Layoffs, harassment, discrimination, mergers and acquisitions, personality conflicts, or an abusive boss are just a few of the many types of workplace situations that can generate intense emotional pain for employees—feelings like anger, frustration, stress, disappointment, and anxiety. For those required to report to work during the deadly #coronavirus outbreak, there is also now an element of abject fear that going to work may result in their own death or the demise of someone they love. With the lone exception of the pandemic, most of these workplace events are predictable—even 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.

If these types of situations are managed poorly, the chronic anger or prolonged stress these situations create results in an undesirable by-product known as organizational toxicity. The word “toxic” comes from the Greek “toxikon” which means “arrow poison”. In a literal sense, the term in its original form means to kill (poison) in a targeted way (arrow). Over time, the buildup of these toxic emotions will create a workplace culture where employees feel devalued, demoralized, and often hopeless—and most assuredly not productive or actively engaged.

Peter Frost (2003) first identified and coined the term for the special role some employees take on in an effort to alleviate this toxicity for employees—he referred to these individuals as toxin handlers. He described them as people within an organization who “voluntarily shoulder the sadness, frustration, bitterness, and the anger that are endemic to organizational life”. Think of it this way: they act much like a kidney or the immune system in a human body—by neutralizing, dissipating, and dispersing organizational toxins that
build up over time as a result of difficult decisions made by the organization, the consequences of which impact employees.

To get a better handle on this phenomenon and to see if HR practitioners could identify with it, we interviewed 26 highly educated and experienced HR professionals. What we found was really not that surprising—they reported that a central aspect of their role is to act as an organizational toxin handler (Daniel, 2018; see also, Daniel, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). In fact, 58% of the study's participants said that they helped employees deal with toxic emotions on a daily basis (Daniel, 2018).

A high-level summary of this research, which is foundational to this book, is included as Appendix I should you wish to read more (Daniel, 2018). And for those of you who are more academically inclined or just wish to more closely examine how the results from the study were derived, a more comprehensive examination of the study's design and findings is included as Appendix II (Daniel, 2018).

You will see that quotes from the experienced HR professionals who were interviewed for this study are included throughout the following chapters to help explain key points. It is only fair to warn you at this point that hearing from practitioners—in their own words—may be painful and cause you to remember some of your own difficult workplace experiences. As tough (and sometimes poignant) as it may be to read them, their unvarnished perspectives are included because they help to underscore how organizational toxicity actually affects both the organization and its employees, including practitioners such as yourself.

This new label—organizational toxin handler—describes an old issue that most of you will quickly understand to be a persistent workplace problem for HR practitioners. In fact, you have likely personally experienced it at some point in your career and may even experience it multiple times per week. In all likelihood, you engage in these type of activities with some frequency but perhaps just didn't yet have a term or label with which to describe it. Now you do.

When engaged in this work, toxin handlers are involved in six core activities: empathetic listening, suggest solutions and provide resources, work behind the scenes and provide a safe space, confidential counseling, strategize communications and reframe difficult messages, and coach and advise managers. If you take a moment to reflect on what you do during a “normal” day, I would venture to guess that this is sounding like pretty familiar territory now, isn't it?

HR, OD, and coaching practitioners are regularly confronted by distressed employees and organizational leaders who bring emotionally charged
problems to them with the expectation that they will receive help to resolve the issue. Any further reference to HR or HR practitioners is also meant to include OD and coaching practitioners since the nature of their work so closely aligns and frequently overlaps. For purposes of this book, though, I will generally refer to them collectively as “HR” or simply as “practitioners” for ease of reference.

By engaging in this work, organizational toxin handlers enable 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 and productivity.

Toxin handlers care deeply about employees. They feel a strong need to listen to and assist employees in dealing with their problems, whether personal and organizational—they tend to think of themselves as inherently fixers.

Although toxin handlers routinely assist employees, at the same time they also feel a strong responsibility to support senior leaders and drive positive organizational outcomes. Navigating these competing role demands (which are often in direct conflict) is not easy. As a result, the role is inherently paradoxical and the nature of this required “balancing act” tends to create significant personal stress for practitioners.

Moreover, the toxin handling role is dangerous because of the personal risk it poses to the practitioner’s personal well-being over time. They commonly experience significant physical and emotional exhaustion, feelings of sadness and anger, high stress, lack of sleep, and burnout. In addition, their personal relationships, overall health, and home life are also often negatively affected. This causes some to seek personal counseling and/or medical attention as a result of the excessive tension and strain they experience at work.

Pictures are often helpful in illuminating new concepts such as that of organizational toxin handler. To further accelerate your understanding of this role, here is a conceptual model which may help you to visualize the organizational role and how it impacts employee well-being and organizational effectiveness (Fig. 1.1).

The heart is a key element in visualizing and understanding 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, in addition to the role itself, that works in tandem to drive employees to seek their counsel.
The “sweet spot” occurs when practitioners work to solve problems for both employees and their organization by being “HR fixers”—helping employees manage the toxic emotions that they feel as a result of workplace decisions and issues. 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.

In the chapters that follow, we will delve further into the types of situations that create organizational toxicity, who toxin handlers are and what they actually do, how they do it, why organizations need them, and what companies can do to minimize the harm to their well-being resulting from the toxin handling role. The risks and dangers associated with the toxin handling role will also be examined, along with what practitioners themselves can do to protect themselves from the increased levels of stress, burnout, and emotional and physical exhaustion that they often experience due to their engagement in this important work. Stay with me to learn more about these topics—and more—in the coming chapters.

It may be useful to initially examine why toxic emotions are so prevalent at work to give you some context for the problem and how it has evolved over the past 30 years. As a result, we will next examine in Chap. 2 some of the economic and legal issues that have contributed to changes in the American workplace—changes that have increased the organizational toxicity that currently exists for so many employees.
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