

Tools, Tips, Tidbits and a Forum for continuing conversation...

Caustic conversations and toxic emotions infect almost every workplace. Left unchecked, they're toxic time bombs and they can be as deadly as any physical disease. All this translates into debilitating costs you will never see on the balance sheet...

A pandemic of caustic conversational behaviour is killing-off trust, ruining relationships, corroding connectivity and turning teams toxic. Are caustic conversations on the increase in your workplace?

A Word from the Editor...

In this issue we examine caustic conversations. They're the ones that turn teams toxic, kill off trust and corrode connectivity. We look at what you can do to handle toxic conversation-makers and caustic colleagues and inoculate yourself from their ill-effects. We've included a catalogue of different types of toxic people and we review Al Bernstein's *Emotional Vampires* and John Clarke's *Working with Monsters*. We also preview our new program *Handling Toxic Emotions at Work* launching 2010. *Bill Cropper, September 2009*

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The Cost of Caustic Conversations...



Pigs to swine-flu outbreaks! With so much consternation about containing contagions lately, have we overlooked a more insidious and costly syndrome?

Caustic conversations infect every workplace. They're the by-product of people who can't handle their toxic emotions. Toxicity is almost unavoidable at work. It's embedded in heated arguments, sniping or critical comments, over-bearing bosses, cantankerous colleagues, the stress and panic of work-pressure and meeting deadlines, not to mention the insidious patterns of blame, bullying, despondency, despair, rage, anger and resentment that seethe below the surface in most organisations. It's enough to depress even the most optimistic of us.

We don't want you to panic, but left unchecked, harmful emotions like these are toxic time bombs. They can be as deadly as any physical disease. Prolonged exposure to toxic emotions is literally poisonous. The costs of toxic emotions at work are often invisible – as is the role poisonous people and caustic conversations, play in undermining work cultures. Left alone to fester, they can cripple teams – and even whole organisations.

They manifest in withdrawal, disconnection, de-motivation, gossip, cynicism, mistrust and spiteful communication. Apart from resentments, resignations and absenteeism, toxic emotions play havoc with our sense of purpose, focus, flow and feelings of self-worth. They poison people's experience of work, rob them of vitality and resilience and drain workforce productivity. All this translates into debilitating costs you will never see on the balance sheet.

Even if some level of toxicity is an unavoidable fact of workplace life, those who want to stay healthy need to learn how to handle it better – and contain outbreaks in the first place. Toxicity is such a regular occurrence and an occupational hazard that creating happier workplaces may soon become an occupational health and safety necessity!

Caustic Conversations – *corroding connectivity...*



Imagine a workplace where we communicate cleanly and openly, where there's a real sense of team and people relate well and really respect each other.

Where people listen intently, go out of their way to connect with you, come directly to you to resolve a difference – not blame behind your back, give you the silent treatment or act annoyed and angry. Where the only dart-board's in the lunch-room and it hasn't got your picture on it; and people

don't use e-mails as WMD's (aka: '*weapon of mass disrespect*').

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Caustic Conversations - corroding connectivity...

If we've just described your workplace – don't move! Stay there and count yourself lucky!

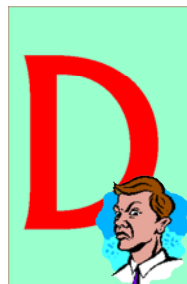
Because sadly, the reverse is often more the case. Caustic work climates are a threat world-wide. We're suffering a pandemic of caustic conversational behaviour that's killing-off trust, ruining relationships, corroding connectivity and turning teams toxic. The trouble is that much of the time, we humans seem to have a tendency to use conversations to be critical, judgemental and adversarial rather than supportive, connective and appreciative.

Whatever end YOU happen to be on, caustic conversations are toxic. They leave you emotionally exhausted, despondent, distrustful, just plain frustrated or even hateful and spiteful. We've all been stuck in conversations where bad feelings erupt.

- ◆ Sometimes, it's right out there: angry outbursts, name-calling, yelling, abuse, public dressing-downs, reprimands, personal attacks and other poisonous behaviours that create emotional overloads and trigger our primitive 'fight or flight' response.
- ◆ Sometimes, it's concealed in more subtle ways – sarcasm, innuendo, public teasing, cynical contempt, disapproving looks, 'polite' put-downs or veiled criticisms.
- ◆ And sometimes, it's outright war: Cc-ing scathing emails around the place, character assassination, ripping apart your reputation by spreading salacious stories and ugly rumours, calling into question your competence, commitment or character, accusing you of things you've done (or not done) and attributing malicious motivations to you when you may not even be there to put your side of the story.

Maybe I'm overstating the case for caustic communication constituting such a widespread organisational contagion. For every caustic conversation, I'm sure a connective one happens. But look around you. *Are caustic conversational encounters on the increase in your workplace?*

'Difficult' people – why can't they be more like us?



Caustic conversations and 'difficult' people go hand-in-glove.

