

# Challenging the Toxic Environment

A HealingLeaders White Paper

by

Howard Hansen

*“To confront a person with his own shadow is to show him his own light”*

**Carl Jung**

## Introduction

### **The Unwelcome Laptop**

Recently, I worked with a corporate leadership team to develop a new mission statement and set up core values for their organization. No such activity is ever complete until the group also decides on how to integrate the results of their work into the company and all employees adopt them. This requires creative thinking and significant team focus. But, our work that day was to be forced and without energy. The CEO entered the room, laptop in hand. As the group sat down to business, he announced that he'd brought his computer into the meeting so he could keep track of email messages. Unfortunately, the message he was sending was more powerful than

email, and it was received by those gathered in the room. Even though he had called for the team to come together for this specific work, he wanted his “way out” should the process not strike him positively.

It wasn't long before conflict surfaced. Our process was derailed twice as two principles argued over issues involving systems recently implemented in the company. The arguments weren't about what appeared on the surface, and they certainly were not on topic. They signaled deep levels of confusion, mistrust and frustration within the team. I watched these adults argue like adolescents, each scoring points against the other on perceived realities of what sequence of details had led to a particular decision. The

CEO was visibly angry. He argued aggressively and beat the room into near silence. At this point, I intervened, and asked whether the behavior I was seeing was common for this team. No one denied it. I told the group it had little or no hope of completing its objectives, given its present method of working together, and suggested they caucus, without me, to decide on how to spend the rest of the day. I excused myself from the room, keeping myself available for whatever decision at which they might arrive.

One newly-hired team leader, clearly upset, had already left the meeting room. Out in the hall she told me, "I can't work here!" The toxicity she had just experienced shocked her. Now, she was thinking she might have to quit her job and resign from the company.

As she and I talked, I saw and heard deep pain in her expressions. She was managing several emotions, from feeling betrayed by the company whose job she had accepted, to wondering how and when she might get another job.

The work continued that

afternoon with some positive results. The group found a way to adjust its behavior for awhile, to "prove me wrong," as one participant put it, and accomplished some of its outcomes. When the meeting ended, I told one of their number, "Don't congratulate yourselves, the cost was too high. You might lose a team member because of the poisonous way you work with each other." What was gained had not been worth the cost.

### **False Sincerity and the Toxic Moment**

Another place and another time... A long-time colleague of mine, Mary, is asked to meet with her boss. She is mid-30's, gaining good experience, well-educated, bright and energetic. She's working for the company she has loved from before the time she was hired. Mary's boss, a team leader, has just completed an internal leadership-training program. The trainer has said that managers need to get closer to their team members and suggested some techniques. The boss tries it. He meets with Mary and asks her to talk about goals and

dreams for herself. But his questions sound inauthentic, formulated and stilted. Mary's well developed intuition correctly tells her the questions are driven not by any genuine interest from her boss, but by the suggestion implicit in the workshop that bosses manipulate the needs and feelings of their subordinates by first, appearing interested. The question is a set up for manipulation, for keeping Mary in line, and Mary knows it. Later, Mary tells me about the meeting. Feeling battered by unfair criticism of her work, longing for compliments which never came and hungry for feedback about her performance, Mary drives home tearful and discouraged. That night she tells her husband, "My soul is crushed"

### **What's Going On?**

Stories like these are common. As we read them we think of our own. They are stories of experiences played out every day in countless numbers of organizations. We see these organizations permeated with toxicity, which discourages and suppresses high levels of employee

satisfaction, teamwork and performance, rather than promoting these ideals. We often find ourselves swimming in these toxic pools.

What are the origins of this toxicity? How did the pool get filled up with this caustic stuff? Who brought it in here? How did it become so pervasive?

The answer to all these questions is that toxicity is seeded by highly anxious leaders whose lack of courage stifles innovation, creativity and imagination.

I define a leader as a person who has important influence over others in the organization. By possessing that influence, the leader exercises power to create either a toxic or healthy environment for him/herself and others. By this definition, a "leader" need not possess title, status and power per se. She can be a "leader" by virtue of knowledge, skills, experience or tenure of placement in the company. A combination of these elements places that person among others as someone with influence.

The primary role of leadership is

to assist in the process of developing people to their highest potential.

This means making daily connections with people whom leaders influence, learning what thrills them; what they aspire to; what kinds of accomplishments make meaning for them. That knowledge gives leaders both obligation and power to define and refine the environment for people whom they lead. The role of developing others can't succeed when levels of unnecessary conflict, personal damage and toxicity exist. We can't avoid toxic moments in our business. They are inevitable. But there is much leaders can do to prevent or diminish toxicity not so much by what they do, but by understanding the impact of their own presence. When leaders understand the healing and enriching impact potential of their presence, they become leaders who heal. The health care community has shifted emphasis upstream. Providers have learned preventive care is preferable to disease treatment. Healing leaders must learn and apply the same approaches to health in their

organizations.

### **From Harm to Health**

Healing leaders examine their own intent before each personal or group interaction. They do instant and effective self-discovery checkups. They ask themselves if actions and suggestions they are about to make are in alignment with the role of helping others develop themselves. These are leaders who believe that each person in their organization is capable of aspiring to higher potential. Healing leaders allow this belief to influence and form even the smallest interactions they have with others, no matter the circumstances, pressure or complexity of the situation. Innovative leaders “innovate” by knowing their input, feedback and suggestions will be different for every set of circumstances, but will always be driven by a desire to reduce toxicity and promote health in their environment of influence. They know their team members respond best to authentic interest in their success.

And there's something else they know. They understand their influence places serious responsibility on them to understand how moments of tension, challenge and conflict affect the brain. The brain goes into reptilian mode under stress and anxiety. "Fight or flight" forces limit a leader's creative alternatives and reduces his/her effectiveness to little or nothing. When anxiety and stress challenges raise the brain response to "red alert", healthy leaders practice self-calming exercises to abort fight or flight and reduce anxiety. When leaders do this, the environment they impact instantly changes. Followers adjust their own anxieties and team performance dramatically improves. Creativity and imagination blooms.

My first experience with a boss who practiced non-anxious and healing leadership occurred when I was beginning my career as a television reporter. It was forty years ago. I was working at a television station in a small Wisconsin city. I had just begun my job and was eager to learn, contribute and build a reputation as a skilled and

dependable team member. My stepfather became seriously ill. He and my mother made an emergency trip to Mayo Clinic for critical surgery. I was closer than my siblings and felt a strong need to be with these two parents at the hospital. But, I felt guilty about asking for time off. I had no vacation available. My boss, the news director, tuned into my anxiety. He told his boss, the station manager, a man named Kelly. As I worked in my cubicle, fretting about my step dad's surgery, Kelly's assistant approached. She quietly handed me an airline ticket and said, "Kelly wants you to get to Rochester right away. Come back when you feel you can." I was never made to feel obligated for this gift. I arrived at the hospital just as my father came out of what was to be a successful operation.

Kelly was practicing healing leadership. He certainly couldn't fix my stepfather's medical problems. He couldn't coach me to reduce my anxiety. But, he could help me engage more effectively in my family's crisis.

Kelly and other leaders like him know that anxious employees won't perform well. They are willing to invest in ways to help these employees move through a crisis without entering the crisis. They

know their rational and non-anxious presence and acts of thoughtful consideration for others is good for business.

Howard Hansen

Howard Hansen can be contacted at [hhansen@healingleaders.com](mailto:hhansen@healingleaders.com)