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Why Organizations Need Them

Organizations are constantly changing due to fairly predictable events such as mergers, acquisitions, re-engineering, leadership changes, downsizings, early retirements or due to unprecedented events like those related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The consequence of these events is the creation of intense anxiety and sometimes even paralyzing fear among employees. Some types of pain are one-time (but tumultuous) events created by the sudden departure or loss of a senior leader, a dramatic shift in profitability, or a breach of ethics. Other pain is more chronic, created by policies and programs that systematically generate distress, however unintended (e.g. unreasonable stretch goals, performance or reward systems that cause destructive internal competition, cultures of fear). In addition, chronic toxicity is also the frequent outcome of toxic leaders who generate high levels of emotion and distress among their employees.

By helping employees manage these mostly common but difficult situations, HR enables other employees to stay focused and do their jobs. Without them, the organizational toxicity would continue to build, resulting in higher levels of turnover, increased health costs, more litigation, and reduced levels of employee morale, productivity, and profitability (Daniel, 2018).

*If you do not have that person who can sit down with people and be compassionate, be a good listener, be a good communicator, I think problems fester, they escalate, and you have huge problems in the end. So, if organizations do have people who are capable of being the toxic handlers, you’re going to have a more efficient operation. You’re going to have an operation who handles problems at a lower level and they never get out of control. So I think it [having a toxin handler] has a huge impact on an organization.*
It is important work for the organization. It helps employees to be able to manage their workflow and continue being productive when they are not distracted by their personal/professional struggles.

I've had this said to me by the executives I work with that they think that the support that I give them enables them to do their jobs and to be successful in their roles. Therefore, it drives the success of the business.

When people are bitter or sad or frustrated or mad, they are devoting a lot of their energy towards that. I would assume that makes them less productive and less likable to be around … so having a toxin handler around has to have a positive impact as far as you know allowing people to vent … so I think it must be a positive if it's handled well.

I believe they have a major impact on organizational effectiveness. Something as small but so important as communication can be the difference between a successful and unsuccessful outcome. Take for example the massive reorganization and downsizing that I was working on. If it's organized, if you bring HR and everybody together before you act, and you make sure to communicate with employees throughout the entire process, making sure that it's transparent and that you are being candid, that's huge.

Because when you're dealing with people's feelings, there is high anxiety and high tension. It's the way those issues are handled and communicated that can be the difference between employees coming to work being unfocused versus being confident that their employers and companies have their best interest at heart.

A happy workforce is an effective workforce. People are happy when they feel supported and they're more effective and/or they work better in teams. If people aren't allowed to bring their personal lives to work or if they feel that there's a line when I walk in that door and I can't bring any of it [their personal lives] with me, you're not getting the best out of that employee.

I kind of think it's a “necessary evil” [referring to the role of a toxin handler]. It presents challenges for the person who serves in that capacity, but it can really help an organization be more effective or efficient, have less turnover and things like that [if the person is successful in a toxin handling role]. I think being able to you come at a situation and help keep it factual, remove emotion from it, and try to get some level of successful outcome can definitely help an organization.

It helps the organization deal with difficult business decisions and minimizes the negative impact of hard decisions on employees. [The toxin handler] in HR limits the negative impact of tough decisions on employees as much as possible.

In addition, because the toxin handler helps to de-escalate emotional situations and make employees feel valued in the process, their work also helps to reduce the potential for lawsuits and claims of discrimination and harassment.
I think if you do not have somebody in the role to respectively deal with it that you get a lot more claims of harassment and discrimination, and maybe potential lawsuits because you don't have the stable calming person who can deescalate and help people move through these issues that they have with one another, and that they have with managers. When you get in the middle of all these investigations and people are not doing the work of the business. They are involved in these lawsuits or investigations because it [the toxic emotion] wasn't dealt with well.

The work protects both employees and the organization. Having HR deal with emotional situations helps get rid of bad employees and helps other employees to feel appreciated and respected by the organization when someone will listen to them and act to assist. The work helps the organization stay in good legal standing and to “stay on the high road” all the time.

The work of an organizational toxin handler is both valuable and important, not only to employees, but also to the organizations where they work. The evidence is unequivocal that organizations need them in order to stay focused and productive (not to mention continuing to be profitable). Given this, it remains somewhat paradoxical that this work is so often undervalued and somewhat invisible.

Reference

Daniel, T. A. (2018). Managing toxic emotions at work: An empirical study of HR’s role and its impact on personal well-being and organizational effectiveness. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.16315.26408.