PART 1

Organisational Behaviour Issues and Well-being

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CHAPTER 1

In Consideration of a Toxic Workplace: a Suitable Place for Treatment

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This chapter suggests that all workplaces will be, to some degree, toxic and that such conditions are to be expected and thus to be viewed as a regular feature of organisational life. It advocates that those in positions of organisational leadership should anticipate, prepare for and handle more openly and frankly the dynamics, features and characteristics of a toxic workplace as described rather more than currently appears to be the case.

Whilst much is rightly made of the critical impact of leadership behaviour on an organisation's well-being this may not be the primary determinant of an organisation's health and condition. In considering organisational toxicity this chapter asserts that more attention should be given to considering the internal culture of an organisation and the organisation's external environment in *combination* with an examination of leadership behaviour-in-context.

INTRODUCTION

For the purposes of this chapter a toxic organisation is defined as one within which behaviours which poison, are disruptive, destructive, exploitive, dysfunctional and abusive are pervasive and tolerated. Instances of this would include workplace bullying and harassment in its various forms, deception and fraudulent dealings, the forced imposition of unrealistic workloads and the fostering of disruptive internal competition resulting in bitter and destructive 'turf' battles. In such environments feuding between different departments and functions is likely to lead to a 'blame' culture, embedded patterns of

misinformation and misrepresentation, together with the condoning of overly competitive and aggressive interpersonal behaviour.

Such destructive and self-servicing misuse of power is likely to create organisations that become increasingly internally divided and composed of competing 'power blocs' of winners and losers. The losers are likely to be discredited, captured, demolished, suppressed, seduced or driven underground. These could be described as 'war-zone' organisations in which the weapons employed whilst not of a military form can be just as deadly. The type of organisation I am depicting, and have experienced, is likely to become progressively unhealthy and protective of its 'ruling elite' resulting in ways of working that will ultimately undermine the effective functioning – and perhaps continuation – of the organisation itself.

'Corruption, hypocrisy, sabotage, and manipulation, as well as other assorted unethical, illegal, and criminal acts, are part of the poisonous repertoire of toxic leaders' is how Lipman-Blumen (2005:18) describes such leaders 'who, by virtue of their destructive behaviours and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organisations, communities and even the nations that they lead'.

In spite of much of the 'positive' hype promoted by the 'leadership industry' leaders are not, by definition, always good, ethical or correct in their behaviour as has been evidenced in recent times by the deluge of material describing toxic leadership behaviour. High profile toxic leadership within companies such as Enron and WorldCom reinforces the importance of addressing, examining, understanding better – and anticipating – the toxic presence of such facets of leadership (Anand *et al.*, 2004; Frost, 2003; Hogan & Smith, 2001; Kellerman, 2004; Sankowsky, 1995; Smith & Quirk, 2005; Thomas & Herson, 2002; Wright & Smye, 1996).

Such examples have been described as evidence of 'the dark side of leadership', a side which whilst always present has often remained in the shadows so far as much of the conventional training for leadership is concerned, yet a side which exerts a profound influence on the well-being of those at work (Babiak, 1995; Cavaola & Lavender, 2000; Conger, 1990; Frost, 2003; Furnham & Taylor, 2004; Babiak & Hare, 2006; Gabriel, 1999; Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Kellerman, 2004; Kets de Vries, 1985; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1985). It may well be that these high profile examples are but the tip of the iceberg of such behaviour in many of our organisations and institutions. It is salutary to speculate that – to some degree – all organisations could be experienced as toxic and thus to think otherwise would be naïve, illusory and fanciful in the light of the day-to-day perversity and pain that is experienced by many.

Whilst examining the behaviour of those in positions of leadership and influence is important in any consideration of a toxic workplace so is the need to look at the internal culture (the 'how we do things around here' dimension) and the 'climate' (what it is like to experience being and working there) (Osrin, private conversation, 2006).

