BREAKING DESTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

This week at a resilience webinar I was facilitating someone asked how can we overcome gender-based violence, racism, and xenophobia? Not exactly a question that lends itself to a simple one-liner. But I think there are certain some key elements that we will have to embrace more to understand and move forward together, namely a) empathy; b) deeper listening with an intent to understand, not reply; c) a willingness to actively engage and stay in those uncomfortable discussions with people who are very different to ourselves. We need connect through our shared humanity rather than fixate on our differences. But we also need to look at the genesis of these situations, and they are not dissimilar whether it is in our personal lives, work, or societal spaces.

In having a discussion with a bunch of psychologists around toxic behaviours in the corporate space, one experienced participant made an alarming observation: "If we eradicated toxic behaviour, we would not have anyone left at work!" I am a strong believer in you get what you tolerate, and this declaration shocked me to the core. On reflecting it made me wonder why toxicity is so prevalent. It is in part because we are not clear about what toxic behaviour is/isn't; we minimise the bottom line implications, let alone human cost of this behaviour; and there are pervasive myths that reinforce apathy in addressing it.

Toxic behaviour defined

Toxic behaviour is harmful to an organization, including either its people, reputation, or property. By its nature, toxic behaviour is both contagious and bad for others. NB: A toxic perpetuator is NOT the same as a difficult person, who can make a valuable contribution to the organisation. There has been some recent work done around the dark triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopaths) and tools to measure it. Whilst these are definitely a start, there are many others that warrant inclusion and need to be called out. They include, but are not limited to apathy, passive-aggressive, gossips, blamestormers, credit-stealers, bullies, sexual harassers, information hoarders and gas lighters. *I would love to hear what other toxic behaviours you witness on a regular basis?*

They are toxic because they poison BOTH your system and the organization's ecosystem, making it hard to maintain your own well-being, professionalism, and collaborative spirit when we are around them. Worse yet, working with a toxic perpetuator can negatively impact your job performance and even derail your career if they're allowed to continue their behaviour.

Toxic behaviour does occur on a continuum, with some being unambiguously toxic e.g. sexual harassment, bullying and ethical violations. Then there are shades of grey behaviour which may include: dubious behaviour, upsetting treatment and inappropriate conduct. On the opposite positive end of the continuum is unambiguous prosocial behaviour e.g. respect, integrity, and inclusion.

Toxic perpetuators are often NOT under-performers, so the poor performance management system is not the right medicine. Toxic perpetuators often do not have a desire to change their behaviour, so they can go unchecked for long periods.

The significant cost of toxic behaviour

But don't we all have some of these characteristics in us, and should we act, or will they just naturally work themselves out of the system? Unfortunately, inaction is exactly what breeds further toxicity as it tacitly endorses behaviour if there are no consequences. Should you tolerate the following destructive side-effects on your organisation:

CREATIVITY	ANALYTICAL PROBLEM SOLVING	HELPING OTHERS	CLIENT LOYALTY	MANAGERS TIME
30% Decrease	20% Decrease	26% Decrease	From 80% to 26% Decrease	13% of time cleaning up shrapnel

(Assoc. Prof Christine Porath, Georgetown University Business School, Prof Christine Pearson, Thunderbird School of Global Management – HBR, 2013)

Research by Abby Curnow indicates that the single most important factor in team success or failure is the quality of relationships on the team. In fact, 70% of the variance between the lowest-performing teams, which they call *saboteur teams*, and the highest-performing teams, or what they labelled *loyalist teams*, correlates to the quality of team relationships — not some or most of

Dr. Mark Orpen-Lyall

the relationships, but *all* of them. Thus, one toxic team perpetuator is all it takes to destroy a high-performing team.

Through a poll of 800 managers and employees in 17 industries, <u>Prof Christine Porath</u> learned just how people's reactions play out. Among workers who have been on the receiving end of incivility:

- 78% said that their commitment to the organization declined.

- 66% said that their performance declined, with 48% intentionally decreasing their work effort, 38% intentionally decreased the quality of their work.

- 63% lost work time avoiding the offender and 47% intentionally decreased the time spent at work.

- 25% admitted to taking their frustration out on customers.

Many managers would say that incivility is wrong, but not all recognize that it has tangible costs. Targets of incivility often punish their offenders and the organization, although most hide or bury their feelings and do not necessarily think of their actions as revenge.

Myths that perpetuate toxic behaviour

1. Managers believe they would know if there was toxic behaviour in their teams. Sometimes it is obvious, but often through filtering, protection by powerful allies, contagion, and fear (toxic perpetrators are not stupid) it is masked.

2. The belief that the toxic perpetuator is irreplaceable or/is a good producer. <u>Research</u> has shown categorically that team performance goes up when toxicity is addressed/removed.

3. Toxic behaviour can be dealt with individually, on a case by case basis. Prosocial and toxic contagious behaviour always exists within a context. First create the right system and then engage individually. If you do not, cultural sustainability is impaired through randomness.

4. Adults are not kids; we cannot teach them good behaviour. So, you are saying adults cannot learn? Ideally you want to be hiring the right people up front, but there will always be a need to close some gaps.

Dr. Mark Orpen-Lyall

Breaking bad solutions

1. Start with oneself. Do an audit of the toxic behaviours and start moderating your behaviour if you happen to be exhibiting any of them. Find someone you trust that will hold you to account and get them to observe your progress and feedback to you.

