It is no longer in doubt that a central aspect of the HR practitioner’s role is to act as an organizational toxin handler. HR helps employees deal with toxic emotions created by difficult organizational decisions as well as fears and uncertainty related to difficult situations—like returning to the office during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, they are also working to keep their organization functioning and profitable by supporting senior leaders.

To do this, they help troubled employees reduce their emotional pain (and the related distraction and reduced productivity that comes with it) so that they can re-focus and get back to work as quickly as possible—clearly, this is a win-win for both impacted employees as well as the organization.

You might remember this conceptual model that was introduced back in Chap. 1 when we started on this journey together. It helps to visually explain the role and undoubtedly makes more sense to you now that you know a whole lot more about this important organizational function:

The heart is key toward visualizing the results of the study given that it demonstrates that HR practitioners are empathetic and compassionate listeners. The arrow to Drives Career Choice demonstrates that their empathetic and compassionate nature drives their career choice—becoming an HR professional. The arrow back to the heart demonstrates that it is this combination of empathy and compassion that drives employees to seek their counsel (and also because of the nature of the HR role itself).

The original version of this chapter was revised to add the missing figure 15.1 in chapter 15. The correction to this chapter is available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51685-7_17.
The “sweet spot” is when they solve problems for both employees and the organization by being “HR fixers”. They do this by providing care and concern for employees so that they feel understood and valued, while maintaining a sharp awareness of the need to keep their organizations functioning and profitable. Managing this dual role is a delicate and complex balancing act that creates a great deal of stress for HR practitioners.

• For Employees:

• HR practitioners show that they care and help to solve problems for employees by empathetic listening, suggesting solutions and providing resources, by working behind the scenes and providing a safe space, through confidential counseling, by strategizing communications and reframing difficult messages, and by consulting, facilitating, and coaching/advising managers.

• For the Organization:

• HR’s work as a toxin handler helps to drive positive organizational outcomes by lowering turnover, increasing productivity, and improving employee morale.

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**Fig. 15.1** Conceptual model of HR’s role as organizational toxin handler (Daniel, 2018)
Although the role of a toxin handler is important to organizations, when HR practitioners do this work, the work is mostly invisible to senior leaders due to the expectation that HR will maintain confidentiality and privacy for employees who seek their help. As a result, they do not feel that the work is recognized or appreciated. Over time, engaging in this helping role tends to negatively affect their well-being through increased levels of stress, burnout, emotional and physical exhaustion, and an increased intent to quit.

While HR is often “front and center” in responding to employees in need, it is important to note that HR cannot (and should not be expected to) do it alone. Senior leaders must take an active and visible role in efforts to reduce organizational toxicity. If they fail to do this, employees can easily misinterpret their absence to suggest that they do not find the issue to be serious enough to warrant their time and attention or, worse yet, that they simply don’t care.

It is clear that numerous workplace situations, including layoffs, harassment, discrimination, mergers and acquisitions, personality conflicts, or an abusive boss can generate intense emotional pain for employees—feelings like anger, frustration, stress, disappointment, and even fear. Although these types of events are somewhat inevitable, it is the way organizations handle them—or do not—that can create a serious problem for both employees and, ultimately, the organizations that they serve.

Painful emotions and high stress are unfortunate by-products of these commonplace situations—a true occupational hazard. Ignoring these reactions puts the organization at risk; conversely, responding to and helping employees deal with those problems puts the toxin handler at risk, making it a dangerous and mostly thankless job (Daniel, 2018):

*I think that we play a critical role in keeping all the balls in the air. I say that a lot. It’s the fact that we are able to diffuse so many volatile situations or the fact that we’re able to reason with people that are otherwise not listening or not hearing what’s being said or understanding what has to be done to get the work done. I think we have a huge impact on the organizational effectiveness, and I think nobody’s ever going to see that until it’s not being done. I do think it’s a very key piece in this and I don’t think that people really understand it. It’s a thankless job.*

Despite the risks, however, toxin handlers in HR step up to provide this compassionate care to employees in pain because they know the work is essential to their efforts to create and sustain a humane and respectful workplace culture. However, they face a *precarious balancing act* between the competing role demands of helping employees while at the same time supporting (and often challenging) senior leaders and protecting the interests of their
company. The HR role is complex and paradoxical in nature which only serves to exacerbate the stress experienced by HR practitioners at work. As a result, they often pay a high price for doing the work in terms of the negative impact to their own personal well-being.

Creating and sustaining a psychologically healthy workplace—one that is devoid of frequent toxicity—benefit both employees and their organizations. The empirical evidence unequivocally confirms what we all already know intuitively—a respectful workplace environment results in higher levels of employee morale and job satisfaction, lower turnover, reduced health costs, higher productivity, and greater profitability for the organization. Coincidentally, demonstrating the courage and leadership necessary to reduce organizational toxicity—and to proactively address the fallout of toxic emotions when it exists—is also likely to result in a more effective and admired HR department.

This comment from an HR practitioner probably best sums up the impact of the organizational toxin handling role on people (Daniel, 2018):

*I feel like the role of the HR professional is to take what is most likely going to be one of the worst days of this person’s life and make it as bearable as possible.*

Working as an HR practitioner inside an organization is hard, and some days it can be very hard. HR practitioners know that helping employees deal with the pain caused by toxic emotions caused by difficult workplace decisions or situations is not only the right thing to do, but that it is also good for business. For this work to be sustainable, though, organizations will need to make these responsibilities explicit in the relevant HR job descriptions, and take affirmative steps to recognize, support, and reward organizational toxin handlers—who are, for both employees and their organizations, truly often-invisible heroes.

I am proud to be an organizational toxin handler and grateful to be part of this noble profession—and I hope that you are too. HR hero—that has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? And as they say, if the cape fits, I hope you will wear it proudly. You’ve no doubt earned it.

**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.