THE PECULARITY OF ORGANISATIONS

Working in an organisation can be quite a strange experience and generate intense feelings and tensions ranging from unsuppressed delight to the deep depths of depression. But why is this so? What is it that working in an organisation does to many of us when we report for work each day? What is it about conformity, anonymity, collectivity, power and authority, and the exercise of leadership and followership that generates the blocking and negativity, stupidity and closed-thinking, selfishness and arrogance we often see around us at work? After all as Bolden and Gosling (2006) observe, leaders do not exist in splendid isolation; they do have a need for meaningful relationships with others yet such needs may be persistently and continually damaged by counterproductive and destructive workplace practices. Why should such behaviour be so prevalent and undermine the constructive and productive work generally accomplished?

It makes you wonder why there seem to be so many people problems at work and why this is such a common and continuing experience for so many? Why don't people work harmoniously all the time? Just what is it that seems to trigger the competition, animosity, rivalry, jealousy and one-upmanship that seem to be all too common at work? What is it about the work of Scott Adams and 'Dilbert' and 'Dogbert' that is so pertinent, accurate, appealing and captivating to the legions of us who are, or have felt, captive at work? What is it that Adams (1996a, b) brings to life so vividly that is ever present yet rarely openly discussed and considered about the dysfunctional and toxic nature – because that is what Adams is so aptly highlighting in much of his work – many experience on a regular basis within their working environments?

Irrespective of the formal and logical bases underpinning their inception, business organisations remain, in terms of how they function, socially constructed entities. They combine – for a variety of specified purposes – disparate groups of people many of whom would otherwise have very little interest in freely meeting or socializing with those they find around themselves. It is highly likely that a more transactional than transformational orientation would describe why most are at work and consequently each person will want to protect and secure the best they can for themselves (Avolio, 1999).

Whilst leaders may wish to believe otherwise, relatively few employees are likely to be profoundly committed to the organisation even though they will want to protect their status and position within it. Furthermore there is unlikely to be any universal experience about what it means to work in any particular organisation even though its internal rules, communications and entreaties will have been scripted for a common audience. Indeed the presented veneer of universality within organisations could be more accurately described as a thin and fragile one punctuated and punctured by vested interests, hidden agendas, competing alliances and personal objectives. With such a mix of personal and sectional interests at play, corporate communications are unlikely to be interpreted at face value but will be interpreted through personal, professional and functional filters. Given such a matrix of dynamics the frequent emergence of

misunderstandings, conflicts, misperceptions, internal intrigue, the interplay of power and politics and resistance to change in organisations should come as no surprise but be anticipated more acutely and addressed more openly.

With such an unpinning, a challenge – real or imagined – to a person's emotional attachment, status and standing at work is likely to trigger defensive and self-protective responses to counter emergent feelings of vulnerability, confusion, shock and anxiety (Roberts & Hogan, 2002). Such reactions are likely to be more keenly felt and more intensely experienced the more senior the person involved is as they will probably consider that they have more to lose and thus may be prompted to try to maintain the *status quo* in a robust – not to say, potentially toxic – manner irrespective of what they may say to the contrary! If so such a working hypothesis could help explain 'seemingly' overly defensive and aggressive over-reactions from senior executives when they feel under threat or under criticism. Reactions which may significantly increase toxicity in the workplace.

There is a further important dimension to organisational life that helps to explain why change in organisations all too often generates stern resistance, dysfunctional reactions and why people may behave with such emotion when they feel under threat. If viewed as a 'containing institution' an organisation comes to be seen as offering a welcomed measure of security, continuity and protection in an otherwise ambiguous and changing world. Consequently challenges and threats to the *status quo*, as well as periods of internal uncertainty, are likely to increase internal tension and trigger self-protective reactions. Such defensive reactions could result and begin to explain the origins of some of the toxic behaviours outlined earlier.

