

CHAPTER 1

Emotional Intelligence Approach to Coping with Toxic Managers and Subordinates

What Do I Do with These People?

Informed Consent for Those Who Read This Book

Politics and personalities present tremendous obstacles to your ability to do the work for which you were hired. To succeed in your job, you need to know how to navigate through these obstacles without crashing on the rocks or having someone drop a rock on your head. You need to be able to deal with different types of bosses and subordinates, some of whom are flexible and easy to work with, many of whom are abrasive or arbitrary.

As you progress up the ladder, you will encounter people with a wide range of personalities. Some are fair, considerate, and flexible, with styles that fit in nicely with your own personality and work style. Others are fair,

considerate, and flexible, but have styles that do not fit in well with yours. Yet others are unfair, inconsiderate, and rigid—and you curse the day the company hired them. Some of these managers think that they are heaven’s gift to your company, even though working with them makes you wonder why the heavens have decided to punish you so severely. Some behave as if they are in a war zone and you are the enemy.

Remarkable things occur in organizations. Otherwise nice people often behave in remarkably offensive ways under the pressure of organizational life. Moreover, there are many people in organizations who are not nice, and organizational stresses and politics bring out sides of them that are truly awful.

Toxic managers are a reality in organizational life. Your ability to deal with such managers will have a significant impact on your career. The difference between stars and average managers is often the ability to deal with the hardest situations, including the most difficult people. Some of these will be your bosses, some will be your subordinates, and some will be your customers and suppliers. The knowledge you gain from reading this book will help you deal with these people and avoid letting them derail your projects and your career. This book 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. This book will also help you manage toxic subordinates more effectively so that they will be an asset to your group rather than a time bomb. Toxic managers are a fact of life—how they affect your life depends upon the skills you develop to deal with them.

Senior management is also deeply affected by the presence of toxic managers because of their profound destructive impact on the organization. Grandiose, aggressive, and rigid managers damage morale. Faced with toxic superiors, people in your organization may withdraw, fail to share valuable information, no longer have the energy or incentive to go the extra mile, lose creativity, become irritable and oppositional, and leave. This book will help senior managers to recognize toxic managers early—hopefully before they are hired but certainly before they rise to positions of power within the organization.

The book will also help senior managers to manage toxic subordinates. A toxic manager can often function reasonably well in one position but create havoc in another. The Peter Principle—the tendency for people to rise to their level of incompetence—most commonly occurs when someone with troublesome personality traits (rigidity, narcissism, aggression) performs well in a position that shields him from the worst aspects of his personality. Senior management fails to pick up on the signs of the manager’s toxic traits or fails to realize how the traits will sabotage the manager’s

ability to succeed in a new position. Recognizing toxic personality traits quickly and knowing in which positions the manager will perform poorly can spare the manager and the organization serious problems.

We all have abrasive edges, ways of behaving that inconvenience others. Managers differ in their ability to control and resolve their toxic traits and thereby become people you want to have in your company. Their ability to contain their rough edges depends to a great extent upon what lies below the surface: their underlying personality traits. If a manager is irritable and yells because of depression or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), appropriate medication can rapidly make an enormous difference in his or her behavior. A manager who yells because he or she came from a culture in which yelling is acceptable may be able to change relatively rapidly with education and practice. Managers with deeply ingrained personality disorders, such as marked narcissistic traits, will remain a problem for a very long time, probably until you fire them. Understanding the various types of toxic managers and what lies under their behavior will help senior management to know who to invest resources in trying to change, who to move to a new position requiring different skills, and who to encourage to leave.

Even when managers' personality traits are not severely impairing, the ability to quickly size up their personality style, along with knowledge of the impact of that style on work processes, will enable you to assign them to positions in which they are most likely to succeed. Sometimes, an outgoing, mildly grandiose, overly self-confident, and domineering manager is the most effective person to drive a project. On other occasions such managers can snatch defeat from the jaws of victory as they disrupt a team's functioning.