'Difficult' people – they're a big blot on our idyllic mental picture of workplace harmony. We all fantasise about that magic potion or silver bullet to neutralise difficult people, to turn swine into *swell people who are as reasonable and 'un-difficult' as ourselves*.

Of course, the 'D' label itself doesn't help. If we expect someone to be difficult – it tends to turn out that way. After all, it's you who stuck the label on them in the first place. You think it stands for '*difficult*' – they think it stands for '*defective*', '*dumb*' or '*disagreeable*'. One thing's for sure. They don't see themselves as 'difficult', and treating them as if they are or worse still, telling them, isn't going to make things any better – though it can make things a lot more, well...difficult.

Think about it? What was your reaction the last time someone said "*You're just being difficult about this*"? Odds are you didn't agree. We bet you felt defensive and self-justifying (eg. "*I'm not being difficult, I just.....*") or even thought the other person was being *difficult* by saying you were. Now we're in a spiralling argument about who's being the most difficult – and that leads nowhere.

Does 'difficult' really describe them or their behaviour – or does it describe your emotional reaction to them? Let's face it – we frequently judge people 'difficult' when their view differs disturbingly from ours, when they challenge our authority, question our approach, want something different to us or act in ways we '*un-difficult*' people wouldn't.

In our *Difficult Discussions* clinic, we prompt people to pay attention to the '*ugly story*' they make up about the other person. Why? Because it has a big impact on how we feel about them, how we interpret their motives and how we react to them – and '*difficult*' is a species of just such an ugly story. Here's how this goes.

Someone says or does something that irritates us. We immediately assume we know why and attribute bad intentions to them. Before we know it, we've made up an ugly story about them. The story comes with bad feelings attached – the uglier the story, the more negative our feelings. Our feelings then take over – and we feel justified to blame, accuse, correct, put the other person '*in their place*' and judge them as '*difficult*'. ...Continued over >>>

Does 'difficult' really describe them or does it describe your reaction to them?

Before you attach the "D" word to someone, why not ask yourself: "*In what ways might I be being difficult about this too?*"

'Difficult' people - why can't they be more like us?

What distinctive trademarks do difficult people display that make them stand out from the reasonable rest of us? Here's a few to watch out for...

Ugly stories are the hard-to-detect ingredient that turns difficult discussions into caustic conversations. We rarely see the ugly story we've made up about the other person for what it really is – *our* ugly story – and we don't see how it controls our reactions.

So before you attach the 'D' word to someone, why not ask yourself: "*In what ways might I be being difficult about this too?*" Be more alert to the ugly stories you manufacture about others. Think about what it's doing to you and how's its making you treat the other person.

'Difficult' People – what are their trademarks?



While we cavalierly label others with the 'D' word, what distinctive trademarks do difficult people display that make them stand out from the reasonable rest of us, who are only difficult occasionally? Here's a few trademarks...

- 1. Persistently pessimistic.** Working from the negative side of their personality, difficult people see every situation through negative filters. Mood-wise, optimism's a great enabler. Negativity isn't. Persistent pessimists can depress your level of motivation, energy and enthusiasm.
- 2. Know-it-all's.** Don't dare question difficult people. You'll be smothered in a landslide of reasons why your idea isn't worth 'zit' while theirs is pure gold! Superiority like this comes across as arrogance (*sounds like a good title for a designer fragrance?*) – often a defensive routine to cover up insecurity or incompetence. Eventually, you give up trying to work with them (*unless they're your boss or you voted for them of course!*).
- 3. Disrespectful.** Though disrespect's often a side effect. They aren't deliberately trying to hurt your feelings or act rudely towards you – they're not considering you at all. They're so wound up in themselves, they don't see how they come across (*"I didn't mean to be disrespectful, I was just....?"*). They have other things on their mind – like defending their rights, protecting themselves or not letting people walk all over them.
- 4. Domineering stand-over merchants.** 'Control freak' is the label we apply to people in management positions like this (though 'power-path' is the new term if you want to sound really trendy). It's *'do it my way, or else'*. The control freak acts reasonably – as long as they're in control. Faced with the prospect of losing control – the thing they fear most – they resort to coercion and bullying. They force their ideas on everyone without discussion – things must be done their way or else. The irony is: the more tyrannical and domineering they are, the more others resort to rebellion or subterfuge to subvert their authority.
- 5. Picky, hyper-critical, fault-finders.** Ever judgemental, ever critical, they don't always mean to, but they damage your self-esteem. The judge is a fault-finder. Critical people fall into two categories; those who don't realise how critical they are being and those who know but don't care. Either way, they can be a real pain. You don't have to suffer the anguish highly opinionated critics inflict. Remind yourself that their judgments often reflect their own quirks or lack of self-esteem and may have little do with you. The best defence is a firm idea of your own abilities, limitations, beliefs and values.

➡ New program...

The Change Forum has added a new 1-day seminar to its series of public learning forums.