When combined within such a complex and multi-layered context, toxic behaviour and dysfunctional practices may be present when individuals and groups feel the need to protect their own interests and advantages. Whilst not desirable such defensive individual and collective responses within an organization can be expected, should be acknowledged and could be valued as evidence of an organization being 'alive and well'. The challenge can then be redefined to become that of maintaining such 'festerings' but within productive limits and to avoid apathy, internal anarchy and extreme internal workplace toxicity overwhelming the productive working through of the tensions of change. This however may be more difficult to achieve than one would wish. Whilst Case & Gosling (2006) note that 'Logic as a practice depends on non-attachment towards subjective feelings (such as those generated by interactions within organisations)' much of what actually goes on interpersonally in organisations is high in subjectivity.

Whilst interactions within organisations will be presented 'logically', just how deep that veneer goes and how well that can be sustained is variable when those involved feel vulnerable, marginalized, threatened, and under duress or strain.

Instances of illogical and even absurd behaviour at work – over 'seemingly' trivial events – which can be out of all proportion to the events themselves – may however be surfacing just how seriously interactions within organisations

are taken when the actors involved feel under threat. It may be that we are all prone to developing high levels of attachment to things at work, which, when we consider them to be under threat, will trigger defensive behaviour, causing 'logic' to fly out of the window! Within the hot-house of an organisation we will scrutinise and interpret peoples' interactions, watch for status plays, power ploys and the like particularly when we feel our position to be vulnerable. In turn, unconsciously perhaps, we may then position and prepare ourselves to repel potential 'attacks'. Organisations, and the dynamics contained within them really are peculiar – albeit interesting – things to consider!

One way of getting more of a grip on toxicity and dysfunctionality is to examine the organisation through different contextual filters – such as the internal culture and climate, the stakeholder network, the predominant disciplines and functions represented, and the main markets and products/services provided – focussing on different aspects of the organisation. The results can then be combined into a more detailed assessment to provide a more integrated 'view' of what may be going on.

'CONTEXT' IS KING

The tone, the feel and the culture of the workplace conditions, how those 'inside' feel enabled, or conversely, disabled to undertake their work. It shapes how an employee experiences and makes sense of what they see going on around them; it legitimizes their actions, commissions and omissions. It guides them towards what is expected and what is unwelcome in what they say, observe and do. The *context* defines and describes what is wanted, what is 'healthy' and acceptable and what is not deemed to be so; it defines the behaviour of executives as 'good' and 'bad', constructive and destructive, caring and selfish, exploitative or paternalistic, threatening and welcoming, functioning and dysfunctional, harmless and toxic.

Yet in spite of this it seems to me that the assessment of an organization's internal context receives relatively little attention when set against the deluge of material emphasizing individual task achievement, personal advancement, the acquisition of charismatic & transformational leadership behaviours, technical skills development and on the successful deployment of one-upmanship behaviour at work. This poses the question 'Why might such neglect, of such an important aspect of organisational functioning, persist?'

In addition the skills of 'spin', impression management and the promotion of self combined with the avoidance of blame seem to attract far more attention, as significant mediating forces for executive success and employee well-being, than examining the internal organisational context and its impact on executive performance.

It may be that examining the internal context, in contrast with a more headline-grabbing numbers driven assessment of the organization, and grappling with the 'challenge of change' takes too long, is low on media interest, isn't sexy enough and could worry investors if it got out that the organisation

had an internal culture problem! If so this may help to account for less attention being placed on culture and context than is merited even though such factors exercise a crucial influence on organizational success and failure. But it may also be that it is more convenient and appealing to hold the leader(s) responsible for success and failure as they can relatively easily be replaced – like sports coaches – when the going gets tough, when their personal allure fades or when an alternative ‘Mr Fix-It Saviour’ becomes available on the market.