Attention to personality styles and problematic traits can also improve your ability to construct teams. Teams benefit from having people with a variety of styles for analyzing situations, dealing with data, and dealing with people. Teams need someone to focus attention on the work effort and make sure that problems are analyzed dispassionately. Teams also need someone to see to the human needs of team members and thereby maintain morale. Teams need people who are creative and who see the overall picture as well as members who pay attention to details and make sure that they are taken care of. Teams benefit from having some people who can keep their eyes on the main objective and others who keep their eyes open to new opportunities.

It is often difficult to create a team in which no member has toxic traits, since a high percentage of people do. How many team members can have such traits and what type of toxic behaviors can be mixed without crippling

the team's function is therefore important to consider in building a team. A team may be able to tolerate one grandiose individual but is likely to run into marked turmoil if it has multiple grandiose members. Depending upon the type of rigidity, a team may function well with several rigid people on it, or it may become totally deadlocked. Aggressive managers are also a problem, but can often be adequately contained if people are aware of their problematic personality traits early and act to constrain them before too much damage is done. The more you know about managers' styles and how flexible they are, the better you will be able to assign people to positions in which they will succeed, avoid placing them where disaster could strike, and construct teams that are highly productive.

Emotional Intelligence Approach

This book aims to develop your emotional intelligence in the critical areas of dealing with difficult people. Emotional intelligence entails both being able to understand and having the skills to cope with your own feelings and the feelings of others. Considerable research during the past decade has shown how critical emotional intelligence is to business success.

Components of emotional intelligence include personal and social competence. Personal competence refers to the ability to understand your own feelings, strengths, and weaknesses, and the ability to deal with the feelings in appropriate ways rather than having them adversely affect your performance. For example, being able to contain your anger and anxiety and thereby think clearly in upsetting situations is crucial to making good decisions and effectively influencing others.

Social competence is the ability to understand what others are feeling and having the skills to effectively work with others. The ability to understand what is going on in a group or organization, to influence people, and to foster cooperation is the most important work of leadership and management.

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
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There are several good books that discuss the importance of emotional intelligence and how to develop general emotional intelligence skills that work with reasonable people. Dan Goleman's *Working With Emotional Intelligence* and *Primal Leadership* are particularly noteworthy.

Much of the time, however, we are faced with people who are not reasonable. Emotional intelligence entails having the skills to deal with toxic

individuals as well as with those who are not difficult. Dealing with toxic individuals requires specialized skills, including an understanding of toxic personality traits and emotional problems that can impair performance. By providing you with an understanding of why difficult people behave as they do, recommendations on how to deal with such people, and how not to be undone by them, this book will help you to develop your emotional intelligence.

This book can also be helpful to difficult managers who have some capacity for insight into themselves but have difficulty containing their emotions, understanding others' feelings, or skillfully dealing with others. It can help difficult managers spot problematic patterns in their relationships and work styles, and can point the way to the skills they need to develop. For those managers adversely affected by anxiety, depression, attention deficit disorder, or posttraumatic stress disorder, recognizing the impact of these problems and then seeking help can often lead to rapid, marked improvements in functioning.

Developing Your Emotional Intelligence

Despite the importance of learning how to deal with difficult people, there is relatively little formal education available on how to deal with office politics and personalities. Rather, you often learn as apprentices do—by observing those above you. Those above you, however, have also never had formal education. Moreover, many of those above you are difficult people from whom you should only learn what not to do.

For many people, simply reading this book and applying its recommendations will foster significant improvement in troubling work relationships. For others, the book will be a prelude to engaging an executive coach. Having read the book should help the coaching experience to move much farther and faster than would otherwise have occurred. You will get the most out of the book if you stop and think about people you have known who fit into the various categories discussed, what problems they caused, what it was like for you to deal with them, and how they reacted to different interventions. Questions at the end of each chapter are designed to facilitate this exercise.

It is puzzling that we seek expert advice on improving our golf game but avoid professional advice on how to deal with other people. We pay for fashion consultants, someone to help with presentation skills, and

interior decorators. 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 stressful 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.

