

Introduction

Differential Diagnosis: Coach, Consultant, and Client

The reckless behavior of a CEO can be studied and addressed at the level of the brain cell, the brain, the individual organism, the individual psyche, the executive team, the company and society. . . . A coach who is limited to one level only, and on that level to one method only, is like someone who uses a hammer to drive nails, fasten screws and bolts and even to paint. . . . From a systems point of view, however, this does not make any sense at all. Many very good hypotheses and explanations about issues such as leadership co-exist on different levels at the same time.

—T. Comperolle, *Coach and Couch*

In this book I share a conversation that is taking place increasingly often behind closed corporate doors. It is a conversation frequently held between leadership coaches, management consultants, organizational scholars, and corporate clients. The line of questioning that tends to dominate these talks resonates in CEOs' chambers and trickles down to the factory floors of Fortune 500 firms. They are typically belated and reluctant inquiries into the darker, counterproductive, and destructive side of the workplace. The questions fall under the heading of toxic leadership:

- What do we do about leaders who are toxic? How do we handle high achievers who also bring deviant and destructive behaviors into our organizations?
- Why do colleagues, followers, and executive boards empower, shield, or avoid toxic leaders?
- Is there any way to positively address our concerns over the delicacy surrounding dealing with toxic leaders?
- How does an organization approach and request accountability from an absentee leader?

- Who in our organization is qualified and ready to assess and intervene when faced with destructive behavior? Can we act before the damage escalates?
- Why have our human resource experts, supervisors, and managers illustrated a lack of readiness or reluctance to respond to toxic behaviors?

When a CEO, a director of aerospace engineering, a business school dean, or a chief cardiac surgeon undermines productivity with condescending and demeaning behavior toward subordinates, how does this affect colleagues, customers, stakeholders, and the entire organization? Surely every corporate officer, president, and executive board member is entitled to a bad day, an occasional loss of temper, or a conflict with a subordinate. But what if the leader's behavior is part of an emotionally unintelligent pattern that negatively affects coworkers, wreaks havoc in the workplace, and spreads companywide? Does such behavior mean that he, or she, is a toxic leader?

THE STAKES ARE HIGH

The spread of destructive behavior requires scrutiny. As a toxic leader goes, so may the company go. Are toxic leaders individually grown and identifiable through DNA and brain mapping, or are they also the products of poisonous business environments? In the aftermath of more than a few corporate scandals (think Enron and Arthur Andersen), it has become fashionable to express some knowledge of leaders who are sociopaths, narcissists, and snakes in suits. Occasionally a rotten leader is abruptly identified and appears in a prime-time media venue reserved for corporate bad boys. Questions abound. Should an organization continue to invest in a toxic leader? Can a seemingly nasty university provost or dysfunctional CEO profit from the detoxification training of a leadership coach? Or will it require the swift removal of the rotten apple in order to eliminate the toxic source? Confronted with pressing problems of turnover, absenteeism, and grievances, can an organization turn to a leadership coach or management consultant for swift interventions and resolution?

Be prepared. The dark side of leadership requires unusual insight, savvy, and patience. Do not expect a seasoned management consultant or coach to neatly diagnose and exorcise a toxic leader from your organization. Such instances are fairly uncommon. Coaches and consultants will testify to the fact that corporate toxicity rarely has a single cause, leader, or culprit. Comparative negligence is a fact. Even the most toxic of leaders is interwoven within the

workings of the organization. The broader system is inevitably in the mix. Most likely, a toxic leader is embedded in a dysfunctional organization housing deviance, poor policies, avoidance behavior, and a negligent approach to social intelligence, team building, and collaboration. Any attempts at isolating Kenneth Lay and Jeff Skilling from Enron, of separating Dennis Kozlowski from Tyco, or of disconnecting Bernard Madoff from a brokerage firm and numerous players affiliated with his Ponzi scheme are doomed to naïveté and failure. Destructive leaders require investors, followers, and a supportive and sustainable network of true believers and toxic cohorts seeded throughout the organization.

Perhaps you are curious about how to handle a toxic leader or have had experience with one. Are you presently concerned enough to explore your organization's readiness to deal with destructive leadership? Have you addressed downside protection? Here I intend to illuminate the workings of toxicity to the extent that you will consider moving forward and addressing the darker side of leaders. I am confident that you will see elements of yourself and your organization in the consulting cases presented in this book. As the inevitability of toxic behavior becomes increasingly apparent, the need to address bad leadership turns into a high-level priority. How do you proceed? Are your human resource people up to the task? Do they have adequate training and experience in clinical psychology, psychopathology, leadership, and relationship building to really hone in on toxic behavior? Are managers sufficiently trained and empowered as toxin detectors and toxin healers? Does your business stress relationship, communication, and people skills in annual workplace appraisals of leaders? Have you considered the prospects for more closely and systematically monitoring the soft-tissue or relationship side of your workplace? How much thought has been given to developing internal coaching and consulting to promote and sustain positive teamwork and leaders? Do you sufficiently value successful collaboration and authentic, visionary leadership?