Handling Toxic Emotions at Work: coping with caustic conversations looks at what you can do to cope better with caustic conversation-makers and emotionally toxic workmates



Handling Toxic Emotions at Work – a new program

The Change Forum is launching a new program: *Handling Toxic Emotions at Work: coping with caustic conversations* – a 1-day extension to our clinic on *Dealing with Difficult Discussions*. What's it about? The title says it all...

Our experience of running *Difficult Discussions* clinics and doing individual coaching work over the past several years has highlighted that there are some people or situations that go way beyond just 'difficult' to handle. They classify for the category of 'severely toxic' or 'plain poisonous' – and this program delves deeper into the realm of dysfunctional behaviour. It doesn't focus on fixing 'them'. It looks at what YOU can do to cope better with caustic conversation-makers and emotionally toxic workmates, to insulate yourself from their harmful effect and deal with your own disruptive feelings they bring on.

Topics we cover in *Handling Toxic Emotions at Work* include: costs of toxic emotions and workplace impacts; emotional contagion and immunity; combating caustic conversations; handling hostility and other types of toxic behaviour; overcoming stress; emotional insulation; revitalising yourself; resilience-building and creating healthier work cultures. For more information, download the program flyer from our [website](#) or contact us as below.

Books abound about organisational psychopaths, abundant with a scary cast of workplace 'monsters', 'vampires' and even 'snakes in suits!'

Sure, people behave badly at work but does it really help to glibly label people?...

Or does it just fuel ugly stories that wind us up more?

The cost of toxic work climates is huge in terms of bad relationships, poor teamwork, low morale and a host of dysfunctional behaviours that drain energy and disrupt our focus and flow at work.

Research is beginning to show that toxic emotions at work may pose a serious health threat, just as if they were real, physical bio-hazards...



Going Gothic – witches, werewolves, vampires... psychopaths?

It's Halloween. My kids terrify the neighbourhood dressed as a dead ballerina and zombie policeman. I'm home, with a stash of trick-or-treat lollies, reading John Clarke's expose on workplace psychopaths, *Working with Monsters* (reviewed in this issue). It was then I started to make a creepy connection...

Books abound at the moment about organisational psychopaths, abundant with a scary cast of workplace 'monsters', 'vampires' and even 'snakes in suits!'. As I read on, I can't help thinking: "Goody! It's a real Gothic Revival. Can we please add gargoyles and Frankensteins to the list? *Mary Shelley would be rapt! Lycanthropy? Yes! Why not werewolves?*"

But as I read on, Clarke's in there before me. I should've known from the lurid allusions he makes to psychopaths 'devouring' us at work, he'd make the lycanthropic leap! With no tongue in his very serious cheek, he hits us with his historical knowledge of werewolves: "...the belief in lycanthropy, or the transformation of persons into werewolves, can be traced back to at least 600 BC, when King Nebuchadnezzar believed he suffered from such an affliction. These wolf-like human beings were individuals who literally tore apart their victims" (p. 26-27). Makes you wonder what the Hanging Gardens were really about!

My publishing opportunity evaporates before my eyes. There's only gargoyles, harpies and yetis left now! ...I feel dubious about books like these. Does it really help to glibly label people as vampires, monsters and werewolves? Or does it just fuel ugly stories that wind us up more? 'Psychopath' has snuck its way into organisation lexicons lately and slips more frequently off peoples' tongues at work.

Sure people behave badly at work. They're troubled, fatigued, burnt-out, stressed, bitchy, mean-spirited, self-centred, closed-minded, paranoid, intimidating or suffer from a moderate to severe personality disorder. But come on, they're still people – not monsters! Reciting this litany of toxic labels, gives me feelings I imagine we all get from reading these books: you feel smug, self-righteous, relieved and liberated you're not like that.

I hear about lots of terrible people in my *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* clinics. Most aren't monsters – they don't have fangs, talons, or even sharp evil intent. So before you go using labels like 'power-path', 'drama-queen' or 'blood-sucker' – stop and think about this: 'The only time I can so harshly label someone else like this is if I have never behaved badly myself.' If you have, you're disqualified. And if you do, regardless of your spotlessly clean and consistently compassionate behaviour towards others, you're a 'character-assassin' just like the people you label.

...Hmm? Maybe there's a publishing niche there after all? I think it's time we got off the monster-thing and started seeing people as human beings again. Perhaps that's old-fashioned – or is it more even-minded?

Toxic Emotions – handling hazards!



Toxic emotions fuel caustic conversations. In my EI clinics, I often joke we should all be issued with bio-hazard suits for handling toxic emotions and poisonous people at work.

Imagine everyone getting around in cumbersome white suits to insulate themselves from toxic emotions – sounds comical, but it may not be that far from the truth! Research is beginning to show that toxic emotions at work may pose a serious health threat, just as if they were real, physical bio-hazards.

Although they often go unchecked, the cost of toxic work climates is huge in terms of bad relationships, poor teamwork, dissatisfaction, depression, low morale, ongoing feuds, personal rivalries and a host of dysfunctional behaviours that drain our emotional energy, distract us from the task at hand and disrupt our focus and flow at work.

