12 ESM Strategies: managing toxic emotions at work – riot or regulation?

Coaching Clinics for Leaders & Teams

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on excerpts drawn from our self-coaching guides on
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I first met Nerida soon after she took up her role as the new nursing director at a regional hospital. She'd held a similar position prior, but moved here because staff at the other place were *"toxic and out of control"*. Looking forward to the new start, she'd formed promising relationships amongst her staff. But over several months, they saw she was prone to moodiness, smiled little, blamed lots and got cranky with anyone questioning her directives. As Nerida sensed some weren't on-board with her, she became increasingly scratchy, coercive and distant. As one of her nurse unit managers said, you never knew from one day to the next, whether she was going to support or snap at you.

Fed up with yet another toxic workplace with alarming behaviours, Nerida left and took up yet another position. Another honeymoon period ensued, where she praised staff for how refreshingly different they were. Six months later, the same behaviours she'd faced before, resurfaced. Nerida didn't consider a common denominator in all this was her own behaviour.

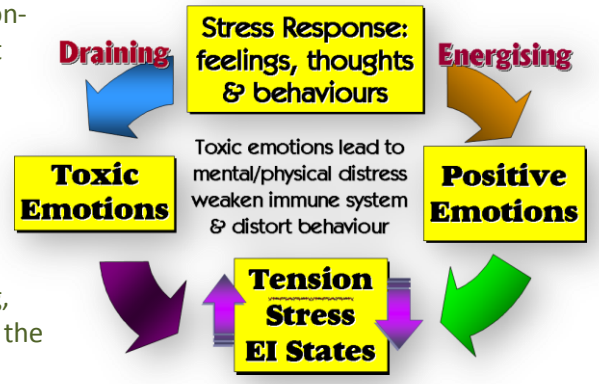
Like Nerida, we all like to think we bring our best-self to work, yet we all know days when we definitely don't. We all have our emotional ups-and-downs, at work and at home. It's natural. Yet I'm hearing more and more alarming stories that lead me to suspect bad behaviour is on the rise in workplaces worldwide.

The Drain of Disruptive Emotions

Is Emotional Self-Management (ESM) giving way to emotional extremism? I don't think I'm exaggerating. Almost a third of those attending my Emotional Intelligence clinics claim to be experiencing unacceptable levels of toxic behaviour at work. Teachers tell me it's the same in many schools – and according to a broad-spectrum survey of more than 5000 employees and HR people, *"childish behaviours ranging from whining and pouting to temper tantrums, are an all-too-common occurrence in U.S. offices and other work spaces."*

This reinforces an earlier 2014 Guardian report on rising bullying which it styled the *"silent epidemic"* and in a February 2013 HBR article entitled *The Price of Incivility,* Phorat and Pearson, who've polled thousands in the past 14 years on how they're treated at work, say 98% encounter bad behaviour *"with half saying they are treated rudely at least once a week - up from a quarter in 1998."*

- Sulking, bickering, bitching-behind-backs, faction-fighting disrespect, grudge-holding, passive or overt aggression – it's at pandemic proportions.
- Toxic work cultures seem to be winning out over warm and welcoming ones. Rudeness and disrespect is rampant.
- Toxicity erupts in heated arguments, over-bearing bosses and insidious patterns of blame, bullying, despondency, despair and anger that lurk below the deceptively serene surfaces of many organisations.



Dysfunctional behaviour like this sets off negative emotional chain-reactions, dampening creativity, declining performance and eroding engagement. The cost of toxic workplaces is huge: deteriorating teamwork, bad relationships, anxiety, stress, chronic dissatisfaction, depression, turn-over and a proliferation of bad behaviours that can infect others and corrode your culture.

Over time, they dispirit, distract, disrupt and drain, weakening our immune systems and leading to physical and mental ill-effects. When emotions run riot over reason, not just individuals but whole teams can get hijacked by strong feelings and be torn apart. Performance and relationships suffer, as people either retreat, retaliate or leave.

How do you know if your Team's turning Toxic?