The internal context and culture will also influence how, and in what manner, an executive’s vulnerabilities are triggered. Vulnerabilities, to which all are susceptible, such as anxiety, fear of failure and ridicule, rivalry, jealousy and dysfunctional competition and the threat of humiliation and perhaps annihilation (which in this context may mean being pushed out of the organisation)! So what then do we need to watch out for? How and in what ways should we be on our guard? To what extent does the behaviour of senior executives and other key influential figures set the tone and demand certain types of behaviour – some of which may indeed be toxic – against which a person’s success, compliance and acceptability may well be measured? The extent to which those in positions of influence tolerate behaviour different from their own and the degree to which behavioural compliance is demanded as a mark of loyalty to the flag may well hold some of the clues to the level of toxicity in the workplace (Harvey, 1988; Janis, 1982 amongst others).

So what then do we need to watch out for? Kellerman for example posits seven categories of bad leadership practices which she describes as being incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular and evil (2004) whereas Lipman-Blumen’s (2005) primary focus concerns the *allure* of toxic leaders and on toxic *follower* behaviour (see also Janis, 1982; Finkelstein, 2003; Kets de Vries, 1989; Lowman, 1993; McCalley, 2002; Offermann, 2004; Sperry, 2002; Stein, 2005; Sulkowicz, 2004; Zaleznik, 1970). In addition to leaders and followers we should also be concerned about those whom Frost & Robinson (1999) terms ‘toxic handlers’ as the pervasiveness of toxic leader/follower behaviour also exerts a pressure and a cost on those who seek to keep the place going, in spite of the internal trauma and angst generated, such as a client of mine who described himself as the ‘Director of Disease, Divorces, Dysfunctions and Deaths’.

INDICATORS OF A TOXIC WORKING ENVIRONMENT

The most obvious and overt indicators will be those relating to the behaviour of ‘the people in charge’. The literature suggests that the most frequently reported disruptive executive behaviours are characterised by dramatic, histrionic, emotionally demanding, narcissistic, aggressive and somewhat grandiose leadership behaviours (Babiak, 1995; Conger, 1990; Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Kets de Vries, 1979, 1985, 1989; Khurana, 2002; Levinson, 1978; Lubit, 2002; Maccoby, 2000, 2004; Price, 2000; Sankowsky, 1995).

The work of the above reinforces the key contributions from the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) whose research on executive derailment highlighted patterns of abrasive and abusive behaviour, insensitivity to the needs of others, distant, aloof and arrogant ways of behaving, unnecessary and intrusive micro-management, the manipulation of situations and continuing self-serving behaviour as significant contributors to an executive's derailment and demise (Kofodimos, 1989, 1990; Lombardo & Eichinger, 1989; McCall & Lombardo, 1983) – and thus, to my mind, a culture of toxic leadership.

Recent years have seen the lure of charisma in leadership generate enthusiasm for such styles of heroic leadership and a relative decline in the appeal of less overt styles of leader behaviour. McCall (1998) quotes Harry Levinson on the grandiose self-image which can develop as executives become more senior: 'They think they have the right to be condescending and contemptuous to people who serve them. They (executives) think they are entitled to privilege and the royal treatment.' McCall concludes: 'In summary, the development of arrogance is one of the most insidious of the derailment dynamics. It is a negative that grows from a positive, deriving as it does from actual talent and success.' (1998:46)

Unsurprisingly then the dangers of excessive charisma attract particular attention when thinking about the potential for toxic leadership as the heightened level of self-aggrandizement that can accompany the enactment of overly 'heroic' and 'transformational' approaches to leadership can so readily drift into excess (see Khurana, 2002; Lubit, 2002; Maccoby, 2000, 2004; Tourish, 2005, amongst others).

A toxic working environment will show itself primarily:

- (i) through the behaviour of an organisation's key personnel,
- (ii) by the rules and regulations formally established governing people's behaviour and ways of working and
- (iii) how these rules are implemented in practice.

Whilst this chapter resists the temptation to place all of the responsibility for toxic working onto the behaviour of an organisation's key executives, how they behave – and what they sponsor – will be indicative of what is deemed constructive and 'acceptably disruptive' about their organisation.

