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THE TYRANNY OF TOXIC MANAGERS: AN EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE APPROACH TO DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PERSONALITIES

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Toxic managers are a fact of life. Some managers are toxic most of the time; most managers are toxic some of the time. Knowing how to deal with people who are rigid, aggressive, self-centered or exhibit other types of dysfunctional behaviour can improve your own health and that of others in the workplace.

This author describes the mechanisms for coping.

Toxic managers dot the landscape in most organizations, making them seem, at times, like war zones. These managers can complicate your work, drain your energy, compromise your sanity, derail your projects and destroy your career. Your ability to deal with these corporate land mines will have a significant impact on your career. Those who are able to recognize toxic managers quickly and understand what makes them tick will be in the best position to protect themselves. Difficult managers are a fact of life and how they affect your life depends upon the skills you develop to deal with them.

The issue is not simply a matter of individual survival. Toxic managers divert people's energy from the real work of the organization, destroy morale, impair retention, and interfere with cooperation and information sharing. Their behaviour, like a rock thrown into a pond, can cause ripples distorting the organization's culture and affecting people far beyond the point of impact.

Senior management and HR can significantly improve an organization's culture and functioning by taking steps to find and contain those who are most destructive. Leadership can spare an organization serious damage by learning how to recognize problematic personality traits quickly, placing difficult managers in positions in which their behaviour will do the least harm, arranging for coaching for those who are able to grow, and knowing which managers are time bombs that need to be let go.

This article will help you learn how to avoid becoming a scapegoat, to survive aggressive managers' assaults, and to give narcissistic and rigid managers the things they need to be satisfied with you. It will also help senior management and HR to recognize toxic managers before they do serious damage. The basic theme of the article is that to deal effectively with toxic behavior you need to understand what lies underneath it, design an intervention to target those underlying factors, and have sufficient control of your own feelings and behaviour so that you can do what is most effective, rather than let your own anger or anxiety get the best of you. In other words, you need to develop your emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence

There are two major components of emotional intelligence, personal competence and social competence. Personal competence refers to the ability to understand your own feelings, strengths, and weaknesses (self awareness), and the ability to manage those feelings effectively (self management). For example, being able to contain your anger and anxiety and thereby think clearly in upsetting situations is crucial to making good decisions and influencing others. Social competence refers to the ability to understand what others are feeling (social awareness) and having the skills to work effectively with others (relationship management). The ability to understand what people think and feel and know how to persuade and motivate them, and to resolve conflicts and forge cooperation is among the most important skills of successful leaders and managers.

Components of Emotional Intelligence

Personal Competence

Self-Awareness

- Aware of your emotions and their impact

- Aware of your strengths and weaknesses

Self-Management

- Emotional self-control
- Adaptability: flexibility in adapting to changing situations and obstacles
- Integrity, honesty, trustworthiness
- Drive to grow and achieve
 - Achievement oriented
 - Continuous learner
 - Willing to take initiative
 - Optimistic

Social Competence

Social Awareness

- Empathy and insight
 - Understanding others' perspectives and feelings
 - Appreciation of others' strengths and weaknesses
- Political awareness

Relationship Management

- Respect for others
- Conflict management skills
- Collaborative approach
- Sense of humor
- Persuasive: visionary, diplomatic
- Able to leverage diversity

The key to changing problematic behaviour is to understand what factors drive it and then prepare an intervention to affect these underlying factors. It is not enough to realize that the person is rigid, aggressive or narcissistic. Effective interventions depend upon what is driving the difficult behaviour, and not what appears on the surface. Interventions that would lead to a positive change in a manager with one underlying personality type could intensify the problematic behaviour of someone with another personality type. For example, both aggressive and rigid behaviour may be driven by fear and insecurity, by cluelessness, or by a ruthless desire to dominate and control people. Managers whose aggression or rigidity arises from fear and insecurity are likely to improve if treated with tolerance and reassurance. Tolerance of toxic behavior arising from ruthlessness, however, is likely to exacerbate the situation. Similarly, while a strong negative response to aggressive or rigid behavior may deter someone who is ruthless, it could increase the anxiety and tension of someone who is driven by fear, and thereby worsen the problem. The better you understand how other people view the world and what motivates them, the better you will be able to influence their behavior.

Senior management and human resources professionals also need to understand why someone is doing poorly in order to know whether to try to help the individual or to let him or her go. You do not want to give too many chances to someone who rains chaos and problems on others. At the same time, you do not want

to get rid of a potentially fine manager who is suffering from readily treatable anxiety, depression, or stress. The more you understand about personality types, the better you will be able to determine whether to keep a manager who is having a problem or to have him or her move on.

