest to Christians – especially missionaries?
2. Can we afford not to be interested given the effects on organisational success?

Unassailable Knowledge and Intolerant of Questioning

A healthy organisation, values the input of all of its members. There is still a decision-making structure (often a very well developed one) but there is also an acceptance that a great idea can just as easily come from a cleaner as a CEO and each needs to be heard for the good of the organisation. Even where an idea has to be rejected by the decision-makers, the value of the suggestion is recognised and the person not just tolerated but praised.

Stanley Morris¹⁴ says a characteristic of purveyors of toxic faith is that “*they do not tolerate any other opinion or expressions other than their own*”. McLauchlin¹⁵ makes a similar point:

The members of the toxic faith system make claims about their character, abilities, or knowledge that make them ‘special’ in some way. Challenging the authority or correctness of the leader is equated with challenging the very Word of God. Who would want to be pitted against the Word of God?

Compare this to the approach of Harvard University:

At Harvard we consider it an extremely important accomplishment when a 25-year-old graduate student who has been here a mere 18 months makes a discovery that disproves the pet theory of a 55-year-old professor who has been here 30 years. Indeed, the professor whose theory has been disproved might be the first to congratulate that graduate student. The notion that one of the community’s most junior members would be applauded for upending the life’s work of one of its most senior would seem exceedingly strange in many organisations and countries¹⁶.

Harvard's approach has a feeling of good health about it. It values all people, fosters creativity and innovation and recognises the achievements of all.

Some questions for consideration:

1. Think of the best 3 innovative ideas in your organisation:
 - a. Who did they come from?
 - b. If you cannot think of any you have a big problem!
2. Bearing in mind for every 1 good idea there are 9 bad ones, how would/do you value all ideas contributed?
3. What does the Harvard story illustrate for us in mission? How does it compare to your organisation? E.g. "newcomer" in orientation or short-termer with idea to challenge "old-timer"?

Authoritarianism, Legalism, Rigidity and Control

In the past decade there has been a shift in the location of the centre of control. The authoritarian command and control approach of the old style business has given way to self-managing teams, flexi-time and greater general autonomy. This has been shown to be much more effective. However there are still many organisations that have not adapted their approach and a significant number who have misinterpreted it to their cost. To allow greater freedom the organisation has to have a very strong and well developed operating framework that allows people to operate autonomously because there is a strong framework (perhaps of values and goals) that allows those individuals and teams to know exactly what they should be doing albeit that they have a great deal of freedom in how they do it.

Cleese and Skynner say that individuals feel good about themselves if they feel in control of themselves. Lack of control, Herman says, is a sign of toxicity. Control along with a sense of confidence and community, are far greater motivators than salary. Having too many layers of management contributes to the feeling of loss of control by the individual as well as hindering many of the other functions like communication and focus.

Just like communication is growing in its importance for effective operating in the global context in which we now all operate, so too is the ability to innovate. Many organisations now are what Leadbeater¹⁷ calls knowledge organisations; the workers have value because of what they contribute in thinking, knowledge and innovation. To foster innovation the culture must encourage openness and Cook¹⁸ goes as far as suggesting that a characteristic of truly healthy organisations in the present age is playfulness.

Talking about who holds the power, McNamara says that organisations need to be organic in nature. The authority within the organisation must be based not on a given title but on capability. The overall shape will be flatter and the structure decentralised.

Some questions for consideration:

1. Do you have a clear framework of accountability and objective setting within which autonomy can be usefully used/offered?
2. Skynner and Cleese say "feeling in control" is important. What might this mean for our orientation programs and application processes in particular? How might we improve this?
3. Is 'playfulness' as a source of innovation present, possible or appropriate in missions?
4. Is MacNamara's idea of organic leadership feasible? How does it fit with existing structures and ideas of democracy in many of our organisations?

Treat Individuals as Interchangeable Replaceable Cogs

Pfeffer says that businesses make their biggest mistake when they show people as an expense on the balance sheet and not an asset. Webber¹⁹ says *“Another sign of a toxic workplace is that the company treats its people as if they were a factor of production.”* In effect they are saying that when people are treated as an expendable resource they will soon function as one, losing the flexibility, creativity and energy they would otherwise be able to offer. Seneviratna²⁰ says that organisations must go further: *“The whole process is based on the psychological contract between employer and employee,”* he says *“people need to feel they are being valued.”*

In reality in organisations that place little emphasis on seeing their staff as a valuable resource, they use them up and spit them out. A management consultant was asked by a large law firm, to help them develop leaders. After some discussions he turned them down saying that they did not see an issue with the toxicity of the firm despite in excess of 60% of new lawyers quitting straight after completing their training. The firm replied that they just recruited enough each year to replace the quitters. Kjellerup²¹ says firms that show *“...disregard for the potential of staff”* and where *“burnout is accepted as an inevitable cost of a tough job”* are some of the most toxic he has found.

Even at the less extreme level of insufficient employee engagement the figures show the impact: *“Only 17 percent of leavers feel management shows a genuine interest in the well-being of employees.”*²¹ This means they lose their fundamental trust in senior management. Katcher²² says that *“Once lost, for whatever reason, an employee's lack of trust in management is very difficult to restore.”*

Some believe employees are only concerned with what is best for themselves. But *“evidence shows that most people will accept outcomes not wholly in their favour if they believe the process for arriving at those outcomes was fair”*.

In very simple terms a measure of toxicity is whether or not contribution is recognised.

Some questions for consideration:

1. Are people in your organisation an expense or an asset? (perhaps not an expense because in our “faith missions” they cost us nothing)
2. Do we value people? (Perhaps not as much if we don't have to pay for them!)
3. What is our psychological contract? How does God/local church fit in?
4. How do we differentiate between sacrifice and burnout?

Conclusion

I believe my study indicates that toxicity is being recognised for the first time as a real issue in a wide range of organisations and organisational types. Whilst many would acknowledge that some individual characteristics have been seen as “bad” before, only in recent work have there been attempts to collect these together using the common criteria of factors that are inhibiting an individual or organisation's ability to function, grow and thrive. Viewed thus it is clear that the incidence of toxicity is widespread. Of course, many organisations are not deliberately destructive and so fall into the transitional rather than toxic category, but few are self-actualising. Further, scholars have demonstrated the usefulness of this work to organisations generally and some, Deal and Peterson in particular, have shown that its applicability is not limited to commercial business but can be applied usefully and constructively on a much wider basis to anything that constitutes an organisation. My question to you is *“What does it have to say to us in world mission?”*

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