Continual exposure to toxic emotions comes at a cost, because just like disease, they're transmittable. "When someone dumps their toxic feelings on us – explodes in anger or threats, shows disgust or contempt – they activate in us circuitry for those very same distressing emotions," says Daniel Goleman in his book on *Social Intelligence*. ...Continued>>>

Toxic Emotions - handling hazards!

The more prolonged our exposure to these kinds of interactions, the more we are at risk of having our own neuronal pathways re-shaped in ways we don't really want at all. "Over time, we become exhausted – we burn out or burn up... and because our emotions are contagious, dissonance spreads quickly to those around us," adds Goleman's colleagues, Boyatzis and McKee in their book, *Resonant Leadership*.

Toxic emotions transfer is an insidious contagion because it happens so gradually you don't notice. Whether you generate them or pick them up from others, they leave residuals of noxious chemicals that slowly penetrate our body's defences, draining our immune system and resulting in physical and mental ill-health. The old adage: "You make me sick" may be true after all. As Peter Frost points out in *Toxic Emotions at Work*, those caustic people may do just that: "Strong negative emotions such as anger, sadness, frustration, or despair can be particularly toxic to the human body and affect the immune system's ability to protect it... In effect, handling emotional toxins can be as hazardous as working with physical toxins. (We) can burn out and become very sick as a result of this toxic contamination."

Unless we all start learning how to emotionally insulate ourselves from the effects of toxic emotions, they can play havoc with our health, behaviour and sense of well-being. You can't suit up at work, but you can boost your reserves of resilience, resonance, empathy, connectivity and compassion, that can act as anti-venoms to the bite of poisonous people.

Do you know someone who makes you feel depressed or angry or constantly finds fault with you?

How do you cope with the cast of caustic characters and poisonous people who skulk around your conversational landscape?



Coping with Caustic Characters

Do you know someone who makes you feel depressed, angry or just plain tired? Who constantly blame or find fault with you? Do they seem more cheerful after ranting at you? How do you cope with the cast of caustic characters and poisonous people who skulk around your conversational landscape?

Unlike fairytales, there are no magic elixirs in the real world. What works with one person may not with the next you encounter. But don't despair. There *are* things you can do and we've put together a few of them...

- ◆ **Dictators or controllers:** The best strategy is not to ramp up your control. This only leads to pointless power struggles. Don't discount or argue with their opinion. This makes them worse. Build on it. Try more empathy. Connect with them. Use 'and' to move to your idea: "And you're probably already planning to do this too – and another thing you probably had in mind was..." Or if you need to, assert yourself: "When someone pushes me into an action, I get confused and I'm likely to make more mistakes. What I'd like is for us to..."
- ◆ **Anger-mongers:** are people who seem to always respond with an angry, hostile or defensive response – no matter what it is. Don't get hijacked yourself and respond with anger – this only escalates. Don't patronise or control either (eg. "Now calm down. There's no need to speak like that or to get angry.") This is even more infuriating. Let the accusation or insult through to the keeper if you can. Overlook the behaviour: look past the emotional outburst and go to the feelings behind it. Connect with them and inquire about the source of the irritation: "Sounds like you feel...?" "What happened?" or "Is there something we can do to resolve this?"
- ◆ **Throw-backs:** those who throw-back defensive lines like: "You're never satisfied no matter how hard I try..." They make their identity-drama your problem, not theirs. Try contrasting: "I can get a bit impatient sometimes with what's going on. This is not about how satisfied I am or about laying blame. What this is about is..."
- ◆ **Simmerers:** silent types who won't talk. Sometimes it's not the particular issue you need to talk about it's the pattern of talk itself that gets in the way of the issue. Don't do the talking for them. Affirm you're interested in hearing their story and won't be judgemental or disapproving. Ask them what would make it easier or safer to discuss this or directly address the issue of how can we talk over things that matter to me/us?
- ◆ **Marginal performers:** They think they're doing OK – not the best but it's tolerable within the standards. Be clear on what you see (facts) as the difference between mediocre and good. Don't dabble with 'mean-nothing' phrases (eg: "I want more or a better effort.") Be explicit as to what needs improving. Ask yourself: "What actual; behaviours can I describe to make this distinction clear?" then zero in on the gap between what's expected and what they're doing (or not).

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Coping with Caustic Characters...