Toxic managers can be divided into four categories: narcissistic, aggressive, rigid, and impaired. Underneath these difficult behaviours are either difficult personality traits, mood disorders or impulsivity. By personality traits, we mean enduring patterns of perceiving, interpreting, and relating to the world and oneself. Problems of mood and concentration can often mimic personality problems. When people are stressed by anxiety, depression, trauma, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, alcohol, drugs, or a difficult environment, any tendency they have for aggressive, rigid, or narcissistic behavior intensifies. Having a professional assess whether the problem is due primarily to personality problems or to a problem of mood and concentration is crucial, since problems of mood and concentration can often be ameliorated fairly quickly with appropriate treatment.

The four types of toxic managers are described below as are ways for coping with, and even changing, their behaviour.

Narcissistic managers

Preoccupied with their own importance, narcissistic managers are grandiose and arrogant. They devalue others, lack empathy for others and have little, if any, conscience. Feeling exempt from the normal rules of society, they exploit people without remorse. Narcissistic individuals are also very sensitive to anything that threatens their self-esteem. Challenges to their grandiose self image can lead to narcissistic rage that sees them lose all judgment and attack in ways that are destructive to themselves and their victims.

Arrogant with peers and subordinates, they may suddenly become submissive in the presence of a superior. Once the superior has left, they may well disparage her. They generally deprecate and exploit others, including former idols. They may, however, idealize powerful individuals who support them, though only for a short time.

Under the surface, narcissistic managers struggle with fragile self-esteem. They also have a sense of emptiness arising from their lack of true self-love and inability to care about other people or about abstract values such as honesty and integrity. Their grandiose fantasies are attempts to fill the emptiness and reinforce their fragile self-esteem.

The classic narcissistic manager is grandiose. Grandiose managers are legends in their own minds. Preoccupied with their exaggerated accomplishments and grandiose expectations for the future, they expect others to hold them in awe. Constantly boasting, they resemble peacocks strutting around with their tail feathers unfurled.

Some narcissistic managers are not effusive about their abilities and accomplishments. What stands out about them is a willingness to exploit others, a willingness to break the law, or a desire to control and dominate others.

Narcissistic managers are less likely to make major changes in their behaviour than are managers with other issues. They are also particularly likely to become outraged and vindictive if someone challenges their behaviour. Therefore, when you are dealing with a manager who is rigid or aggressive, it is important to

know whether narcissism or other disorders lie underneath their destructive behaviour.

A milder variant of narcissistic managers are those with learned narcissism. They are not desperately trying to hide and shield fragile self-esteem arising from a troubled childhood. Rather, their success in some area has brought sufficient fame and fortune that they have been shielded from the normal consequences of behaving arrogantly and treating others poorly. Moreover, as people incessantly flatter them, they come to believe the glorifying compliments. Although somewhat grandiose and inconsiderate of others, these people have a conscience and can feel empathy for others; they simply do not realize the full impact of their behavior on others. People with learned narcissism are far more amenable to change than are those with narcissism resulting from problems early on in emotional development.

Types of Narcissistic Managers

Varieties	Primary Traits	Objective	Subordinate survival tactics	Superior's Actions
Grandiose: Psychodynamic	Outward grandiose self-image; exploits others; devalues others; enraged if self-esteem threatened; limited conscience and capacity for empathy; desperately protects underlying fragile self-esteem	Be admired	Show admiration, avoid criticizing them, consult with mentor or executive coach	Close oversight of managers to continually assess their treatment of others; Do not automatically believe superiors over their subordinates; 360-degree feedback; Place them where they cannot do serious harm; Consider getting rid of them;
Grandiose: Learned	Grandiose self-image; exploits others out of carelessness; is inconsiderate in treatment of others due to not receiving negative feedback for behavior (see Chapter 2)	Be admired	Show admiration, avoid criticizing them, consult with mentor or executive coach	Don't ignore signs of trouble; Consider possible presence of depression, anxiety, alcohol
Control Freak	Micromanages; seeks absolute control of everything; inflated self-image and devaluation of others' abilities; fear of chaos	Control others	Avoid direct suggestions; let them think new ideas are their own Don't criticize them Show admiration and respect Don't outshine them; play down your accomplishments and ambition Document your work Build relationship with a mentor Look for other positions	
Antisocial	Takes what he wants, lies to get ahead, hurts others if they are in his way; lacks both a conscience and capacity for empathy	Excitement of violating rules and abusing others	Avoid provoking them Transfer out before they destroy you Do not get dragged into their unethical/illegal activities Seek allies in coworkers and mentors Seek executive coach to help you cope	

Coping with a narcissistic manager is very difficult for most people. You can't make it a fun experience, but there are things you can do to make yourself less vulnerable to them.