Try this quick quiz I use in my *EI@Work* and *Creating Constructive Cultures* programs. Tick any warning signals you've noticed. Do you notice…

☐	People lack energy, listless, de-motivated, don't want to be here	☐	People are distrusting, suspicious, unsure of others
☐	More crises, flare-ups and out-of-control behaviour	☐	People are scratchy, irritable, reactive, cynical, make caustic remarks
☐	Leaders are less tolerant, more impatient, demanding, terse, directive	☐	More aggression, impatience, disrespectful behaviour
☐	People act frustrated, stressed; relations seem strained	☐	People feel insecure, less safe, being defensive
☐	More selfishness, personal egos, a 'look after yourself' mentality	☐	Blaming, back-biting, sniping, snitching behaviour
☐	Self-protection has become the norm; more competition, little collaboration	☐	Conversations are guarded, withdrawn or disengaged

If you notice more than 4 of these consistently and widely appearing within the same time-span, you probably have toxic leaks in your culture and your team's in trouble.

What contributes to Toxic Workplaces?

For sure, poor interviewing and screening processes let through those with dysfunctional behaviours, especially if we look for technical prowess, toughness, results or reputation, and overlook emotional intelligence capabilities, like the ability to get along well with others. At the other end, we also seem to have pretty weak processes for weeding out these toxic individuals, and sometimes even reward them!

At a more fundamental level, cultures can often be the culprit in cultivating deeply rooted dysfunctional behaviours. So is our upbringing in terms of schemas we've picked up, and the consequent behaviour patterns and defensive routines that result from them. In some cases, this extends to chronic anti-social behaviours arising from serious childhood trauma events we suffered (often in silence).

Another contributor are 'Nerida-type' behaviours leaders display. It's amazing how some leaders can be blind to their own negative impacts yet so keenly aware of bad behaviour in others. I also believe we harbour a secret attraction to strong, no-nonsense leaders celebrated in film and the media, who are directive and tell it like it is (*aka abrasive, bullying, overbearing*).

DANGER – Emotional Blast Zone...

When a leader loses it and starts to blame and berate a staff member in front of others, it can appear as if only the target of his ire is suffering and getting the full effect of the blame blast. This isn't so. Because everyone's limbic radars are attuned to what's happening, everyone in the blast area who hears or sees this happening also has the same fight or flight reaction as the target person. They all go back to work feeling less secure, less trusting, wondering if they will be next. If you don't believe me, pay attention to the next time you see or hear someone lose it with their kids in a supermarket. Register your feelings and reactions...

- When leaders manage their own emotions well, when they're approachable, positive, supportive and connective, people feel understood, valued and cared for. It brings out the best in them and they put in extra effort. This is resonance and it creates positive emotional climates that engage and energise.
- The reverse is too often true too. When managers dwell in negative emotions, they infect others with their off-colour moods. They create dissonance and dissatisfaction that decimates morale.

Even resonant leaders can grow dissonant under stress. As Daniel Goleman says: *"dissonance dispirits people, burns them out and sends them packing."* (*The New Leaders* p.27) Leader or staff, dissonance can easily spread to infect others with toxic emotions at work.

Lack of Emotional Self-Management

But I believe the biggest contributor to people behaving badly at work is a lack of ESM – *Emotional Self-Management*. Teams who let emotions get out-of-hand suffer relationship-strain, cooperation crumble and ultimately, performance privation. In my *Working Better Together* sessions I frequently run for teams in trouble, there seems to be an alarming upsurge in emotionally volatile behaviour, coupled with a *'dumbing-down'*, in terms of being able to manage and regulate disruptive emotions at work - and elsewhere for that matter. This switch from emotional regulation to riot hinges on our levels of emotional intelligence (EI).

- A 2010 Hay Group survey of 283 companies concluded that EI drives a firm's performance – that staff and leaders lacking in EI don't know how to cope with emotions at work, and are likely to be less competent, act more irritated or over-bearing and feel more frustrated, submissive or disengaged than those who have a handle on their feeling-control faculties.
- Whether they're pleasant, painful, poignant or pernicious, having feelings isn't really the problem. It's how we choose to react as a result of them.
- Some of us seem dominated by disruptive emotions. When they power-up, they overpower us and we feel powerless to prevent ourselves from getting on an emotional roller-coaster ride.

- When our amygdala – the emotions control centre in our brain – takes over, we're vulnerable to emotional hijacks where our feelings run away with us.
- Abandoning better judgement, we act at the whim of our emotions and mindlessly do whatever an emotional impulse tells us. Anger, or its close cousins, irritation and annoyance, has to be the most common emotional hijack. The consequence of angry outbursts tarnishing work climate and relationships is only too well known.

