

Toxic organisations and the unenviable choices available to mid-level managers

They face potentially competing interests to protect themselves, support others, and advance their work, write William Kahn and Bess Rouse



Many people find themselves working in organisations characterised by dysfunction. These so-called “toxic workplaces” can involve intolerance, bullying, narcissism, and other forms of destructiveness that, over time, can demoralise people and undermine organisational purposes. Workers in these organisations have three primary courses of action when faced with toxic work conditions over which they have little control: they can leave; they can confront sources of toxicity; or they can employ defence mechanisms, psychological strategies used to protect the self. The first two strategies are risky and require some degree of job mobility. The third strategy risks long-term psychological complications. We became interested in exploring a different course of action, focused less on individuals left alone to make such choices and more on how people at work join together to organise their responses to toxicity.

We explored this idea in [a study](#) of a consulting firm based in the New England area. Over the course of a year, we conducted 57 interviews with 34 participants, speaking with many of them several times. We focused on how people experienced diminishment, a specific and recurring form of toxicity in which the CEO, aided and abetted by other senior leaders, made people feel small, as “less than,” both as people and as workers. Our analysis of how members responded to such diminishment yielded three key insights.

First, we found that middle leaders (the vice presidents that led the various business groups, and managers of divisions within the groups) made choices that balanced potentially competing interests to protect themselves, support others, and advance their work. These choices initiated particular routines in the agency: repeated patterns of action and interaction that, for better or worse, balanced those interests against the backdrop of persistent diminishment.

- In the primary routine, *absorption*, middle leaders sought to insulate others by absorbing the diminishment themselves. They absorbed the CEO’s attention; they kept her as a central focus so others would not have to do so. They also provided emotional support, when the diminishment that they could not intercept affected others. Absorption temporarily staved off the effects of diminishment, yet diminishment continued within the system.
- At times, middle leaders, worn out by the absorption process, shifted to a *dissemination* routine, in which they aligned with the CEO, both enabling and adding to the diminishment of the people they

supervised. They did so partly as a result of being worn out and down by absorption processes, and as a tactic to garner more resources in the agency. Over time, dissemination amplified and perpetuated diminishment within the organisation.

- At other times, middle leaders shifted to a *differentiation* routine, separating themselves and group members from senior leaders and toxic diminishment. Independent bases of power, such as distinct clients and services, licensed them to develop such protective boundaries. Differentiation removed people more decisively from exposure to diminishment altogether and prevented the perpetuation of diminishment throughout the system.

Second, we found that the routines directly shaped personal agency of people in the conduct of their work; that is, the routines shaped the capacity to act independently and make choices about how and on what one worked. The absorption routine enabled bounded agency: people engaged their work within circumscribed limits developed by middle leaders, negotiated with and against senior leaders. The dissemination routine increased peoples' preoccupation with their leaders' stress and anxiety, narrowing the space available for personal agency. When middle leaders enabled and amplified anxiety and stress, work was disrupted. And the differentiation routine expanded the space available for personal agency, enabling workers rather than the CEO to inhabit the centre of their roles.

Third, we found that, as middle leaders initiated these routines, their attention shifted to the management of social and emotional dynamics within the system and, as a consequence, were less available to focus on the welfare of the firm itself. Absorption meant that middle leaders inserted themselves between senior leaders and group members. Dissemination meant that they were focused on their own survival or gain. And differentiation meant that they focused outward, on clients, or inward, on their own tightly knit group, but not on the firm itself. The three routines, in effect, left middle leaders and members unwilling or unable to attend to growth activities that required integration across groups. Indeed, interventions to enable the firm's strategic growth failed as a result of the paradoxical reality of the CEO occupying so much of the centre of the firm that there was little space for executive leadership to occur. With senior leaders focused on ensuring the CEO's centrality, the firm lacked a wider, authorised leadership team that could direct a growth strategy.

These findings suggest the important role that middle leaders play in toxic organisations, as the initiators of specific routines that represent specific ways to balance competing needs to survive and accomplish work. Our work points to the importance of these leaders becoming intentional about the pathways that they create amidst toxicity and to remain vigilant about where those pathways lead. They also need to attend closely to how certain people are authorised and deauthorized, with particular focus on when those processes facilitate or undermine personal agency and actual work. Middle leaders need to make certain choices about how to respond when those with power become increasingly outsized in their presence, at the expense of diminished others.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on *Navigating Space for Personal Agency: Auxiliary Routines as Adaptations in Toxic Organizations*, *Academy of Management Journal*
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