If you are subordinate to a narcissistic manager:

- Avoid criticizing them

- Show admiration
- Don't outshine them; play down your accomplishments and ambition
- Document your work
- Build relationships to a mentor
- Keep your eyes open for other positions
- Do not take their behaviour personally

Superiors of narcissistic managers also need to be careful. If you supervise a narcissistic manager you should:

- Watch your back
- Don't ignore signs of trouble
- Don't believe them over their subordinates
- Assess if the narcissism is learned or from early development and if it can be modified with the help of a therapist/coach
- Get coaching for them
- Get 360 feedback on them and use it as a major part of their assessment

Aggressive managers

There are a variety of factors that can lead to aggressive behavior. Ruthless managers perceive the world as a dog-eat-dog competition in which people are out to get you. In their eyes, if you are not a predator, you will become someone's prey. They are narcissistic and lack empathy and concern for the well-being of others. A particularly severe variant of narcissistic managers is the bully, who derives a perverse pleasure from intimidating others. Some aggressive individuals chronically view themselves as victims; what others view as aggression they see as self-defence or compensation for wrongs done to them in the past. Frantic and irritable managers have enduring problems modulating the intensity of their feelings. They are often flooded by them, and then ignore the feelings and rights of others in desperate attempts to deal with their distress. They are often clueless about the impact of their behavior on others.

Aggressive Managers

Varieties	Primary Traits	Objective	Surviving Them
Ruthless	Calmly goes after what he or she wants	Get what he wants	Watch your back
Bully	Seeks to intimidate for the pure excitement of it	Dominate and intimidate	Stay out of their way; don't let them see you are intimidated
Frantic	Always hyper and pressured	Avoid being in trouble; accomplishing a lot	Help them with their objectives; help them see that a frantic pace may be inefficient; evaluate for anxiety and depression
Irritable	Difficulty modulating their stress level; highly reactive to certain things	Varies	Find out what upsets them and avoid pushing their buttons, provide support, evaluate for depression and anxiety problems; gently let them know their behavior is destructive
Narcissistic	Underlying fragile self esteem leads to eruptions of anger if the self esteem is challenged	Maintain their self esteem	Show deference, play down your accomplishments, avoid outshining them, never criticize them

Rigid Managers

Rigid managers insist on doing things their way. Underneath this insistence can be a variety of factors.

Compulsive managers fear being wrong. They live in a world of “should” and “should have.” Avoiding making mistakes dominates their decision-making. Authoritarian managers believe that rigid hierarchies are the best way to run organizations. Oppositional and passive-aggressive individuals perpetually feel that their autonomy is constantly being threatened, and they must push back in order to defend themselves. They fail to see how in doing so they are stepping on the rights of others. Narcissistic managers who are rigid feel that their way is best and that there is not reason to listen to others’ ideas.

Rigid Managers

Type	Belief System	Underlying dynamics	How to deal
Compulsive	His way is the only way, since trying a new way would be very hard.	Fears being wrong.	Show them that many, many respected people do it this way and that this way will work out in this particular situation; avoid arguing about what way is best.
Authoritarian	The bosses’ way is the way it should be done.	Fears the world being out of control unless someone is rigidly in charge.	Show them that an authority they respect does it this way.
Oppositional	People are trying to dominate him and he must speak up	Feels that they are always being dominated and need to push back.	Let them feel a part of the decision.
Passive Aggressive	People are trying to dominate him, and he can’t speak up	Feels pushed around	Encourage their participation
Narcissistic	I know better than anyone, I am remarkably skilled.	Covering over fragile self esteem by a rigid grandiose self image.	Feed their ego, don’t criticize them, explain how your ideas fit into their plans.

Impaired Managers

Many managers, at one time or another, suffer from depression, an anxiety disorder, burnout, or alcohol abuse. Many have attention deficit disorder that has never been diagnosed. Each of these can significantly impair someone’s performance and ability to work effectively with others. Failure to recognize and treat these common problems costs businesses billions of dollars a year in lost productivity.

Impaired Managers

	Main Symptoms	Dealing with them
ADHD	Easily distracted, disorganized, talks incessantly, interrupts others	Get them treatment
Anxiety	Fearful: generally or with a focus	Get them treatment
PTSD	Preoccupied, emotionally numb, withdrawn, jumpy, fearful, irritable	Get them treatment
Depression	Loss of interest and energy, pessimistic, tends to worry, sleep and appetite changes	Get them treatment
Burnout	Feels overwhelmed, loss of motivation and interest	Get them treatment
Alcohol Abuse	Declining performance, often late or absent,	Get them treatment

Unfortunately, most of the time, the nature of the problem and the relative ease with which it can be ameliorated is not recognized. In addition to damaging productivity, these problems can markedly exacerbate, or even mimic, the various personality disorders discussed above. When this is the case, treating the problem can lead to rapid improvement in the toxic behavior.