Yet this is not the whole story as one of the difficulties in addressing toxicity in the workplace is the way in which 'toxic' demands can be cast in such a manner as to be difficult to fault, counter, challenge or deny. Demands such as to the need to 'build for the future', the need 'to strip out dead wood and embrace 20th-century thinking', to 'beat the competition', to 'endure the pain for the longer gain', and to 'work harder & smarter' may all sound reasonable yet may prompt and encourage – and legitimise – uncaring, abusive and toxic behaviour. Whilst demands such as these need not be punitive nor abrasive how they are enacted may be. So the issue is not that such exhortations are inappropriate so much as *how* they are then pursued. *The means* do not always

justify *the ends* yet in an organisation which displays toxic characteristics this is far more likely to be the case.

The workplace situation can be further complicated as behaviours, now increasingly recognised as toxic and abusive, may have previously been excused, denied, or even encouraged, because of the results they delivered and may over time have:

- (i) reinforced and intensified leadership behaviour now viewed as toxic,
- (ii) discouraged others from addressing the unacceptable behaviours experienced, and
- (iii) generated a groupthink and/or acceptant mentality within that setting that may have become deeply embedded and is now resistant to change (Harvey, 1988; Janis, 1982; Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 1969, 2007).

Toxic organisational behaviour could be said to exist within the 'white space' of an organisation – between the lines of what is going on and what is seen as acceptable to discuss – and where a culture of 'Omerta' may have taken hold. This makes it difficult to initiate discussions about such matters as they expose the instigator – as in the fable of *The Emperor's New Clothes* (Anderson, 1991) – as a more neutral and distanced observer of what is actually going on as opposed to what many, collusively, pretend is happening within the workplace. In adopting such a position the naïve observer makes themselves vulnerable:

- (i) to possible accusations of being unable to cope,
- (ii) of being unsuitable and untrustworthy for the job in the first place,
- (iii) of being a naysayer,
- (iv) of betraying colleagues,
- (v) of being a troublemaker, and
- (vi) of being labelled as someone to watch for the future. A person perhaps whose card may be then be marked as unreliable, as someone not likely to be 'one of the boys', a snitch and a person who could at some point in the future be brave (or foolish!!) enough to be a whistleblower (Alford, 2001; Wright and Smye, 1996).

Influential though they are the behaviour of those in positions of power and influence will give a clue about the toxicity of an organisation but that is not the whole story ...

REVIEWING THE SITUATION

Whilst this was not, to my knowledge, their primary purpose frameworks such as the 7-S model (Peters & Waterman, 1982) and Galbraith's (1977) 'Fit' model can be used to examine how different facets of an organisation are working in support of each other or if they may be skewing the way an organisation is

(i) orientated and (ii) functioning. In effect highlighting whether the organisation is in-tune internally or if its ways of working are mutually competing and antagonistic. For example when the reward structure fails to encourage the very outcomes the organisation needs to accomplish to survive or if it rewards behaviour that is destructive and self-serving (but perhaps financially beneficial to the few).

This section introduces another method – based on field work – that can be used to re-view the behaviour of executives and consider the organisation's susceptibility for excess toxicity by focusing on:

- (i) the key influencers,
- (ii) the internal state of the organization, and
- (iii) on the conditions in the external environment within which the organisation is operating and trading.

Although it remains very appealing to attribute to the leader the successes and the misfortunes of an organisation's performance, to do so fails to give sufficient weight to the wider range of factors at play which influence and determine the success and the failure of an executive's performance and that of their organisation. Whilst the personal characteristics, behaviour and pedigree of key executives will influence an organisation's performance – and set the tone and feel of the working environment – my research suggests other facilitating factors will influence organisational toxicity (Walton, 2005). Based on a review of consulting cases, three dimensions emerged as significant in reviewing the behaviour of senior executives and their impact on the internal workplace climate and sense of well-being. These were:

1. The behaviour of the *executive(s)* themselves.
2. The internal *context* of the organization (its internal culture and climate).
3. The *external* environment (the 'external' world) in which the organization finds itself.