Al Bernstein's 'Emotional Vampires' is amongst a long line of books many of us seem to find fascinating - about the foibles, fakery and fractiousness of other people we find repugnant, painful and pugnacious

Emotional Vampires: Dealing With People Who Drain You Dry,
Albert J. Bernstein, 2001
McGraw-Hill NY

- ◇ **Complainers or pessimists:** They complain constantly, bombard you with negativity, always expect things to go wrong or see the worst in situations. Their negativity drains your positivity. You expend too much spend emotional energy either trying to cheer them up or fend it off. Don't argue with their pessimistic viewpoint. Acknowledge and 'reframe'. Take the negative and convert it into a positive: "*That may be so sometimes.* (reframe:) *The way I see it is...*"
- ◇ **Snipers:** specialise in hit-and-run conversations – a quick shot then retreat before we can even ask what prompted the attack. They're not serious about engaging you, they haven't even thought about it. They just want to take a shot at you and stir you up. This gives you your first strategy. Simply ask: "*What is it you want me to do differently?*" or "*What can we do about that?*". Since they haven't thought about this, they'll probably beat a hasty retreat. Definitely don't snipe back. This feeds them. They don't want to engage so connect with them about their feelings and the impact of your behaviour they want you take notice of: "*Sounds like you've got some issues to talk over with me. I know you're in a rush but let's arrange a time to talk about this...*"

Emotional Vampires – they suck in conversations...



We love making up ugly stories about people we find difficult to deal with in discussions. It's easy to attach the 'difficult' label to someone else. Yet we rarely see ourselves and what we do, even in the very same situation, as being 'difficult'.

New York-based psychologist, Al Bernstein's spin-tale is *emotional vampirism* – people who "*drain you dry*". His metaphor's apt – we all know energy-drainers, and he sinks his fangs into a scarily extensive typology of different kinds of E-vampires.

Take his treatise to heart (staked or not) and you'll end up decking yourself out in garlic necklaces and never going out at night! (But who would in New York anyway!)

Well, what is an emotional vampire? Anyone, says Bernstein, who gets sustenance from sucking on your emotional energy in "*a desperate attempt to build up their own reserves of emotional strength*". Among his many 'fangy' friends, there's the:

- ✘ Pessimistic vampire, who sinks their teeth into the jugular of your positive feelings, to drain you of all hope and joy (shades of the Dementors in *Harry Potter!*)
- ✘ Perfectionist vampire, who preys on people who don't do it the way they would
- ✘ Paranoid vampire, who twists everything you say into a personal attack on them
- ✘ Narcissistic vampire, the only one in the world who has needs, wants or desires
- ✘ Histrionic vampire – drama-queens making a big show of how productive, busy or over-worked they are, but never seem to get all that much done

Bernstein says while each type has their own peculiarly parasitic way to suck energy and leave you feeling depleted and done-over, all EVs live by the same set of rules: (1) *My needs are more important than yours.* [This rule only applies to other people, not me] (2) *It's not my fault, ever.* [But I am happy to show you how it's always yours.] (3) *I want it now.* [And if I don't get my way, I throw a tantrum.] We may be EV-positive ourselves, but since vampires cast no reflection in mirrors, we'd probably be the last to see it.

What motivates EVs? Bernstein says the simplest motive is plain jealousy. But as you'd expect (after all there's a whole book to fill) he then says there's quite a bit more to it than that. For instance, most EVs (is Dracula an exception?) suffer self-esteem issues.

Bernstein also provides a few silver bullets, a couple of sharp stakes and few cloves of garlic to ward off EVs and their evil intent.

For example, with the bully-vampire, who feeds off your fear, he says that what BVs do only works if you play along and let them feast off the negative emotions they create in you. Bernstein's silver bullet? Control yourself. Deny the BVs emotional reward by doing the unexpected. When a BV attacks, keep cool (or at least pretend to). "*When he yells, quietly ask him to repeat himself as if you hadn't heard. Never explain or try to defend. He hopes you'll say things he can turn around.*" The real calmer is to ask the bully what he wants you to do. "*Nothing stops a bully dead like having to think instead of reacting to primal instinct.*"

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Emotional Vampires - they suck in conversations...

In *Working With Monsters*, John Clarke profiles the mind of psychopaths in the workplace. His thesis is that 'psychopath' is a label usually applied to extreme criminal behaviour but working monsters exhibit the similar traits with devastating effects.

His book seems bleak, sombre, clinical, disturbing and humourless - what you'd expect from someone who's spent too long lingering on viciousness.

Given his criminal profiling background, it's saturated with extreme examples, that bitterly flavour his book. Great if you want to obsess a lot or institute monster-spotting as a new workplace past-time...

Not so great if you want to maintain a charitable, balanced and compassionate view on people and their frailties - and remain hopeful about resolution.

I'd give it 2 stars... unless you want to get obsessive!

Working With Monsters: How to identify & protect yourself from the workplace psychopath

John Clarke 2005,
Random House Sydney

Of course, there are a few kinds of vampires Bernstein doesn't mention – like the pop-psychology vampire who comes up with an appealing metaphor that lets you be snugly judgemental of others. Do we then run the risk of becoming stereo-typing, hyper-judgemental vampires? The original Van Helsing in Bram Stoker's classic novel had hints of obsessive insanity about his single-minded quest for the count and I wonder whether books like these – if taken seriously – might just drain you dry of compassion, charity and understanding.

Workplace 'psychopaths' – Working with 'monsters'?