People can make changes themselves and can effect change in others. You are unlikely to bring about wholesale personality change, but you do not need to. Rounding off rough spots and bringing greater flexibility and responsiveness to situations that most seriously affect your colleagues 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.

Roots of Toxic Behavior

Underneath toxic behaviors are either toxic personality traits or disorders of mood or impulsivity. By personality traits, we mean enduring patterns of perceiving, interpreting, and relating to the world and oneself. In other words, personality traits concern how someone has learned to understand the world and his or her place in it. The toxic behaviors discussed in this book include narcissism, aggression, rigidity, and unethical behavior.

There are a variety of belief systems that underlie aggression. Ruthless managers perceive the world as a dog-eat-dog competition in which people are out to get you, and if you are not a predator, you will become someone's prey. Bullies obtain a perverse pleasure by intimidating others. Other aggressive individuals chronically view themselves as victims, and what others view as aggression they see as self-defense or compensation for wrongs done to them. Frantic and volatile managers have enduring problems modulating the intensity of their feelings and are often flooded by them.

Similarly, there are a variety of views of the world that can drive rigid behavior. Dictatorial and authoritarian managers believe that strict hierarchical organization and control are the best way for the world to work. Compulsive managers fear chaos in the world and in themselves. Oppositional and passive-aggressive individuals feel that their autonomy is constantly being threatened, and they must push back in order to defend themselves.

Narcissistic personality traits (arrogance, devaluation of others, limited empathy and conscience) play an important role in several types of toxic managerial behavior. The self-preoccupation, devaluation of others, and limited empathy and conscience of narcissistic managers free them to behave in markedly aggressive, controlling and unethical ways. People without narcissistic traits may want to behave in these ways at times but constrain themselves out of respect for other people.

Problems of mood and attention are generally more readily treated than are personality traits. Mood and attention have large, biological components and can readily change with medication. In contrast, personality traits depend upon the models in your head concerning how the world works, what type of person you are, and what your place is in the world (your identity). These mental models cannot be directly affected by medication and generally change slowly in psychotherapy.

However, when people are stressed by anxiety, depression, trauma, ADHD, alcohol, drugs, or a toxic environment, any tendency they have for aggressive, rigid, or narcissistic behavior intensifies. They may appear to have a personality disorder even if they do not. Treating the underlying mood problem can lead to rapid improvement. In fact, a lifetime of difficult personality traits can almost vanish if the underlying chronic depression or ADHD is treated.

An organization's culture, role models, and performance measurement system are also important in determining managerial behavior. They can either inhibit or foster toxic behavior in an individual who would otherwise behave in problematic ways. Figure 1-1 shows the factors that drive or inhibit toxic behavior.

Why Understand Difficult People?

Why should you try to understand difficult people? Why not just heed recommendations on how to respond to difficult behavior?

The key to changing problematic behavior is understanding what factors drive it and then designing an intervention to affect these causal factors. Interventions that would lead to a positive change in a manager with one underlying personality type could lead to intensification of the behavior in someone with another type. For example, aggressive behavior may be driven by fear and insecurity, by cluelessness, or by a ruthless desire to dominate