The First Dimension: The Executive-in-action: Personality Characteristics

Although, as has been noted earlier, the psychological composition of the key executives exerts a significant effect on an organization, no one set of personality characteristics emerged that led to the range of dysfunctions I had witnessed and studied. For example 'toxic' behaviours were recorded which led to problems in some organisations, but also where the same behaviours did not in others! I had examples of those who could be described as 'heroic' and as 'villains' who were creating positive and less than helpful outcomes. I had examples of charismatic extroverts and introverted thinkers, some providing helpful and some providing unhelpful leadership, and I had examples of executives offering directive and more transformational approaches again with

varying effects (Avolio, 1999; Burns, 1978; Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Lowman, 1993).

The personality characteristics of those in charge seemed, on their own, insufficient to account for a toxic workplace. Considering the internal contexts and cultures of the case material I was studying seemed the logical next focus to take.

A Second Dimension: Working within the Culture and Climate of the Organisation

Executive behaviour does not occur in a vacuum but within contexts and settings which shape the ways in which leadership is defined and accomplished. Just as form without function could be said to have little – other than an aesthetic – meaning on its own so examining an executive's personality and make-up without reference to how these are presented at work offers a similarly incomplete picture.

In sharp contrast to a view that it is what the executive does 'that gets results' it may be more accurate to explore how (i) the internal context(s) mediate what the executive is able to do and (ii) how those contexts define executive success and failure (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Cavaola & Lavender, 2000; Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997). A more extensive exploration of the contextual determinants of effective leadership behaviour, whilst currently somewhat neglected in the literature, is needed and may help to avoid excessive and penalistic toxic leadership practices taking hold.

Contextual conditions that appeared to facilitate the likelihood of a toxic workplace revolved around:

- (i) disruptions to previously long-standing internal processes and procedures,
- (ii) loss of well established colleagues (who held the internal 'wisdom and history' of the place),
- (iii) a too rapid level of internal staff movement across and within departments,
- (iv) too rapid promotion to levels of responsibility,
- (v) a climate of expediency, of structural 'transition', and
- (vi) a loss of belief in the internal integrity of the organisation and its future.

Such internal 'fragmentation', if combined with executives who may have psychological predispositions for the misuse and manipulation of influence and power, dramatically increases the possible degree of toxicity that could be induced. The research however suggested the presence of a third dimension, which, if present, would place an organisation at severe risk of toxic danger. The third dimension influencing leader and workplace toxicity was the stability of the organisation's external environment. If it was deemed to be

unstable this was likely to facilitate toxic behaviour, if not a tolerance for extreme internal toxicity will be much reduced.

The Third Dimension – Conditions in the External Environment

Disruptive and intrusive conditions in the external environment became the third dimension as a determinant of internal disruption and toxic leader behaviour. Examples of which would include a market collapse, a local disaster, an emergency alert, threat of a public humiliation or Federal Inspection, a hostile bid, bankruptcy protection under a Chapter 7 or Chapter 11 filing, the threat of an external Inquiry, media pressure, 'Wall Street' and 'City' intrusion and high profile stakeholder pressure.

My hypothesis is that a significant increase in toxic behaviour and internal instability is more likely to occur and be sustained when all three of these dimensions, like three tumble locks on a combination safe, are sufficiently aligned for the 'spring' into dysfunction and toxicity to be released.

The likelihood for executive dysfunction is increased where the following conditions are present:

1. A personal predisposition for errant working.
2. An internal context which permits or encourages errant behaviour to occur.
3. Significant external circumstances which provide the wider context, cover and excuse for toxic behaviour.

Thus, when in alignment, these three conditions may trigger – or perhaps invite – latent negative and potentially destructive and disruptive executive behaviour resulting in an increasingly toxic working environment.

