



# print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: THE TOXIC HANDLER

## A thankless job: the shoulder to whine on

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**Dear Susan,**

I have worked with my manager for a number of years at various companies and we have a great working relationship. On a daily basis, she comes into my office and complains to me about her boss (the chief executive officer), other employees in the company, office politics and her frustration with meetings or projects she's involved with. She knows that I can be trusted not to repeat what I hear. Listening to her has become stressful and I can't handle the negativity any more. How do I tell her, in a professional way, to stop venting and to respect my work time?

- *The Wet Wipe*

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**Dear Wet,**

The late Peter Frost, who was a business professor at the University of British Columbia, would have called you a Toxic Handler. Though he died in 2004, Prof. Frost's description of such empathic people who absorb and neutralize people's hostile or pain-filled dispatches - and they exist in every organization - so resonated with my own work experience that it has stayed with me five years after I read his 2003 book, *Toxic Emotions at Work*.

It's rare enough to be touched by a business book, a genre that is long on bullet points and short on human connection. But Prof. Frost dug right down to a basic truth: Offices are where people who are in conflict or competition congregate. And being human, they come with baggage, namely personal histories and volatile emotions.

Yet, despite all the lip service paid to the power of emotional intelligence, I would say most institutions are more concerned with profit-loss ratios than they are with their leaders' emotional lives - a trend that's sure to become more entrenched as financial issues continues to take centre stage. So, skilled listeners and communicators like you step in to fill the breach, often at their emotional peril.

Your concern about how long you can sustain your role is well-founded, but the risk to you has more to do with imminent burnout than with reduced productivity. As you note, absorbing someone else's frustration and anxiety takes psychic energy - energy that can be in greater or lesser supply depending on life's

other demands. And sometimes it takes a stress related illness (such as chronic headaches, backaches or even depression) to realize that what comes naturally to you -being an empathic listener - draws on your emotional reserves.

Still, even if it's never been acknowledged outright, listening to your manager has become an essential feature of your job. That's because your manager trusts you implicitly and has confidence in your ability to absorb her frustration. She needs your ear as much as she needs more concrete supports, such as administrative or technical assistance.

As confidant, your role approaches that of a therapist, although without the training that allows those in the helping profession to maintain a some self-protective distance while offering compassion.

"Managers who act as [toxic] handlers consciously take the time to actively connect with a person in pain ... even the act of simply listening to the person's story can help the healing begin. They also buffer their staff and others from toxic messages from others in the organization, taking on the pain themselves or redirecting it so it does not get through to people on the line or in the team," Prof. Frost said in an interview he gave to the Harvard Business Review the year before he died.

His view was that there are always employees who listen to another person's distress or anger and reframe it so that person can get on with their job. In some cases it's wise leaders themselves who perform this role, but more often there are hidden factotums who mop up emotional messes behind the scenes, who absorb and translate destructive messages so that they lose their sting.

If you don't want to do this any more, you may have to ask for a lateral move within the organization, as your relationship to this manager has been established over a number of years. At this point it will be hard to revamp your role in your boss's eyes. You can explain that you badly need a change, and ask for her input and assistance about where else you might fit in the company.

But there's another alternative. You can draw attention to your value as a "toxic handler," an underrated but essential service in any organization. This takes some diplomacy. Next time your boss confides in you, by all means listen to her respectfully, but add a little postscript: Tell her that you are honoured in the confidence she has invested in you over the years and that you deeply value your relationship. But now you too need some support. Might it be possible for the company to underwrite some coaching or therapy sessions for you from a professional outside the company?

It's a trade secret that psychologists often have their own psychotherapists waiting in the wings, one that Tony Soprano's therapist, Jennifer Melfi (played by Lorraine Bracco) revealed via her sessions with her own psychiatrist, played by Peter Bogdanovich. This kind of support is how you might "keep your head when all about you are losing theirs," as Rudyard Kipling famously wrote.

"Helpers" with maturity and staying power rarely manage to do their jobs without the cushion of someone else to absorb their stresses and provide some perspective -especially at key points in their careers. Why should you?

**Dear Susan,**

A co-worker continues to come in sick with some sort of respiratory problem. She complains, but as far as I can tell doesn't seem to be doing anything concrete to get better, as she has been sick for months. She comes into work hacking, which is not just annoying but I also worry about catching whatever she has. In fact, I developed a bad cold a few weeks ago - my first in many years - and I am now wondering what can I do to protect my health and my sanity. Do I have a right to speak up?

- *Silent, for Now*

**Dear Silent,**

You have a right to inquire about her health, while expressing sympathy for how awful it must be like to live with a cough that just won't die. You also have a right to wash your hands whenever it occurs to you - perhaps every time your co-worker coughs. What is out of bounds is suggesting a diagnosis and giving advice, such as stay home, drink plenty of fluids and take Aspirin.

Here's why. Although you assume that your coworker's cough is due to a cold or flu that she has neglected, you have no way of knowing what the problem is. Her cough might be a smoker's hack. It could be post-nasal drip. It could be a nervous tick, asthma or allergies. It could even be Tourette's syndrome - although that's rare, and primarily hits boys and men. None of these conditions is contagious or puts you at risk. In other words, one symptom doesn't tell you much, which is why doctors take rigorous patient histories and apply differential diagnoses, comparing a specific pattern of symptoms to similar-looking conditions, ruling out all competing possibilities one by one.

Your co-worker may have consulted a doctor already, and that is something you can ask, although you can't insist that she do so. In situations where there is a threat, public health departments can intervene, as was the case during the 2003 SARS outbreak.

"But that almost always requires a health care provider (or laboratory) to report a case to the public health department," says Terry-Nan Tannenbaum, a respiratory illness expert who is responsible for vigilance and protection at Montreal's Department of Public Health. She agrees that frequent hand washing is key to staying healthy this winter, along with other acts of "respiratory etiquette," such as using tissues when you cough. But like all forms of politesse, they're easier to demonstrate than impose on others.

While you're modelling how to behave like a good corporate citizen in a germy workplace, getting a flu shot wouldn't be such a bad plan, either.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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