Impaired Managers

Case Study: Dealing with a Narcissistic VP

Bill was the vice president of a mid-sized company. His unit had grown rapidly and was profitable. He had special knowledge and skills that made him very valuable to the company. At the same time, the company's president was increasingly aware that the morale in Bill's unit was poor and that turnover was high. The president instructed Bill to obtain some coaching. He balked and the CEO relented. In time, however, things went from bad to worse. The CEO considered firing Bill. The cost of finding a replacement, and the inefficiencies suffered while the new person came up to speed, would be high. Nevertheless, he couldn't let the unit continue to bleed people. Faced with the possibility of being fired, Bill agreed to executive coaching.

Bill balked at 360 feedback but he agreed to let the coach speak with people and observe his ways of interacting. What people reported, and what the coach saw, was a driven person who lacked concern for others, focused on his own needs, was constantly snapping at people, rarely gave a pat on the back, and sometimes stole credit for others' work. He certainly fit the description of the narcissistic manager.

There was, however, another part of him. At times, he really seemed concerned about others. In individual discussions with the coach, Bill's insecurity and depression stood out more than his grandiosity. The coach determined that rather than having the core personality structure of a narcissistic individual, Bill had been so successful that he had been able to get away with stepping on people and was relatively clueless about how others felt and how his behavior affected their performance.

A major factor in Bill's behaviour was a mild chronic depression. He did not enjoy things that much and rarely smiled. A great deal of his irritability came from the mild depression. The coach convinced him to try an antidepressant. Bill's snapping at people declined in a few days. In a month he seemed like a different person. With his depression gone he not only felt much less irritable, but had the emotional energy to think about others' feelings and to begin to look at his own behaviour more than he had before. He had many bad habits in how he related to people, but he was now able to begin to look at them and gradually make changes.

Developing your emotional intelligence

It is puzzling that we seek expert advice on improving our golf game but avoid professional advice on how we can deal with other people. We pay personal trainers remarkable fees one or more times a week to encourage us to exercise harder. We avoid, however, engaging an expert to help us learn more about ourselves and others – someone who could help us learn to deal with different types of difficult people. Somehow, we are supposed to be experts on dealing with other people and with our own emotions even though these issues were never formally addressed in our education and training.

You are unlikely to bring about wholesale personality change in someone, but you do not need to. Rounding off rough spots and bringing greater flexibility and responsiveness to situations is all that is needed to make a significant improvement in the quality of the work environment and work output. This is very doable if handled with skill and understanding of what is needed for change.

Enhancing your emotional intelligence is preventative medicine, a vaccine against the development of toxic relationships as well as a suit of armour limiting the damage that toxic managers can do. Emotional intelligence is the key to understanding others' perspectives and needs, resolving conflicts, and wielding influence. It also helps you to know who is dangerous before problems begin, enabling you to take steps to decrease your vulnerability. Emotional intelligence helps you deal with the rigid, aggressive and grandiose behaviour you may be subjected to. Emotional intelligence also enables leaders to find, and then either coach or remove, managers who behave in ways that are toxic to others.

People are born with varying levels of talent for understanding their own feelings and the feelings of others. Nevertheless, with conscious effort most people can make significant strides in improving their emotional intelligence.

The keys to developing your personal competence (self-awareness and self-management) are (1) paying attention to your emotional reactions to situations, (2) enhancing your understanding of why you react as you do (3) thinking of alternate ways to interpret upsetting situations and (4) finding constructive ways to deal with whatever emotional stress remains. The more time you invest in introspection and talking with confidants about how to understand your emotional reactions and behavior, the more your personal competence will grow. A good coach (one who is also trained as a therapist) can speed and deepen the process, as well as remove obstacles that prevent you from accurately understanding your feelings and reactions.

Social competence grows through a similar process: (1) paying attention to the emotions and behaviour of others, (2) seeking to understand others' behaviour through reflection and discussions with third parties, (3) thinking of various ways to deal with situations, and (4) observing the effects of your actions. You do not have to be directly involved in situations to learn from them. You can enhance your social competence by observing others, thinking about why people are behaving and reacting as they do, and seeing what behavior seems helpful in which situations.

Certain psychological issues can present an enormous barrier to developing emotional intelligence. Obstacles include a tendency to interpret situations in ways that lead to self fulfilling prophecies, black and white thinking, having interpretations controlled by past painful memories, and holding attitudes that color your interpretation of experiences. These blinders can block learning. Executive coaching with someone trained as a therapist can remove the obstacles and enable you to learn.

Toxic managers are a fact of life in organizations. Some managers are toxic most of the time; most managers are toxic some of the time. In the end, knowing how to deal with people when they are being rigid, aggressive, self-centered or performing poorly separates the good from the great managers.

About the Author

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