- Venting anger can feel good. It's an adrenalin-buzz to let it rip. We feel powerful until the chemical cocktail our amygdala served up wears off. Then, we usually regret what we said or did under its influence, if we're honest with ourselves and mindful of our impact on others.

The more we act in a certain way – pissed-off, positive, pressured or pleased – the more that emotional behaviour becomes an ingrained brain-habit. We continue to act, feel and think that way. And because our brains pick-up emotional habits from each other, other people in your team may copy you, especially if you're a leader, because like it or not, many follow the emotional lead of their leader.

At work, when emotions run high, we're at risk of being taken-over by them. Our feelings control what we say and do. It's summed up when we say things like: *"I didn't think – it just came out that way,"* or *"I don't know why I over-reacted – I just did."* Under the influence of strong feelings, we act in ways we find unfathomable that leave us puzzled, scared, furious or plain dumb-founded. Emotional explosions (where you vent your feelings) or implosions (where you hold stressful feelings in) disrupt our work flow and focus. They 'flood' it. We become disabled, immobilised or overwhelmed by our feelings. We get so preoccupied with our own emotional state that we lose the ability to do anything else. And this affects our ability to do anything to control these feelings. That's an 'emotional hijack'.

Defusing Disruptive Emotions

While some writhe in the thrall of destructive emotions – being abrasive, hostile, pushy, 'stand-overish' or constantly pressured or pressuring – others seem better poised to be able to disperse or defuse disruptive emotions and put the brakes on their roller-coasters. A big part of EI is about managing our moods – understanding our emotional patterns, recognising how they affect what we say and do, and controlling strong disruptive, emotions better.

ESM means being more mindful of our feelings and practising ways to tone-down over-charged feelings that hijack you. In fact, learning the EI skill of self-regulation is a *mindful* activity. It's about learning to control our moods and our emotions by:

- Being aware of our feelings in the moment – tuning in to them and how they help or hinder us
- Engaging our rational-brain to tone-down whatever our emotional brain is telling us to do

- Tempering our temper: learning to handle cranky, upsetting, panicked and irritable feelings
- Curbing those impulses to say and do things that damage; not letting feelings dictate or decide
- Staying emotionally balanced and saying what you feel in honest, direct and respectful ways

In her book *Emotional Alchemy*, Tara Bennett-Goleman talks about *"the very latest research in neuroscience–including the neurological 'magic quarter second,' during which it is possible for a thought to be 'caught' before it turns into an emotional reaction."* It's so much easier to nip a feeling in the bud before it really takes root and spreads throughout my system and I have to go digging up the entire weedy garden. Mindfulness *"can help us disengage from the emotional habits that undermine our lives and relationships...to identify hidden emotional patterns, bringing them into the light of awareness so that we can begin to free ourselves from their hold"* ***Emotional Alchemy: How the Mind Can Heal the Heart*, Crown Publishing 2002**

You'd think the emotional patterns we've picked up and the level of EI we have now is what we're stuck with. But the beauty of our brain is it can re-mould itself at any time. So the good news is: emotional patterns can be unlearned and re-learned at any stage in our lives – though the longer we've been emotionally reacting in a certain way, the more ingrained our emotional habits become, the harder it is change, and the more effort and practice is required.

ESM Strategies: Feeling Control

ESM is essential not only for emotional self-regulation, but longer-term, for team health – and your well-being too. But how can we manage disruptive emotions in the moment so we can respond in a more measured and less manic way?

Here's a few ESM strategies that feature in our *Working with EI* clinic (and companion self-coaching guides) to help you and your team handle disruptive emotions better. Basically, most of them fit into a 3-step sequence as this diagram shows.

- All of them depend on mindfully engaging the thinking part of your brain. That means your emotional brain doesn't get such a mindlessly free-run.
- Doing them means anchoring yourself in the present moment, mindfully taking a step back to see yourself experiencing emotions. The more attention you focus on what's going on for you emotionally, the better.
- *"Deliberate, top-down attention"*, as Daniel Goleman dubs the process of engaging your brain's rational circuitry, *"holds the key to self-management"* (Focus p. 194) This can put a pause on the impulse to rush onto the roller-coaster – a valuable few mini-seconds of mental-space, you can think how to act in a more restrained, effective or balanced way.

