



Managing Organizational Pain in Academic Health Centers

BY R. KEVIN GRIGSBY, DSW

Despite dire predictions, academic health centers (AHCs) continue to survive, and in some cases, to thrive.¹ These complex organizations present a plethora of challenges to organizational leaders. All too often, conflicts among departments, work units, and individuals result in an organizational environment that is less efficient and less satisfying for the individuals comprising the human element of the organization. Emotional pain, often in the form of anger, sadness, fear, and confusion (and often leading to overt conflict between individuals or groups), is generated in the course of everyday workplace activities. Left unchecked, an undesirable by-product known as *organizational toxicity* will emerge and manifest in a loss of self worth, feelings of hopelessness, and a loss of energy and drive on the part of individuals in the organization.² Management of this pain is necessary if an organization is to be successful in the creation of a workplace where working together adds value to work units, individuals, and the organization as a whole. In turn, fulfilling the organizational missions becomes a more gratifying experience.

Recent contributions to the professional business literature have identified persons within organizations who “voluntarily shoulder the sadness and the anger that are endemic to organizational life.”³ These individuals, known as *toxin handlers*, manage organizational pain and, as such, are of great strategic value. In AHCs, the dean of faculty affairs or director of human resources frequently serves as a *formal* toxin handler and, as such, plays a critical role in managing organizational pain. Typically, they are not the only persons involved in mitigating organizational pain. In addition to individuals who formally shoulder sadness and anger endemic to life in an organization, *informal* toxin handlers exist within organizations

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and are equally critical to the success of the organization. Formal toxin handlers are seldom acknowledged or rewarded for much of this work within organizations, but informal toxin handlers may be overlooked entirely, often at the expense of the individual. These individuals may be deans, department chairs, division chiefs, or simply trusted peers in the organization. Acknowledging their presence and rewarding them for serving in this role leads to improved organizational performance.

What Is Organizational Pain?

Organizational pain is the emotional or affective response of individuals in an organization to events occurring in the everyday life of the organization. Organizational pain is ubiquitous—and inevitable.

Painful events may be obvious, such as downsizing and related layoffs, widely publicized accounting irregularities, and mergers (or failed mergers). Other painful events may be less obvious, such as changes in leadership, a shift in organizational culture, or the loss of market share. Painful events may elicit a positive—or negative—response. Ineffective responses to organizational pain detract from and, at times, may destroy an environment conducive to success. The faulty belief that the organization can ignore organizational pain until it “blows over” often compounds the problem. When an individual’s attitudes or an organization’s policies disregard “the emotional attachment people have to their contributions to work,” the result can be the creation of an emotionally toxic environment.⁴

The notion that a pain-free environment can be created is unrealistic. Managing organizational pain within the environment is possible, however, especially when approached proactively. Leaders should recognize that some toxin handlers are already at work mitigating pain without ever being asked to take action. A workplace environment that promotes success requires, at best, a proactive approach, and, at least, a reactive response of the organization. Danger lurks in doing nothing, as passivity in response to the natural occurrence of painful organizational events promotes organizational toxicity.

Role of the Toxin Handler

It is critical that organizations understand the role of the toxin handler and, in turn, acknowledge and reward him or her for the value added to the organization, as these persons play a key role in organizational success.

Toxin handlers alleviate organizational pain in five ways. In formal and informal meetings with individuals and group, they:

- ❖ Listen empathetically.
- ❖ Suggest solutions.
- ❖ Work behind the scenes to prevent pain.
- ❖ Carry the confidences of others.
- ❖ Reframe difficult messages.⁵

The behavioral manifestation of *empathetic listening* is “lending an ear” to a colleague, student, or staff member when she or he has experienced a painful organizational event. Sometimes, the toxin handler does nothing more than to listen to another ventilate feelings of disappointment, anger, or feeling neglected. Responses may include nothing more than “tell me more” or a nod of the head. Empathetic listening validates the speaker’s feelings. Even if the person’s perceptions are off-target, the toxin handler is experiencing an emotional reaction to those perceptions. Although this may sound much

like psychotherapy, it is not. The sole focus is, and should remain, limited to organizational issues. It is neither fruitful nor appropriate for the toxin handler to assume the role of therapist—although the work may be therapeutic in the context of the organization.