'Workplace psychopath' is a label that springs easily to people's lips lately – and Sydney University-based, forensic psychologist John Clarke, spices up the psycho-pathological workplace mix by adding the emotive term 'monsters'. A gruesomely quaint touch.



Drawing on his extensive criminal 'monster-spotting' experience, Clarke does the maths – 10% of the work population show characteristics, and around 1% are diagnosable psychopaths, he says.

That's *really* monstrous! How do you spot one? Superficially charming, but ruthless, unremorseful, manipulative, intimidating, cold-blooded, calculating, self-absorbed and totally lacking in empathy – are some warning signs. They'll do anything to get ahead, says Clarke. They dazzle you first to win trust, then devour you later. If this reminds you of the personality make-up of someone on your team, you could be in for a rough ride!

Monsters make worklife a living hell for us non-monsters. They leave behind a swathe of psychological damage – insomnia, anxiety, social withdrawal, suppressed immune system, family conflict, loss of self esteem and even suicide.

When it dawns on us that we're working with a monster, Clarke says we go through 5 stages: (1) Shock, then (2) Anger, followed by (3) Shame, embarrassment and (4) Feeling like you're crazy – with massive self-esteem/confidence loss leading to (5) Social withdrawal, relationship problems and dwelling on the situation obsessively. *"Taking action when you are still in stage one or two is critical to avoid the worse impact of the office psychopath,"* Clarke advises, while it's *"still about them, but when you move into stage three – shame and embarrassment – it starts to become about you."*

Clarke is no doubt well-versed in workings of the criminal mind, but his handle on useful measures around what to do is loose – limited to largely legalistic measures and glib solutions like formal management of the psychopath, psych assessments, employee education and *"team-building"*. Don't go head-to-head with monsters, he warns, because they'll do things you wouldn't – lie, cheat, bully. So what does he recommend instead?

- ◆ *"Read everything you can about psychopaths"*. Sure forewarned is fore-armed. Would this also be important, presumably, to boost book sales on organisation psychopaths?
- ◆ *Don't isolate yourself. Find out if others are having similar encounters.* Setting up a 'monstered' support group sounds fine but wasn't witch-hunting also a group activity?
- ◆ *Don't let shame stop you seeking support. See a psychologist,* says Clarke. Seek out family or friends who are on your side and will confirm your opinion of this monster.
- ◆ *Ensure others hear early about your good work before that monster steals the credit. Copy others in on emails,* says Clarke. Now wait. Didn't Clarke say monsters were manipulative? Maybe this is monster-insurance, but it also sounds manipulative?
- ◆ *Document incidents – tell HR.* Sound, well-trodden, workplace paths. Trouble is, monsters already have them pretty well paved! It's one way they already monster you!
- ◆ *If you're not supported, move on.* Is that: monsters win? Is run-away an answer?

Which all leads me to think: maybe this is sound advice for self-survival – but I have lurking suspicions that if you do all these things, you may well become a monster yourself!

While Clarke hits us hard with a host of psycho-characteristics, not all psychopaths have all the characteristics, he cautions, and many normal people do. So you're left wondering whether they conclusively add up to anything much more than fuelling ugly stories about people who may act difficult, but in the main are not psychopaths (leaving aside workplace swindlers, corporate rapists and office-axe murderers, who Clarke lavishes too much time on for my milder tastes)...

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Working with monsters?

Conversational Tool Feature...

Highlighting a tool from our Coaching Clinics for improving your conversations...

There's nothing so satisfying some say than handling hostility head on - but is it always the best way?

Dealing with anger is stressful, right? But does it have to be? Is it possible to let the waves of anger wash over you and stay calm and collected?

➡ Here's a list of things you can do to handle hostility better and avoid those head-ons...

➡ For a full copy of this tool... [contact us](#) at The Change Forum

Many books of this genre take psychiatric data and behaviour traits of extreme cases, and label people in organisations with them. We then de-humanise and demonise. Am I missing something? Isn't that what Hitler did to the Jews? Let's face it, labelling anyone a psychopath without rigorous clinical testing is probably inflammatory and defamatory too.

Handling Hostility – is ‘head-on’ the only way?



What do you do when facing angry people? Do you clam up? Defend yourself? Explain or apologise? Or do you wind up getting angry yourself? There's nothing so satisfying some say than handling hostility head on – but is it always the best way? Dealing with anger is stressful, right? But does it have to be? Is it possible to let the waves of anger wash over you and stay calm and collected?

Here's a list of things you can do to handle hostility better and avoid those head-ons...

1. Don't be shocked – expect an assault. Angry people do a combination of bringing up their issue in an adversarial way, saying things in an attacking, blaming way (lots of YOU messages), only focusing on their rights (and your wrongs), and demanding or delivering ultimatums and threats. When someone comes at us like this, our Amygdala addles us with adrenaline. One of our first thoughts is indignation (*“How dare they speak to me this way!”*) followed by shock, surprise and then our own anger response. So the first thing to do is expect them to be on their worst behaviour and don't be taken by surprise by it.