DETAILED NARRATIVES AND THICK DESCRIPTIONS

In this book I answer these questions by ushering you into a world of toxic leaders and organizations. I am committed to immersing you in something more than the usual array of metrics, theories, and sound-bite versions of destructive leaders. Here you will find detailed narratives and thick descriptions of organizational culture, conflict, communication breakdowns, and struggles to locate the nexus of toxicity and do something about it. In serving as a coach I sometimes find myself unangling and debriefing organizations that have been

traumatized by leaders through poorly conceived or clandestine versions of 360-degree feedback (see glossary). As the external expert I am at times called upon to work with companies to sort through the efforts of a previous consultant who was manipulated by a toxic leader to generate skewed data. Extremely bright executives are quite capable of manipulating their external experts and spreading their toxicity throughout the organization.

By sharing stories of function and dysfunction I hope to create a qualitative data base that extends our conversation and provides deeper insight into the many faces of toxicity. Ultimately, by the close of this book, I trust you will be closer to accurately recognizing toxicity and understanding the preventive measures that an organization can take. Moreover, there may be reason to consider employing external management consultants and leadership coaches to extend an organization's detoxification and recovery repertoire. I describe the positive concepts, strategies, and actions that can be utilized in day-to-day operations. In the final chapter I examine how leader toxicity presents both serious challenges and unprecedented opportunity for organizational development and growth. At times there is a fine line between trauma and renewal, crisis and rejuvenation, negative and positive deviance, and deficit and abundance gaps.

TOXIC LEADERS ARE DIFFICULT TO DETECT

As the consultant and coach I provide an insider's view of classified corporate operations and struggles. It is an exercise in making the invisible visible. In the following pages I open the previously closed corporate doors of Bentley Pacific, North Country Solutions, SkyWaves Aerospace, Eisenhower Heart Institute, Jarling-Weber Inc., and EuroText International to reveal the intricacies and complexities of toxic leaders and dysfunctional organizations. Toxic leaders may be quite difficult to detect. They are frequently protected by their followers and corporate brethren. They typically do not act alone. They are empowered by, fueled by, and serve as players in webs of destructive behavior populated by colleagues, executive boards, policy makers, customers, and stakeholders. Productivity, profits, and quarterly reports rule. The quality of human relationships is swept aside. Emotional intelligence becomes a footnote, an afterthought. Greed and power plays emerge.

There are many complex organizational scenarios conducive to the high incidence of toxic leaders. In Chapter 3 I tell the story of a human resources (HR) director who looks the other way while a heart surgeon has repeated angry

exchanges with his surgical team. The threat of death-by-surgery and medical malpractice is unattended to and escalates daily. A few members of the surgeon's team filed grievances against him, banding together to make their leader look as bad as possible. Eisenhower executives initially bought into this "fish rots from the head down" routine and greeted an external leadership coach with the assessment that "the doctor is guilty as charged." But the consultants looked beyond the client's incomplete internal assessment and provided a differential diagnosis (see glossary) of the dysfunctional cardiology division; they resisted the client's indictment and ostracizing of the surgeon.

The morality plays at stake shed light on basic truths inseparable from power, competition, destructive coalitions, and the difficulty of unraveling truth within a complex organizational system. Single, simple causality is for simple minds. Multiple causality is what the consultant typically uncovers—even when all client roads and assessments appear to point toward a solo toxic source.

TALKING SHOP

Talking shop is all about bringing outsiders into the field and firing line of real-time consulting and coaching assignments and providing you with an insider's vantage point. I speak to multiple professional audiences: upper echelon corporate leaders and executive boards; managers and HR directors; leadership coaches and management consultants; organizational behavior, leadership, psychology, and human communication scholars, as well as their MBA and doctoral students; and a litany of intelligent readers who are on a quest to unravel troubling human behavior in high places.

I see myself as an action researcher engaged with leaders and immersed in client organizations, doing work not unlike that conducted by anthropologists. In describing conflicts, destructive behavior, and toxic leadership, I attempt to also include strategic nuance and detail central to the unfolding psychological and organizational theater. At times I am in the middle of the action and allow the organizational drama to speak for itself.