Suggesting solutions offers the opportunity to develop alternative perspectives and approaches to resolving, reducing, or managing pain. This may take the form of brainstorming, recalling or reviewing what has happened in the past in similar cases, or making the decision to involve more formal actions to make the organizational pain less intense.

Some toxin handlers have a proclivity for *working behind the scenes* to prevent organizational pain. This is not to say that they are invested in trying to avoid experiencing pain. To the contrary, these persons have an uncanny ability to sense the potential for pain and to intervene to effectively prevent its manifestation. In some cases, individuals may be referred to as “natural peacemakers,” as they have no formal training in how to prevent pain—they just do it.

Carrying the confidences of others requires the toxin handler to be sensitive and respectful of coworkers. Trust is paramount, as sensitive information about one’s feelings is often shared in describing reactions to organizational pain or to the potential for organizational pain. When individuals expect to have a “difficult conversation” with a coworker or if they have received painful news, those individuals can often



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find comfort sharing that information with someone he or she trusts.

Reframing difficult messages requires translation skills on the part of toxin handlers. Often, the intended message of the speaker does not result in the expected impact of the message. The recipient of the message may need assistance in understanding that she or he has misinterpreted the intended meaning. The linguist Deborah Tannen describes this situation aptly: “Every time we open our mouths to speak, we are taking a leap of faith—faith that what we say will be understood by our listeners, more or less as we mean it.”⁶ Misunderstanding can lead to both acute “flare-ups” of organizational pain or to chronic pain in the organization. Reframing involves stating the message in language

familiar to the listener as a means for helping the listener “get it.”

Value of the Toxin Handler

Toxin handlers add value to organizations in many ways. At present, rapid change is a fact of life in most AHCs. Leadership turnover, declining bottom lines, and downsizing of personnel can all be sources of organizational pain, even during periods of relative organizational stability. Organizational instability and rapid change can lead to acceleration in the generation of organizational pain. A climate in which uncertainty is rampant is often manifested in collective anxiety, a form of organizational pain stemming from the ambiguity endemic to rapid organizational change.

Toxin handlers detect collective anxiety early in the change process. They intervene to minimize and manage the pain, and by doing so add value to the organization. In effect, toxin handlers play a critical role in the creation of a humane workplace.

The Bottom Line: Recognizing, Supporting, and Rewarding Toxin Handlers

Moses et al. believe that two fundamental changes must occur in academic medical centers to meet the challenge of the future. They argue that the ties between academic and private practitioners must be strengthened and that the organizational structure of AHCs must be simplified.⁷ As these fundamental changes occur, organizational pain will be endemic. Even in an ideal organization, it is unlikely that management of organizational pain will be systematic and comprehensive. Toxin handlers, whether formal or informal, will help to mitigate the organizational pain that is a result of the status quo or as a result of rapid change.

Frost and Robinson recommend several actions in support of toxin handlers. The first is simply to acknowledge that toxin handlers exist and serve an important role. Second is to create opportunities for toxin handlers to share experiences with one another and to support one another. In fact, the organization may need to import an expert on the topic to facilitate the creation of support networks. Finally, some toxin handlers may need respite from the stressful environment or may need to exit the

Why Are Toxin Handlers Motivated to Handle Organizational Pain?

There is no single factor responsible for motivating toxin handlers to do what they do. They manage organizational pain for several reasons. For formal toxin handlers, it is a function of the position held in the organization, e.g., the human resources manager. For informal toxin handlers, coworkers may have placed them in the role because of preexisting personal characteristics, e.g., they are trustworthy and solution-focused and may have a track record of successfully solving problems.

Other toxin handlers have a very high tolerance for organizational pain. As such, they are able to focus on problem solving

without distraction from the pain they may be experiencing. Some toxin handlers are more perceptive of the human aspects of the organization or may be more empathic than the typical person in the organization. As such, they may detect developing organizational pain earlier than others. For others, they see managing organizational pain as a means to an end remaining focused on managing the pain as part of accomplishing organizational goals. Finally, some toxin handlers are motivated to manage pain because it brings them satisfaction. In essence, they feel “called” to do this job.⁷

stressful environment entirely.⁸

Ultimately, recognizing, supporting, and rewarding toxic handlers in AHCs will help the organization to function more effectively and efficiently—even in the midst of rapid change. ❖

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