The resultant 'ACE-R' framework as illustrated in Figure 1.1 can be used to prompt a more rounded look at organisational situations and specifically to identify combinations of conditions in which executive dysfunction and extreme toxic working environments may be more likely to be present.

Factor 4 proposes that even though the other three dimensions may make dysfunction likely the executive may still hold off exhibiting such behaviour if they considered it to be too risky. The combinations of these dimensions are summarised in Table 1.1 and indicate how these can work to either block or prompt toxic behaviour to be more or less likely to occur.

The ACE-R framework can be used to prompt sufficient attention being given to each of the three dimensions it highlights to reduce the conditions that may intensify toxic working conditions.. The tendency to ascribe toxic and dysfunctional behaviour to the organisation's leadership – triggered when executives feel under psychological threat – can be too easily adopted and result in the internal and external contextual features noted above being neglected.

This framework invites a broader consideration of the underpinnings of executive success and failure and of the contextual conditions that may

Figure 1.1 The ACE-R framework

Table 1.1 Assessing the likelihood of a toxic surge

The ACE-R framework	The Actors—the personal dispositions of those key people (A)	Internal context: the climate and culture of the organisation(C)	External circumstances (E)
Condition 1: Latent potential for dysfunction, but awaiting the opportunity	Yes, person(s) predisposed	Yes, allowing	No, not suitable
Condition 2: Executive quite prepared to take advantage but culture won’t condone this	Yes, person(s) predisposed	No, not allowing	Yes, suitable
Condition 3: Executive not prepared to take advantage of the situation	No, person(s) not predisposed	Yes, allowing	Yes, suitable
Condition 4: Potential for executive dysfunctional behaviour is high	Yes, person(s) predisposed	Yes, allowing	Yes, suitable

encourage or discourage toxic working patterns to take hold. It can be used to prompt timely, defensive and protective action should 'Condition 4' appear likely.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Perhaps as Thomas & Hersen suggest (2002), 'within many organizations there is a heightened and continuing level of strain, expectation, stress and vigour beyond that which is "healthy" for most of us for too long' (see also Kahn & Langlieb, 2003; Tobias, 1990). If this were so it raises questions:

- (i) as to how might executives be better prepared for such unhealthy conditions, and
- (ii) as to what may be the resultant impact of such pressures on their overt behaviours and on the organisations and departments they lead.

It may be timely to remember that whilst business organisations are constitutionally and legally formulated they remain – through their dynamics – socially constructed environments in which those within them will seek to meet their own individual goals some of which will be mutually congruent and some of which will be mutually antagonistic to the expressed needs of their organisation.

In conclusion the studies on which this chapter is based suggest that an executive's success is not determined primarily by their own behaviour (or psychological characteristics) but is significantly conditioned and constrained by both the internal organizational contexts within which they are working, *and* the wider external circumstances affecting that organization.

Toxic behaviours by leaders – and from followers – could be described as silent killers as they operate below the surface and sabotage, block, and penalise those who raise issues for discussion (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000). A combination of toxic leaders, vulnerable and demeaned followers, and conducive contexts results in an unhealthy 'toxic triangle' (Padilla *et al.*, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). With such forces threatening an organisation's success it remains surprising that a fuller exposition and exploration of the darker side of leadership, and the misuse of institutional power, is not at the top of the curricula for organisational studies (Dotlich & Cairo, 2003; Schell, 1999).

What is apparent is that appointment to a position of formal leadership does not guarantee positive, constructive leadership behaviour. The leader as a person will remain susceptible to the full range of human strengths and vulnerabilities irrespective of their title, professional background and experience (Zimbardo, 2007). All working environments are likely to be toxic to some degree; if so a key question revolves around how we prepare ourselves for such conditions and how we engage with them insightfully, constructively, purposefully, ethically and maturely (Walton, 2007).

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