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Inglourious leaders may cause health risk

Looks at how toxic leaders undoubtedly can become a liability to organisations and the individuals they manage

Bad leaders don't just squander productivity and engagement. Employee health is on the line.

For most of our life, we choose our friends based on shared interests, similar outlook on life and compatible personalities. In the world of work, people are often paired with a boss or manager not of their choosing and whose personality may not closely align with their own.

Most people naturally try to avoid toxic individuals, a loose term that covers a range of low-trust behaviours including blame-shifting, constantly focusing on the negative, emotional outbursts and social rejection. But when the toxic individual is the boss, avoidance is more difficult. Most global surveys consistently suggest that one of the key drivers for high employee engagement, trust and performance cultures is having supportive and strong relationships with peers and managers. Gallup estimates in its *2015 State of the American manager: analytics and advice for leaders* that managers account for at least 70 percent of the variance in overall employee engagement scores.

The leadership health connection

Toxic leaders undoubtedly can become a liability to organisations. They can affect such outcomes as absenteeism and stress claims; impacting health and well-being. Two separate studies of 3,205 men and 1,204 women, followed for 15 years by Marko Elovainio at the University of Helsinki, found that employees who worked for toxic bosses exposed to unfair treatment on the job experienced significantly higher levels of poor sleep and elevated inflammation¹.

The logical progression from this is that positive relationships generate positive

outcomes. Current studies support this and show a significant link between relationships with one's boss and other colleagues with positive outcomes such as enhanced immunity, less job burnout, decreased depression, enhanced job satisfaction, greater longevity and fewer illnesses.

A three-year prospective study of 3,122 workers in Sweden, conducted by Anna Nyberg from the Department of Public Health Sciences at the Karolinski corroborates this positivity thesis². Nyberg found that supportive leadership behaviour, clarity of goals and role expectations, supplying information and feedback, ability to carry out changes at work successfully and promotion of employee participation and control, were significantly associated with lower cardiac risk and death. And these health gains were confirmed even after controlling for such factors as perceived workload, social class, smoking, physical activity, blood pressure and body mass index.

Why toxic bosses have such an impact

So why do poor relationships at work make us feel so bad? Research is well documented suggesting that negative interpersonal interactions can elevate our level of stress much longer than stressors that are largely task or performance-oriented.

But one possible reason for poor relationships making us feel so bad appears to be that emotional pain (social rejection, bullying etc) and physical pain both follow similar physiological pathways in our brain. Additionally, both lead to the same negative outcomes of stress, depression, immune suppression and fatigue. In her 2006 study, UCLA's Naomi Eisenberger used functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI, to peer into the inner workings of the brain, while participants were involved in a social exercise (a virtual ball-tossing game Cyberball)³. The game was designed to provoke feelings of social isolation, hurt and rejection. Eisenberger studied what part of the brain was activated while a group of subjects played a computer game with other individuals they didn't know. Comparison of fMRI brain activity in participants who thought they were being ignored and rejected during this collaborative game revealed greater activity in the part of the brain associated with physical pain (anterior cingulate cortex). Additionally, the participants who were rejected also reported feeling psychological distress based on self-report measures.

Eisenberger's study was one of the first to confirm that there is substantial overlap between social and physical pain. Everyone has experienced physical pain, and one reaction is to take an over-the-counter pain reliever. But as Eisenberger and her team demonstrated, physical pain isn't the only kind of pain we experience. Social pain hurts too. It literally hurts when we feel slighted, that our ideas are rejected or even when we

are given feedback we experience as evaluative.

In other words bosses don't have to be highly toxic to have toxic impact on their people. They may just be unskilled in building working relationships or in giving feedback.

Working towards a well-being culture

There is no doubt that raising awareness of the components of a healthy lifestyle is important for well-being. But promoting well-being initiatives whilst tolerating the behaviours of toxic bosses - or even unskilled behaviours of non-toxic bosses - is like undertaking an Olympic Triathlon programme on a junk-food diet.

Given the effect of toxic and unskilled bosses on employee health and engagement, the behaviour of these leaders should be given significant consideration in any employee well-being initiative.

To build *psychologically* healthy cultures, organisations should consider the following.

At the macro level:

- Make sure organisational engagement surveys are transparent to first line manager level. Interventions can then be considered and implemented.
- Use available "big" and "small" data to assess the effect of leadership practices on retaining high-potential talent, absenteeism rates within departments, stress disability claims, and other important metrics that have both productivity and health implications for the organisation.
- Use organisational values initiatives to highlight specific interpersonal behaviours that promote a psychologically healthy environment.
- Encourage employees to use the confidential employee assistance programs, or EAPs, when necessary to seek strategies for managing toxic bosses and other colleagues.
- Communicate policies and procedure around bullying behaviour at work and be consistent with the enforcement of such stated policies.

At the micro level:

- Leadership and management development programmes should include knowledge and skills development in emotional intelligence and crucially how to build trust-based, collaborative working relationships.
- With senior development programmes or when toxic leaders are identified, provide coaching and 360-degree feedback to increase their awareness about how their

behaviour affects others and establish action plans.

- Assess for emotional and social competence when recruiting and promoting or creating talent pools. Gallup suggests that companies fail to choose the leadership candidate with the right talent for the job 21% of the time.
- Assess future leaders for interest in leading. Minimise the practice of promoting independent contributors into leadership roles when specialist career paths and compensation opportunities are lacking.
- Provide ongoing feedback on performance progress linked to specific projects/assignments, and link compensation, rewards and bonuses directly to positive and supportive leadership practices that can be observed and measured.

References

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This guide was written by hpc's David Storrs with research partner Kenneth M. Nowack, Ph.D., a member of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations and President of Envisia Learning Inc, who partner with hpc in the provision of 360 feedback tools.