In fact all the ESM strategies listed below rely on pausing-the-moment in some way – being able to mentally STOP yourself before boiling over, then check your impulse by asking *"What do I feel like doing or saying right now?"* or *"What thought is making me feel like this right now"*?

Most ESM strategies work on the idea that changing thoughts changes feelings – that ultimately the only way to dispel a disruptive feeling is replacing it, since two different feelings have trouble occupying the same space at the same time. Feelings replacement – imposing a positive emotion over a negative one - means that one drops out and it's usually the latter.

ESM: 12 Strategies for managing disruptive emotions…

1. **Know your E-Triggers.** Identifying situations or things people say and do, that irritate or unsettle you acts like an early warning system that you're moving into volatile emotional territory and should be on the alert for signals of emotional hijacks.
2. **Notice physical symptoms.** Your jaw or stomach tightens. You feel panic or adrenalin surge. Then think of a counter-measure to relieve these. If your fists are clenched, flex your fingers.
3. **Take a deep breath.** Each amounts to a 5-6 second pause before responding. Momentary but significant. This one particular physical counter-measure has universal applicability. You can't stay angry if you deep breathe. It refocuses you on your body and helps reset feelings
4. **Move.** When we change our body position it can change our feelings because motion is linked to emotion. Our lymph-system relies on movement to remove residues of toxic emotions like cortisol from our body. Take a walk, flap your arms, flex, bounce, stretch
5. **Name feelings.** It puts you back in touch with the rational part of your brain and gets the amygdala to release an antidote to the emotional cocktail it's given you. Just saying *I feel annoyed* can instantly make you less so. Naming feelings for others can also help them defuse emotions *('Sounds like you're fed-up with this')*
6. **Reframe wind-up thoughts.** Thoughts fuel emotions. We often go from one bad thought to the next in a chain reaction. Alert yourself *("I'm winding myself up now")* then replace your wind-up thought with a more balanced or calming one that winds you up less or even chills.
7. **See it from their side.** This is a particular example of reframing thoughts. If we switch to thinking how they feel or see the situation, it can calm. *Can you see their side of things?* Empathy can soothe anger. Without connectivity and compassion, we're all more vulnerable to toxic emotions – both our own and those emanated by others.
8. **Acknowledge their annoyance.** Instead of trying to control their bad feelings and judge, simply acknowledge them. Being able to connect with others and take a more compassionate stance may be pivotal in helping them de-pressurise and combat toxic emotions
9. **Think consequences:** *"What will happen, if I say or do this? Will it escalate hostility and retaliation?"* If you think consequentially, you're more careful about what choices you make
10. **Ask "What do I really want?"** It may be the most centering question you can ask yourself. As emotions kick in, your focus moves away from getting good outcomes to less-noble motives like putting them in their place or proving them wrong. Can you calm through asking: "W*hat is really upsetting me (or them)"* or by focusing on *"what I really want from this situation?"*
11. **Put it in proportion and scale-down.** We've said thoughts escalate our emotional reaction. Consider how you may be exaggerating, personalising or how your reaction is over-the-top. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being life-shattering) how bad is this really? Can you scale it down?
12. **Choose how you act.** Say to yourself: *'Yep, I'm angry but do I want to let it get the better of me?* Replace rage with mindfulness: *"The choice for me now is how to respond without losing it?"* Saying these things can exert a calming effect in itself.

While you can use these practices alone, it's way more powerful if your whole team adopts them. It's not easy or quick. It takes perseverance, critical self-reflection, candid feedback from others, and consciously practising new behaviours until they become your new brain habit. But in terms of creating more healthy and productive work-spaces, relieving stress, restoring well-being and protecting yourself from the harmful effects of toxic emotions, it's got to be worth it.

Coaching Clinics for Leaders & Teams

Our ***EI at Work: Working with Emotional Intelligence*** clinic can help staff get started on managing emotions better. We look at what EI is, why it matters for good work and great teams and practise key tools from the 95-page program Guidebook that also includes a matrix of self-learning activities to do after the workshop that can help with becoming more self-aware emotionally, managing emotions more mindfully, and encouraging more emotionally intelligent behaviours, for yourself and colleagues.

More on *EI at Work: Working with Emotional Intelligence* and our other emotional intelligence and conversational coaching programs on-line at **www.thechangeforum.com**.

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