2. Systemic approach. Toxic behaviour is the result of organisational, team and individual complicity. Addressing only one level of the problem will never resolve the inter-connected nature of toxicity. Some practical approaches across the three levels include:
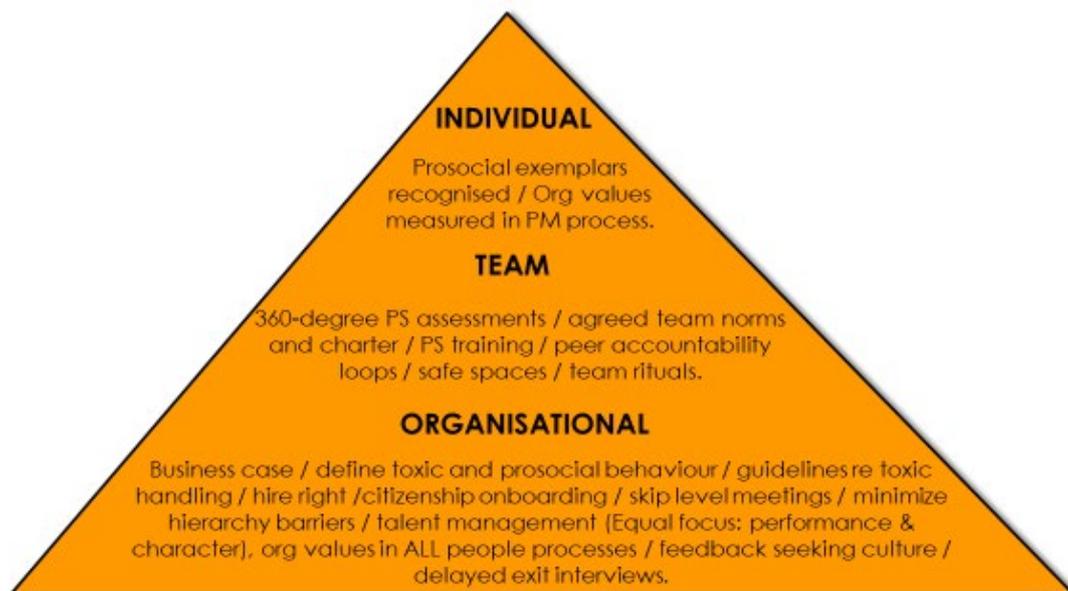
3. Team norms. Get the team to define both prosocial and toxic behaviour. It is not just about identifying the negative but providing a positive alternative that is key. With the team run facilitated sessions where they explore the following questions: Does toxic behaviour occur at work? Do you want to be part of a toxic-free workplace experiment for 6 months? Identify and define toxic/prosocial behaviours. Capture these behaviours on a poster, sign and hang on the wall. Every week at the team meeting reflect on how we are doing with regards non-toxic behaviour.

Dr. Mark Orpen-Lyall

4. Positive reinforcement for prosocial behaviour. We are implementing in some of our client organisations psychological safety and evaluating using brief, 360-degree tools people's contribution to the team dynamic. By using peer-based feedback peoples prosocial/toxic contributions are recognised and then addressed.

5. Acting when the system is breached. As the manager you need to:

   a) **Check yourself.** Look at how you may have contributed to the situation, what do you tolerate, and what are you going to have to stop/start doing going forward.

   b) **Situational awareness.** Talk to the person to try to understand what is causing their behaviour. (This is not about absolution, but you do need to understand their side as well, reality depends on where you are standing).

   c) **Unambiguous conversations are crucial.** Non-Violent Communication is a powerful, yet simple methodology to apply in difficult conversations. *"When ....(observation), I feel .....(emotion) because I am needing some.....(universal need). Would you be able to...(request)?"* Sometimes the request part falls away due to the seriousness of the situation.

   d) **Quarantine.** Look for ways to minimize interactions between the toxic perpetuator and the rest of your team.

   e) **Monitor, re-assess and remove.** Then provide a reasonable time to change their behaviour, with clear check-in sessions where they and you provide evidence of growth or backsliding. You should always be aiming to elevate people's performance and behaviour, but there will be times when you will need to take serious actions that may end their work relationship.

   As the manager do not lose:

   f) **Dignity.** Do not bring the individual situation up with the team in detail. Just say you are taking care of it. (Praise in public, punish in private.)

   g) **Perspective.** Do not get so wrapped up in handling the issue that you ignore your top performers and other responsibilities.

   h) **Process integrity.** Do not try to terminate the person unless you have documented the behaviour, its impact, and your response and consulted IR/HR. There are procedural and substantive factors you will need to align to, otherwise you may be charged with unfair dismissal.

Dr. Mark Orpen-Lyall

How do you know when it is time to leave?

In couples therapy, the Gottman Institute uses a highly predictive approach to ascertain if the relationship is salvageable. The couple tells their "Story of Us"—how they met, some of their struggles, their most positive memories, what they believe to be true about their relationship. There may be a fair dose of negativity. But if the couple can *glorify the struggle*, that is, make light of the bad and deeply appreciate the good that came from it, then they can likely fix whatever is wrong through effective interventions.

However, if that story is entirely negative, if even the positive memories of first becoming attracted are absent or viewed negatively, then the couple will likely split or stay together but lead parallel, non-intersecting lives in which they do not trust one another and will not feel connected. Superimpose your life partner with your organisation and see what comes up.

In conclusion, you get what you tolerate in life. Let us make our workplaces and lives in general better by creating environments where people thrive, not hide.

Dr. Mark Orpen-Lyall