

"The Toxic Handler: Organizational Hero -- And Casualty," by Peter Frost and Sandra Robinson, Harvard Business Review, July-August 1999.

You've watched them comfort colleagues, defuse tense situations, and take the heat from tough bosses. You've seen them step in to ease the pain during layoffs and change programs. Who are they? The authors call them toxic handlers--managers who voluntarily shoulder the sadness, frustration, bitterness, and anger of others so that high-quality work continues to get done. Toxic handlers are not new. They are probably as old as organizations themselves. But there has never been a systematic study of the role they play in business.

In this article, the authors introduce the role of toxic handlers, explaining what they do and why. Managing the pain of others is hard work. Toxic handlers save organizations from self-destructing, but they often pay a high price--emotionally, professionally, and sometimes physically. Some toxic handlers experience burnout; others suffer far worse consequences, such as ulcers and heart attacks. The authors contend that these unsung corporate heroes have strategic importance in today's business environment. Effective pain management can--and does--contribute to the bottom line. No company can afford to let talented employees burn out. Nor can it afford to have a reputation as an unhappy place to work.

The authors offer practical advice for managers and organizations about how to support toxic handlers--before a crisis strikes. The role of toxic handler needs to be given the attention it deserves for everyone's benefit, because the health of employees is a key element in the long-term competitiveness of companies and of society.

To order and download the full text of this article, please go to:

http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/hbsp/prod_detail.asp?99406.