Worth mentioning is a core distinction made by theorists in neighboring research streams. Under the heading of "organizational misbehavior" (OMB, see glossary) it has been stated that *OMB researchers limit themselves to assessing and studying only intentional misbehavior, not unintentional acts*. I wrestled long and hard with this distinction and find that it does not hold up for me. In consulting and coaching work I frequently find unruly and darkly complex motives entangled with organizational misbehavior. Surely toxic leaders harbor both

intentional and unintentional motives. How do we draw the line between intentional and unintentional misbehavior and between low-level and high-level toxicity in our leaders? Certainly there are unscrupulous executives who fit the profile of the toxic snake in a suit whose behaviors are premeditated. They are motivated by greed and personal aggrandizement. But other leaders are driven by their brilliance and a dark underbelly of pathology not quite under their conscious control.

Perhaps because of my clinical psychology and psychotherapy background I am especially intrigued by those relatively “good bosses” who incorporate significant degrees of unintentionally toxic behavior. For example, among leaders diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (see glossary), I have often found that their abrasive, hyperactive, and frequently demeaning behavior with colleagues is largely unintentional and not under their conscious control. Research currently under way in the neuroscience of leadership holds some promise for better understanding some of the hardwiring of psychological afflictions and disorders that lead to unintentionally toxic behavior. For example, in this book you will find several references to leaders who I suspected might be suffering from intermittent explosive disorder (see glossary), and that that might be the source of their hurtful behavior. In other words, some leaders are not significantly in control of their own emotions and lack adequate ability to censor public displays of affection, grief, or anger.

Under clinical supervision, leaders suffering from depression, intermittent explosive disorder, antisocial personality disorder, or narcissistic personality disorder can substantially improve and go through a detoxification process (see Chapter 6). Accordingly, woven throughout the narratives you will find clinical interpretations and questions pertaining to the need for a bona fide psychological diagnosis of allegedly toxic leaders grounded in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association* (DSM IV-TR) (see glossary). The lack of an ability to make an internal DSM IV-TR diagnosis may represent a significant shortcoming in attempting to assess toxic leadership behavior. Central is the organizational readiness and the ability of managers-as-counselors to include toxicity in their everyday repertoires. Along these lines, it behooves supervisors and human resource professionals to function as toxin detectors and handlers on the firing line.

In addition, the employee assistance program (EAP) may be the corpora-

tion's only internal entity trained and qualified to diagnose psychological disorders. Assuming that a leader does in fact warrant a DSM IV-TR diagnosis, this in turn becomes confidential or privileged information unless the leader/client is identified as a danger to self (DTS) or a danger to others (DTO) in the workforce. As will be revealed in these pages, the organization's repertoire of responses to an allegedly difficult or toxic leader will rest with this critical determination—a verdict that can be a serious point of healing or contention.

Overall, expanding and enhancing an organization's repertoire for assessment of toxicity is a major step in the right direction. Managers, leaders, consultants, coaches, and researchers can profit from a broad-based interdisciplinary approach to human behavior in the workplace. I urge you to be suspicious of simplistic causality and those who point toward a single source of organizational deviance. Entertain a broader approach and be open to a differential diagnosis—whether it is achieved inside your organization or through the expertise of an external consultant. A counselor consultant should be patient and humane, earn employees' trust, be a good listener, solicit detailed narratives from colleagues and subordinates, conduct extensive interviews that include anecdotal information, and work on the assumption that many destructive behaviors and relationships in the workplace require time and curiosity to unravel. Leaders should strive to enter into dialogue with experts from a variety of perspectives that can shed light on the broad range of leadership and workplace behavior. Superior leaders, coaches, and consultants conduct far-reaching searches for information and often benefit from professional and innovative partnerships with experts in such areas as: organizational behavior; strategy; projects management; leadership; industrial and organizational psychology; management consulting; executive coaching; psychotherapy; and counseling psychology. As a practitioner and scholar I combine an eclectic array of disciplines and perspectives in clinical leadership coaching, management consulting, and organizational therapy.

I invite you to join me in what I trust will be an interesting and sometimes intriguing inside look at companies on the brink, organizations in confusion and decline, corporations unaware of incipient toxicity, upper echelon leaders in search of a voice, the transformation of organizational deficits into abundance, and the turning of leader toxicity into opportunity.

In compliance with client privilege and confidentiality requirements central to counseling psychology, coaching, and consulting I have changed the names

of the leaders, officers, players, and organizations whose stories appear in this book.

Note that throughout the text I use quotation marks liberally as a means of quoting and paraphrasing snippets of actual conversations and dialogues with clients and calling attention to the tone and type of language involved in sometimes bizarre, difficult, and emotionally laden communication.