2. Let them vent. Accept the fact they're angry with you – regardless of whether it's true or not. Don't interrupt to defend or correct – stand back, let them vent and don't get in their way. The average vent is about 2-3 minutes. It's painful, but if you interrupt a vent, it refuels them and they'll start again.

3. Don't try to control their anger response. As Kerry Patterson points out in his book *Crucial Confrontations*: *“Telling people to calm down or grow up throws gas on the flames. They're already fuming about being mistreated, and then you heap on more abuse. You patronize them. Your tone tells them that you think you're superior.”*

4. Show them you're actually listening to what they say. Don't stand there with a dismissive or smug grin on your face or look like you're just waiting your turn to load and fire-back. Be curious. Ask yourself questions: *“WOW, this person is really upset. I wonder what's going on with them?”* Then imagine yourself in the other person's shoes and ask yourself: *“If I said or did that, what might be going on with me?”* See if you can guess. In most cases, people calm down if they see you have a sincere interest in what they say.

5. Train yourself to ask a “What” question. Don't ask this straight-up and interrupt their vent. Wait for a pause – then ask *“What did I do to make you feel this way?”* This is not accepting blame – it's seeking information. A 'what' question may get them to engage their rational brain and move from venting to explaining mode.

7. Don't defend yourself or try to justify your position. As they tell you their story, you will see parts you think are unfair, wrong or downright libellous. Don't leap in and defend yourself or correct them. Later you may get a chance to explain – but not yet. Just listen to their story and put yours aside for now.

8. Assess why the person is angry at you. Put yourself in their shoes. What if they'd have done to you what you did to them? Don't be afraid to admit you did injustice or had a bad impact on them – even if your intention was good. Admit if you can see how you may have impacted them badly. It's an act of courage to acknowledge it – and can help calm..

9. Don't take it personally. This is the most critical and challenging thing to do. I know you're thinking: *“Don't take it personally! How can I when someone's screaming accusations at me or telling me it's all my fault?”* This step is difficult because we've conditioned ourselves to react emotionally when we feel under attack. To learn how to stop taking things to heart, remind yourself that what they're doing or saying isn't about you – not most of it anyway. It's coming from a need they have that isn't being met or a compulsion to protect something they value. While it seems to you like they're launching a personal attack, what's really happening is that something they need is missing from the situation. Once we understand that their actions are all-about-them not us it's easier to move forward and solve the problem instead of reacting to it.

Handling people's anger by practising these steps can free you from reacting defensively, open the way to understanding, and help you maintain emotional balance.

Too often, our response to a person who's being angry and argumentative is to focus on what we disagree over

If you want to calm and defuse so you can both engage more rationally, look first to what you do agree on...

What are the practical pay-backs in coming along to our *Difficult Discussions* clinic? Do conversations improve as a result? We let some of our past participants share their perspectives....

Next Dates for Dealing with Difficult Discussions

For upcoming dates in your Region check 'What's On' on-line at www.thechangeforum.com

➡ Download course Brochure for details and registration form

Disagreeability – draining the common ground...



Too often, our response to a difficult person who's being angry and argumentative is to focus on what we disagree over. We may wait to hear what the other person has to say – but we listen mostly to prove them wrong – right?

Caustic conversations centre first on disagreement and conflict that lead to argument. We take an adversarial approach. The focus is firmly on what we disagree over rather than what we do agree on. *What's wrong with that, you ask?*

- ◇ Well, it's actually rare we totally disagree with *everything* the other person says. But in a disagreeable frame of mind, we adopt the law of absolutes, focusing solely on what we disagree on. We blow that up larger than life and sideline areas we do agree on.
- ◇ Rationally, this is a dumb approach. We know it escalates argument, but when we feel right about something we do it anyway. We both get more entrenched in rightness.

Psychologist Donald Moine says we should employ more often what he calls the "100+1 percent principle" – find the 1 percent in that difficult person's argument you *do* agree with, and then agree with it 100%. Sure, you may be mentally screaming to yourself that you completely disagree with the other 99%.

But if you can resist the natural tendency to verbalise your disagreement and hold back the urge to show how the other person's thinking is faulty and flawed, talk first about the 1% you do agree with. You must, of course, be truthful and genuinely agree with this 1% 100% percent. Otherwise, the other person picks up on your falseness. This means more than throwing out a bland pacifying statement – that usually gets followed by a 'but' (eg. *"I agree wholeheartedly with that, BUT..."*), then spending most of the time pulling apart the other person's viewpoint.

Feedback from the Field... Difficult Discussions



Our *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* clinic is now in its 6th year and we've been privileged to work with and learn from a host of people from so many different backgrounds: eg. nurses, doctors, social workers, project managers, scientists, technicians, psychologists, police, teachers, trainers, HR professionals, administrators, managers. What unites them all is recognition of how destructive difficult discussions poorly handled can be – how quickly trust and respect can dissipate and team relationships turn toxic. And they all want to handle them better.