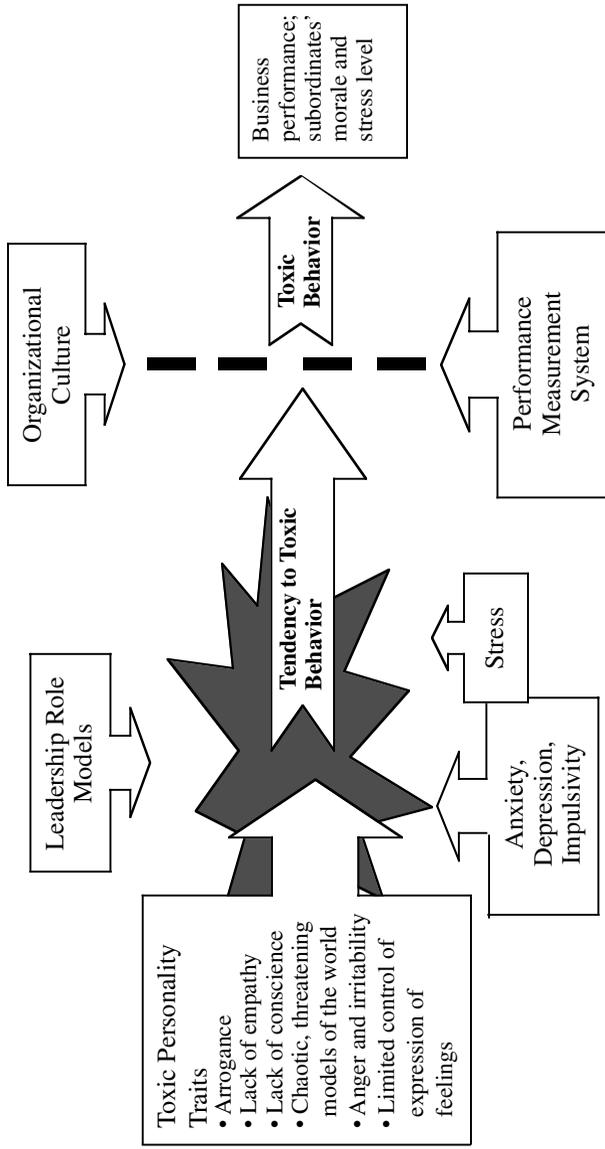


Figure 1-1 Factors driving and containing toxic behavior.

and control people. Managers whose aggression arises from fear and insecurity are likely to calm down if treated with tolerance and reassurance. Tolerance of aggression arising from ruthlessness, however, is likely to exacerbate the situation. Similarly, while a strong negative response to aggressive 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 them to behave in ways that are helpful. The more you know about what motivates people with different styles, the better you will be able to defend yourself and encourage them to cooperate with you and provide the work products you need to do your own job.

Senior management and human resources 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, stress, or abuse by a toxic manager. The more you understand about personality types, the impact of anxiety and depression, and the problematic behaviors that can be evoked by being placed in difficult situations (such as being scapegoated or bullied or placed in a job requiring the wrong set of skills), the better you will be able to determine whether to keep a manager who is currently having a problem or to have him or her find a new position.

Myths Rationalizing Destructive Behavior

People tend to accept rather than confront difficult behavior in others and in themselves. Effecting change is difficult. To avoid the stress of attempting to foster change, people often convince themselves that it is impossible to effect change or that the situation is not that destructive. Both of these beliefs are false (see Table 1-1).

Table 1–1 Myths Versus Reality About Destructive Behavior

Myth	Reality
I'm/he's too old to change or can't change.	The most effective managers are not the fast starters but the ones who learn throughout their careers. Old dogs can learn new tricks if they want to.
That's the culture.	The culture is often a reason why people do things as they do. Reasons, however, are not excuses. Those who can rise above a problematic culture and do things the best way are called leaders.
She's just blowing off steam.	Someone blowing off steam is harming others and needs to be contained.
This is the best way to motivate people and get things done.	A good manager understands the people she works with and designs her interactions to be most effective with each person. One size does not fit all.
There is one right way to do things.	This is the siren song of narcissistic and compulsive managers. It is rarely true.
That is just his style.	If someone's style seriously interferes with the effectiveness of other people and the overall team, he needs to modify his style.
It doesn't do any harm.	Closing our eyes to the harm being done may provide a temporary and uneasy sense of peace, but it doesn't last and isn't real.
She deserves it.	No one deserves to be screamed at, insulted, or treated badly. They may deserve to be taken aside and told the ways in which they need to change. They may deserve to miss out on a promotion or bonus. You may need to fire them. They do not, however, deserve abuse, particularly because we never know what is going on inside them, what pressures they are under, what good things they are doing, or what trauma they suffered earlier in life.

Further Reading

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