What are the practical pay-backs in coming along to our clinic? Do conversations improve as a result? We thought we'd let some of our past participants share their perspectives....

One of the biggest barriers to engaging in difficult discussions is confidence. It's why many of us avoid them. It looks like our clinic can help close the confidence-gap. *"Learning formulas and tools to guide my Difficult Discussions gave me more confidence"* said Jane Lyons from Trinity Bay State School. *"Difficult Discussions was brilliant,"* adds Dana Farrell from BlueCare, *"I really feel much more capable of handling difficult conversations."*

Some say after our clinic, they now plan more before having a difficult discussion, instead of just launching in unprepared like they used to. *"I now feel more prepared and equipped to tackle difficult conversations and not back away from them,"* says Barbara Foster from Trinity Bay State High, *"I've been a lot more planned for my difficult conversations."* *"Difficult Discussions was both rewarding and enjoyable,"* Debbie Farrell from Queensland Health chimes in. *"I feel confident I will be able to use the tools in future conversations."*

While our clinic focuses on difficult discussions at work, many participants, like Naomi Pradella, tell us they've also been using them in other arenas of their life. *"Very enjoyable, insightful and most of all useful in everyday life. I've been refreshing what I learnt on arrival back in the workplace and trying to use this in all my dealings now, not just in difficult discussions. I found the book very easy to read and have used a number of the concepts even in everyday life."*

Most feedback we get confirms people are using the Guidebook that goes with the clinic...

...Continued over >>>

Feedback from the Field... *Dealing with Difficult Discussions*

Extend your team's conversational competency with an in-house clinic or personalised or small group coaching in the workplace... Powerful learning support that's also cost-effective!

➔ Use our on-line [Enquiry form](#) or the contacts below

➔ For upcoming dates in your Region check 'What's On' on-line at www.thechangeforum.com

➔ Download course [Brochures](#) for details and registration form

➔ Download our [Leadership Coaching Prospectus](#) here

More Information?

To register or find out more about how our Difficult Discussions & Emotional Intelligence Clinics can help you and your team contact:

"It's a great resource," Leonne Deighton told us. "I've used it to go over concepts with different staff to help them remember how to deal with clients."

Cathie Peut at Centrelink agrees: "The resource guide is a great set of tools. It really has informed my conversations in the past weeks". Heather Scott agrees: "The course came at a time when I felt a huge need for it. My biggest fear is I'll forget all the good stuff, which is why I'm grateful for the Guide."

It's true for most of us like Heather. Our appreciation level for a program like *Dealing with Difficult Discussions*, depends a lot on the timing of it in our lives. As Elizabeth Tilbrook from RSL Care observes: "This opportunity came at the right time of my life for me both personally and professionally. If you come away from this clinic the same as you went in, then you need to look at yourself and think about where the challenges really are for you!"

Can dealing better with difficult conversation situations be life-changing? We frequently get feedback that says 'yes'. Here's a recent story from one participant we won't name. You'll see why.

"I'm pleased *Difficult Discussions* was also helpful for a friend who had to do something about her snappy, moody behaviour at work, which was very difficult to work with. Inspired with my enthusiasm, she took my Guide home to read before a difficult discussion she had to have the next day. She rang that night to say that was exactly what she needed to see her whole situation differently. So, from my friend, I repeat: 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.' ...It may save her job."

Why not do a Difficult Discussions clinic In-house?

Our **Difficult Discussions**, **Conversational Coaching** and **Emotional Intelligence** clinics offer excellent teambuilding advantages when run **in-house** for leaders, mixed learning groups or intact work teams – along with shared understanding of tools and techniques, strengthened relationships and increasing 'real-time', back-at-work application of learning. And we can tailor programs to focus on your priority improvement areas or key learning needs – as stand-alone events or part of a broader workplace change or team development effort.



Dealing well with the difficult moments that inevitably arise in any team is one of the 5 foundations of effective teams we cover in our **Working Better Together** team-building series and a segment of our extended **Learning to Lead** series for emerging leaders. In-house **Dealing with Difficult Discussions** clinics can be offered in either 2-day or condensed 1-day formats in-house, if time is an issue for your team.

Emotional Intelligence Clinics for leaders & teams

What sets successful leaders apart from the rest is their level of personal mastery and emotional intelligence. No longer an optional extra, EI is a critical competency for all capable leaders! Our 2-day **Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence** clinic explores 7 essential EI practices to energise your leadership, create more connective team relationships and bring out the best in others. And since we believe it's just as important for staff to be emotionally aware as it is for leaders, we offer a 1-day EI seminar for staff that explores what EI is, why it matters and how to start applying basic EI tools and practices at work.

We also provide **personalised, by-the-hour coaching services** – face-to-face, on-line and by phone – for individual managers or small teams keen to fast-track their leadership and conversational capabilities. Contact **Bill Cropper** to find out more about the learning programs, coaching and [change support](#) services we provide.

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